

These are the *Digital Storytelling* notes of Mark Sweeney, National Film Archive, as presented to the 10 August 2010 Writing & Publishing Group.

The [Digital Storytelling Cookbook](#) is a free download (700KB PDF) that Mark recommended.



Introduction

Digital Stories are short, personal, multimedia scraps of TV that people can make for themselves.

They're 'mini-movies'. Desktop computers enabled with video editing software are used to synchronise recorded spoken narratives with scans of personal photographs.

This project requires commitment for, as well as all the technical stuff that must be learnt, script writing, picture editing and performance skills are also needed and these have to be worked on, which is why most Digital Stories are made by people attending workshops where participants can benefit from the help and advice of facilitators.

People of all ages and abilities make Digital Stories and many have testified how rewarding the experience is for, when their story is shared with friends and family or posted on the web, they find they have discovered a new voice.

There's a strictness to the construction of a Digital Story: 250 words, a dozen or so pictures, and two minutes is the right length. As with poetry these constraints define the form (e.g. a haiku is a poem written using 17 syllables, and the 14 lines of a sonnet are written in iambic pentameter) and it's the observation of that form which gives the thing its elegance.



Finding the Story

Remember that everyone has a story to tell and it's only a matter of coaxing it out of yourself or someone else, although most people don't need much coaxing!

* Remember that grammar and spelling are not important. This is a spoken story and not a homework exercise. The crucial thing is to speak normally and sound like yourself.

* If you are stuck for a topic think of something about which you feel passionate or focus on an event in your life which provoked a strong emotion - happiness or anger or sadness.

* You don't have to change the world with your story but it is a special opportunity so use it so tell a story that is important to you: this needn't mean having to bear your soul or be too serious. Some of the most successful stories are funny.

* Remember that, ideally, this story will only last two minutes and be no more than 250 or 300 words long so if you have the material for a three-hour television documentary (e.g. the complete history of the place where you live), or a long novel (e.g. complicated ins and outs of your family history), it will not be suitable for this medium.

* Don't be put off by having to be brief. It seems daunting at first but your story will benefit by being boiled down to its essence.



Getting the Story Down on Paper

- * Don't sit about looking at a blank sheet. Give yourself a time limit and just write. Don't judge at the beginning.
- * Remember that spoken words are only heard once, in contrast to the written word which can be re-examined. Clarity is important. Avoid repetition unless it is deliberate. Find other words. Don't use literary expressions or connecting phrases like "as I mentioned before". They will jar on the ear.
- * Find your own voice. Don't imitate. Be aware of how you like to use words and have the confidence to use your own idiom.
- * Picture what you are writing about in as much detail as possible - feelings, colours, textures, smells. This will influence how you write.
- * You don't have lots of words so plunge in. There's no need to tell the story in a linear way, even though it will require a beginning, middle and end. Find what's most arresting and start there. It may be from any point in your narrative.
- * Don't get too attached to the exact facts. Don't let them get in the way of the truth.



Refining and Completing the Story

- * Try your story out on others and get feedback. What works and what doesn't? Are you being clear? Have you left out something important that was there originally?
- * Less is more. Expect to re-write and re-write. Edit rigorously. What is the essence of your story? Attempt to express that in one sentence. Now make sure that you have nothing unnecessary. Does everything move the story on?
- * Avoid cliché and banal sentiments. Phrases like "he's always there for me" are exhausted. Look for a fresh form of words.
- * Generalities are lazy and close things down. The specific, well observed detail is what will resonate.
- * Remember that, whilst an anecdote can meander, a story needs structure. The end needs to have some connection with the beginning to be satisfying. Think of stepping stones. When you reach the other bank of the river you should still be able to see the bank from which you started the journey.
- * And the stepping stones are important. They are the steps that build the story. Make sure you haven't missed a vital step out.
- * Treat your story with respect as though it were the best story in the world.