

Your story arc that is... And just what is a story arc?

In a multimedia application the story arc moves your character and his/her situation from one place to another, similar to movements in classical music. In general you start with a beginning, middle and end. Within this story line, you should look for five distinct movements:

1. **INTRODUCTION** – This is where the character(s) of the story are introduced and the scene is set. What's the story about?
2. **CONFLICT** – This part should answer the question about why the story is important. This is where the audience is introduced to the struggle or challenge facing the character(s) in the story. There is usually one dominant struggle or challenge, but there can be several minor ones as well, subplots to the main plot. If the introduction is where you get your audience interested in your subject(s), the conflict is where you motivate them to begin to care.
3. **CLIMAX** – Perhaps more of a moment than a movement, this is the high point of the story, not unlike a climax in a movie. This is the peak point of discovery about your characters and the conflict.
4. **RESOLUTION** – This is the “and as a result, this is what happened...” part of the story. Real life may not always be as “neat” a resolution as in the movies, but there should be a sense that the conflict has been resolved in some way, which could even mean that the resolution is that the conflict does not get completely resolved.
5. **REFLECTION** – This is a sometimes forgotten but always important way of including in your story, usually at the end, but they can be in other places as well. Once the story is resolved, revealing how the subject feels about his/her experience makes the audience empathize with your subject. Just as important, it causes them to do their own reflecting about the issues involved in the story and perhaps put themselves in the shoes of your subject. This creates an even deeper connection between subject and audience.

So these are the “movements” of an effective story, but in order to tell an effective story you first need a compelling subject. Here are some guidelines for success:

1. The story idea is a HUGE part of the success of the story, so choose carefully. As you do your research and talk to people, as you consider who your main characters are in the story, ask yourself, “Why should people care?” The subject matter should not only be meaningful to you but to a larger audience. There has to be a universal connection.
2. As you settle into your story, complete these two sentences (borrowed from Alex Blumberg from *This American Life*): My story is about _____. It's interesting because _____. Remember that in the multimedia world, especially online, attention spans are short. Will this story compel your audience to watch it through to the end?
3. Since you are working with both visuals and sound, you need to think about an articulate character who can narrate your story. You need to be a connoisseur of the interesting voice just like you are a connoisseur of the interesting face when considering someone for a portrait. A successful interview/story depends both on your subject having something interesting to say and him/her delivering the information/emotions in an interesting way.
4. In addition to your interview subject, you also need strong ambient audio to lead your audience through the transitions in the story as well as give your story and visuals additional impact. Think of ambient sound as an equivalent to a scene setter in a picture story that provides your viewer with a sense of place.
5. While we are on important elements of a story, make sure you are shooting and recording DETAILS. You can never have enough. They literally and figuratively draw your audience in closer to your subject, and from a visual standpoint, they are invaluable to the pacing of a story/edit of a multimedia project. Similar to visual variety in a picture story, you need to “move” your viewer in and out visually as they listen to the story.
6. With visuals, make sure you are shooting sequences, that is, wide, medium, tight and a variety of angles of the same scene. Shoot more than you think you need. This technique is absolutely critical when it comes to having enough visuals to cover the audio.
7. The edit of your multimedia project is as important to telling the story as the content itself. Without a strong, tight edit, even a good story can get derailed. Effective storytelling is as much about the revelation of the content as it is about the presenting of it, and a strong edit has everything to do with effectively revealing the story. Hollywood has been doing this for years. Sometimes the reveal is at the beginning of the story, sometimes it doesn't come until later, once you have your audience on the edge of their seats. Look for surprises. Use humor even in the most serious of stories. Take your audience through the full range of emotions. Finally, give yourself plenty of time/practice in the ordering and timing of your audio and visuals. This ain't easy.
8. Last and most important, your story needs to have EMOTION. It's not enough for your subject to just say what happened, your subject needs to reveal how this made him/her feel. It is up to you as an effective storyteller to establish the necessary trust with your subject so you reveal this emotion. Learning to do this is a skill in and of itself and one you should work at as diligently as your multimedia chops. Treat your subject as a person first and a story subject second!