

## TEN NARRATIVE FORMS

### - - The Price We Pay to Get Results - -

#### STORY

A story provides packets of sensory material that allow the listener to quickly and easily internalize the information, comprehend it, and create meaning from it.

- - Adapted from Karen Dietz, (former) executive director, National Storytelling Network, as cited in *Wake Me Up When the Data Is Over* (Jossey-Bass, 2006)

#### The Price We Pay to Get Results

Contributed by Robert McIlree

I received a call from the support staff in the information systems area. A customized software application that I'd developed as a consultant to a federal government agency had stopped functioning. This particular application makes extensive use of internal databases and is very useful and popular with agency staff charged with controlling budget dollars. Lots of money is lost if this application is shut down for long periods of time.

Now, I'm properly and officially credentialed with this agency. I have a badge to enter their facilities, complete access to the computer systems that I support, and a small office where I'm required to work onsite due to federal computer security restrictions. When I began to work the problem, I kept getting error messages that said I didn't have permission to view the databases. Somehow my security level had been altered. The only way this could've happened was if the database administrator had removed my clearance. This didn't surprise me. He was known to have an insatiable thirst for power and control over his domain.

I immediately placed a call to him. "Jim, "I'm having trouble looking at a couple of databases. I keep getting error messages that tell me I don't have access." He replied, "Oh. We've just implemented our new "cyber security" scheme. It's a requirement of Homeland Security. I barked, "Well I have a problem—a real live support issue that needs to be addressed right now." He quickly countered with, "You'll have to get me some sort of documentation for the permission. Then it'll have go through the proper channels and be approved by a committee. You know, I really don't have the time to deal with this right now. I said, "Thanks." And hung up. Right then and there I knew I'd have to go around him. All he'd given me were excuses. As far as I was concerned, he'd arbitrarily and without notice removed permission for me to access the databases.

It didn't take me more than five seconds to call the government manager in charge of my activity. She also happened to be Jim's boss. I told her what had just taken place. All she said was, "Thank you. I'll take care of it." She didn't need to say any more. Her words were as good as gold. Within minutes she called me back to say she'd directed Jim to restore my access even though he'd claimed to her as well that he and his staff were "too busy" to immediately respond. She was under the impression I'd get my access within 24 hours.

I waited out the day. No access. One day turned into two days. Still no access. Then it became three. After 72 hours, I still couldn't access the databases. My manager was now out on vacation. And Jim was ignoring my ongoing request for a completion date. I'd

been stonewalled. What was I to say to the support staff? They were furious. I couldn't fix their pressing production problem.

Not one to give up, I started mulling over strategies to work around, through, or over the problem. I quickly hit upon an idea. While risky and long-winded in process, it would send a clear message that something was seriously amiss. I had decided to file a claim to access the data under the Freedom of Information Act—what we folks in government affectionately call FOIA. This meant working through the “front door” of the agency—the one the general public must use to get information. By law, the agency must allow or deny the request within a limited period of time. I figured none of the data I needed was sensitive or secret. And even if it were, the FOIA request would be routed to the proper department and eventually to my manager for decision and disposition.

From the agency's internal web site I printed out what needed to be included in such a request. I wrote up a couple of pages including my name, who I was, and what I specifically needed. Then I took it downstairs to the public affairs people. They accepted it and I got a receipt from the office. Word of what I'd done leaked out faster than a broken water main. People either laughed hysterically or shook their heads wondering why it took a stunt like this to point out a glaring deficiency in the organization.

The next week my request landed like an F-16 fighter jet on my manager's desk. Which prompted her of course to come and see me in my cubicle. “I got this FOIA request. What's going on?” I replied, “Jim's group never responded. I still don't have access. They basically blew me off and they blew you off too.” Without saying a word, she picked up my phone. “I asked you a couple weeks ago to give Bob access to these databases and he never got it. What's the deal?” I could hear Jim stuttering on the other end of the line. When she hung she looked straight at me and politely asked, “Why did you do this?” “Because I wasn't getting any results. I came to you and you also tried getting results. They don't seem to care. They want to be masters of the universe and control everything. I did it kind of as a gag and to bring attention to the fact that things needed to change around here. I can't do my job and neither can others.”

With a twinkle in her eye, she replied, “I understand your point completely. But, please don't do this again. I asked, “How do you want to bring this to closure? Do you want to deny my request and fire it back at me or do you want me to go down and close it?” She answered, “I want you to close it.” The next day I went downstairs and withdrew the request. She quickly corrected the problem and I was able to proceed with my work.

When you can't get what you need to do your job or solve a problem, “assert yourself.” Be vocal. Be creative. Follow-up with people who can make things happen. Persist until you're satisfied you have exactly what you need. Assert yourself even if it means seeking forgiveness rather than asking for permission. If I can do it, so can you.

## **ANECDOTE**

A short personal account (your personal take on a situation)

One time I had this experience of being denied viewing access to several databases so I could fix a customized software application. When I approached the database administrator, he refused my request. My boss couldn't get anywhere either. As a last resort, I filed a Freedom of Information Act in order to get my access reinstated. That got my boss' attention. The database administrator and I both got chewed out and I got my access.

## CASE STUDY

An analysis of a particular case or situation used as a basis for drawing conclusions in similar situations; a record of somebody's problems and how they were dealt with. It is usually presented in sections: situation, solution, result, and analysis.

### BOB'S SITUATION

Bob received a call from the support staff in the information systems area. A customized software application that he'd developed as a consultant to a federal government agency had stopped functioning. This application makes extensive use of internal data-bases and is very useful and popular with agency staff charged with controlling budget dollars. Lots of money is lost if this application is shut down for long periods of time.

Bob is properly and officially credentialed with this agency. He has a badge to enter their facilities, complete access to the computer systems that he supports, and a small office where he's required to work onsite due to federal computer security restrictions. When Bob began to work the problem, he kept getting error messages that said he didn't have permission to view the databases. Somehow his security level had been altered. The only way this could've happened was if the database administrator had removed his clearance. The person who could give him access stalled. Bob called his boss. Even though she said she'd take care of it, nothing happened. He was stuck.

### BOB'S SOLUTION

Not one to give up, Bob started mulling over strategies to work around, through, or over the problem. He quickly hit upon an idea. While risky and long-winded in process, it would send a clear message that something was seriously amiss. He decided to file a claim to access the data under the Freedom of Information Act—what government employees affectionately call FOIA. This meant working through the "front door" of the agency—the one the general public must use to get information. By law, the agency must allow or deny the request within a limited period of time. He figured none of the data he needed was sensitive or secret. Even if it were, the FOIA request would be routed to the proper department and eventually to his manager for decision and disposition.

### THE RESULT

The next week Bob's request landed like an F-16 fighter jet on his manager's desk—which prompted her to come and see him. She asked what was going on. Bob replied that the database administrator had ignored his request and basically blown him off. Without saying a word, she picked up his phone and called the database administrator and told him to fix the problem. As she hung up, she looked straight at Bob and politely asked him not do that again. They agreed that to bring closure to the situation, he would withdraw his request. The next day, Bob did so. The database administrator quickly corrected the situation and Bob was able to proceed with his work.

### ANALYSIS:

1. What lesson or meaning do you take away from this story?
2. How does what Bob experienced apply to what you do in your work?
3. What causes situations like this to take place in an organization?

## DESCRIPTION

Giving a brief explanation of a situation as a very simple, high-level narration of events by using a brief timeline to represent what was experienced, instead of actually conveying the totality of the experience. Similar to “examples” in that descriptions are often used when “talking about” a story instead of telling one.

Bob, an IT consultant, was denied access to a critical database he had been hired to work on. He repeatedly asked various managers and supervisors for the access but was denied. So Bob bent the rules and found a way around the denied requests so he could complete his work.

## EXAMPLE

A particular single item, fact, incident or aspect that serves to “illustrate” an opinion, theory, principle, rule, guideline, or concept. Similar to “descriptions” in that examples are often used when “talking about” a story instead of telling one.

Sometimes in organizations, following traditional protocol does not work. One day, Bob learned this as an IT consultant when his viewing access was denied to critical databases so he could repair a customized software application. Even though Bob’s boss asked Bob’s coworker to grant him access, he could not get the approvals. So Bob found a creative way to gain approval access that still fit the rules but was outside of the normal flow of events.

## NEWS REPORT

An accounting of recent events or developments.

For fourteen days, tens of thousands of taxpayer dollars were at risk through several critical federal government databases, which deal with a key agency’s budgeting process. It took the filing of a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) to get enterprise architecture consultant Robert McIlree the right to use and repair them. Previously McIlree, an expert in repairing the databases, always had access. Significant amounts of money are lost if the application McIlree was hired to repair is shut down for long periods of time. But new homeland security rules and bureaucratic turf wars made the database inaccessible to him. Two weeks after McIlree’s filing of the FOIA, it got the agency’s attention. He was finally granted access and could repair the databases. In an interview, McIlree and an agency representative reported all was fine and back in top working order without harm to the agency. *For full story, see our on-line version.*

## PROFILE

A concise biographical sketch

Bob has been working as an enterprise data architect in the information technology industry since the early 1990s. His claim to fame is the ability to come into organizations and tackle tough problems quickly. His work is widely known in the financial services,

insurance, consumer products, energy / utilities, telecommunications and transportation industries where he is valued as a provider of innovative solutions.

Bob started working for a federal government agency as a consultant in 2002. He encountered some initial hiccups but was eventually able to smooth things out with some original thinking, successfully resolving the issues. Today he continues to go beyond his current client's expectations as he did at this agency.

## SCENARIO

An imagined sequence of possible events

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If you were Bob, what would you do? Provide three different options.

## TESTIMONIAL

A favorable report or statement of qualities or virtues of somebody or something; an expression of appreciation; a statement testifying to benefits; a character reference or letter of recommendation

### VERSION 1

I loved Bob's story. It really helped me get unstuck about my own problem with my needs being met.

## VERSION 2

For the last 18 months I've been having a lot of problems with one of my coworkers who appears to continually undermine my efforts. I've bought a number of books, talked to some people, but nothing has worked. In a workshop I had the opportunity to read your story and in 30 minutes of discussion about it, I realized that the reason my actions weren't working is because I was misinterpreting my coworkers' behavior. He was just abiding by the mandatory rules. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to have this insight and to craft different action steps.

## VIGNETTE

A brief (can be elegant) incident or scene as in a play or movie, a short descriptive piece (ability to talk about it in the third person)

The words flashed across the screen: Access denied. Bob was stymied. A few minutes pass. He thinks he's one phone call away from resolution. Unbelievable. Blown off by the database administrator. Boss equally unlucky. Eureka! Bob decides to show him. He files a Freedom of Information Act and comes in the front door. Boss finds out. Database administrator's ass gets chewed. Problem resolved until next time . . .

## TO CREATE A COMPELLING STORY, INCORPORATE THESE ELEMENTS

**Analogy** – A comparison between two things that are similar in some respects, often used to explain something or make it easier to understand

Bob's story: *Bob's story is like doing an end run around the defensive end.*

**Aphorism** – A concise statement of a principle; a terse formulation of a truth or sentiment. For example: *It takes a whole village to raise a child.*

Bob's story: *When all else fails, assert yourself.*

**Metaphor** – A figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used non-literally in place of another to suggest a likeness between them. For example: *The ship plows the sea.*

Bob's story: *There's more than one way to skin a cat.*

**Tag line** – A phrase repeatedly used in connection with a person, organization or product, especially in publicity

Bob's story: *Make things happen.*

**Trigger** – To initiate, actuate, or set off the memory of a story in another person

Bob's story: *The End Run*