

Digital Stories

Digital stories are short narratives composed with digital tools. They usually include a combination of digital images, recorded narration, video clips, text, and/or music. Much like other types of stories, digital stories tend to focus on a particular topic and are told from a specific point of view. These finished stories are often shared on the Internet, hosted on such sites as YouTube or Vimeo, or published on digital storytelling sites such as StoryCenter. They can also be shared in the classroom as a culminating presentation of an assignment.

One of the early pioneers of digital storytelling is the documentary filmmaker Ken Burns. In his documentary *The Civil War*, he combined first-person accounts of events with narration, music, and photographs. In the 1990s, digital stories began to be integrated into academia. They are used in a variety of subject areas, such as humanities, science, sociology, and composition.

WRITE

What are some stories you might tell that would be enhanced by using pictures and music? Make a list of those stories and next to each story, jot down what types of pictures and/or music might enhance the story.

Analyzing Digital Stories

Purpose Writers often compose digital stories to share an experience with their audience. Like a memoirist, digital story composers believe that their insights might help others who have found themselves in similar situations. Sometimes digital story-tellers want to share a piece of their family history or help others travel to distant lands in order to experience the wonder and discoveries of their journey. Other times, a digital story might be told to help someone care about or understand an issue, as when a person who has struggled with depression tells his story, hoping to help people who have never experienced depression understand the illness.

Audience Digital storytellers often compose for a wide audience. However, some might imagine that their audience will be someone who has shared a similar experience. If a digital story is related to a particular cause, then the audience might be someone who wants to learn about that issue or is already involved in the movement. When a digital story is part of an academic class, the audience is your classmates and professor.

Rhetorical appeals In order for their story to be believed, digital storytellers need to be reliable narrators. They develop ethos through the anecdotes they share from their own experience. Photographs from the narrator's archives also help convey the truth of the story. Pathos is also central in a digital story, since most digital stories have an emotional layer to help the audience connect with the experience.

Modes & media Digital stories combine audio and visuals. The audio almost always includes the story's narration. Other audio elements commonly included in a digital story are a soundtrack and sound from any included video. The visuals are usually a series of photographs. Sometimes a digital story might also include some video. Although text is often a part of the story, usually it is only a minor part, in the form of captions or as a title or closing screen. Digital stories are always presented through a digital medium.

Elements of the genre Following are some of the most common elements of the digital story. Composers of this genre provide:

- *A central, dramatic question.* The story has at its core a particular question that is ultimately answered by the end of the story. This is not always an actual question, but rather a statement that provides the arc for the story.
- *A point of view.* Every story has a particular point of view. This is the vantage point of the narrator. Digital stories use first-person narration (*I did this*) to help the audience connect with the narrative.
- *Emotional content.* Since digital stories tend to use pathos to connect with their audience, the content of the story usually has some type of emotional pull. Content might elicit laughter, tears, shock, or sympathy.
- *Economy.* Digital stories are usually two to five minutes long. The focus should be limited in scope, using just enough detail to get the central point across.
- *Voice.* Since digital stories are usually narrated by the story's writer, the voice can help deliver emotional meaning. By changing the pitch, the narrator can illustrate emotions such as curiosity or anger.
- *Pacing.* A digital story is neither rushed nor told at a crawling pace. Instead, it tends to vary, speeding up to help build tension and slowing down for emphasis (such as by lingering on a particular visual). Varying the pacing helps hold the audience's attention.
- *Soundtrack.* Music and other sounds are often included to help build the story. Music can help establish the mood. It's important that the music doesn't compete with the story by being too loud or having lyrics run over the narration. Also, any music that is added needs to adhere to copyright laws.

Style Composers of digital stories make stylistic choices based on the following:

- *Detail.* Digital stories usually provide details through narrated anecdotes and visuals. The details help develop the central character (usually the narrator) and her situation. Since economy is a key element of a digital story, details are kept to a minimum (just enough to convey the central point).
- *Tone.* The overall tone of the story is usually informal. It contains language that is natural to the speaker, rather than the elevated diction that might characterize a peer-reviewed journal article. It may include colloquialisms, such as "y'all."
- *Organization.* A digital story is usually organized around a sequence of events that are ordered in a way that helps build tension and that illustrates the experience of the narrator.

Design When designing their digital stories, composers consider the following:

- *Framing.* Much like films, a digital story uses framing to help a viewer see what to focus on. Zooming can be used to highlight a particular aspect of a photograph, such as a face. Panning from one side of the visual can simulate the reading of a storyboard, revealing pieces of the photograph slowly to the viewer.
- *Duration of images.* When a digital story is assembled, the creator decides how much time a visual should be on-screen. The amount of time is usually varied throughout so that the pacing of the visuals is not monotonous.
- *Transitions between images.* Composers need to decide how to transition between different visuals. Sometimes there is a fade-in, while other times there might be a dissolve of one photo before the next one appears. Whatever transitions are chosen, it's important to avoid distracting the viewer with techniques such as swirling, where a visual spins around into focus.