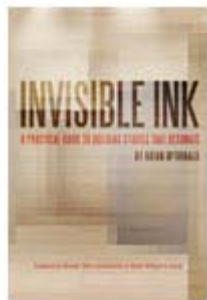




## Building Stronger Stories With 7 Sentences

**In his book *Invisible Ink*, filmmaker and teacher Brian McDonald offers 7 simple steps for building more engaging stories.**

Andrew Stanton knows a thing or two about telling stories. Having written screenplays for *Toy Story*, *Finding Nemo*, and *WALL-E* - movies that have grossed billions of dollars worldwide for Pixar Studios - he's earned the title Master Storyteller. So when Stanton says that he got stuck while writing a story and a certain book got him un-stuck, I want to read that book.



Which I did, and now I strongly recommend you read it, too. Because even if you're not in the screenplay-writing business, *Invisible Ink: A Practical Guide to Building Stories that Resonate*, can help you stop staring at that blank page and start writing.

Brian McDonald, the book's author, began studying stories by audio-taping *The*

*Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Newhart* and other classic sitcoms that he watched at home after school. McDonald transcribed and analyzed the dialogue to learn precisely what made these thirty-minute stories tick. At 21, he moved to Los Angeles to find work as a writer and director but ended up on the special effects crews of such forgettable horror films as *Return of the Living Dead II* and *Night of the Creeps*.



Brian McDonald

June 2010

### Building Stronger Stories with 7 Sentences

An easy-to-follow model for storytellers.

### Master Storytellers Wanted

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*free-range thinking* is written by Andy Goodman and edited by Lori Matsumoto. To read back issues, download free

Like many before him, McDonald eventually struck out on his own, financing his first film, *White Face*, out of his own pocket. A mockumentary about racism (with white face clowns playing the role of Oppressed Minority), the 14-minute movie made up for its \$1,000 budget with a great story and lots of laughs, and it captured the audience prize at the Slamdance Film Festival in 2001.

McDonald, 45, currently teaches screenwriting at the 911 Media Arts Center in Seattle, occasionally returning to California to lead workshops at Pixar Studios, Industrial Light & Magic and Disney Animation. He published *Invisible Ink* last year, and when we spoke recently, we talked at length about Chapter II, "Seven Easy Steps to a Better Story." Before we began, McDonald insisted we be clear on one point. "I didn't make this up," he told me, referring to the seven-step model. McDonald says he learned the steps from Matt Smith, an improvisational actor who learned them from Joe Guppy, another improv veteran.

Regardless of the original source, the seven sentences that follow can help you start writing a story and build it, scene by scene, to its climax and resolution. And it all begins with those familiar four words:

### ***Once upon a time...***

Whether you use these exact words or not, this opening reminds us that our first responsibility as storytellers is to introduce our characters and setting - i.e., to fix the story in time and space. Instinctively, your audience wants to know: Who is the story about? Where are they, and when is all this taking place? You don't have to provide every detail, but you must supply enough information, says McDonald, "so the audience has everything it needs to know to understand the story that is to follow."

### ***And every day...***

With characters and setting established, you can begin to tell the audience what life is like in this world *every day*. In *The Wizard of Oz*, for example, the opening scenes establish that Dorothy feels ignored, unloved, and dreams of a better place "over the rainbow." This is Dorothy's "world in balance," and don't be confused by the term "balance." It does not imply that all is well - only that *this is how things are*.

### ***Until one day...***

Something happens that throws the main character's world out of balance, forcing them to do something, change something, attain something that will either restore the old balance or establish a new equilibrium. In story structure, this moment is referred to as the inciting incident, and it's the pivotal event that launches the story. In *The Wizard of Oz*, the tornado provides the inciting incident by apparently transporting Dorothy far, far away from home.

### ***And because of this...***

Your main character (or "protagonist") begins the pursuit of his or her goal. In structural terms, this is the beginning of Act II, the main body of the story. After being literally dropped into the Land of Oz, Dorothy desperately wants to return home, but she is told that the only person who can help her lives far away. So she must journey by foot to the Emerald City to meet a mysterious wizard. Along the way she will encounter several obstacles (apple-throwing trees, flying monkeys, etc.) but these only make the narrative more interesting.

### ***And because of this...***

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To reach Andy directly, please call (323) 464-3956 or send an email to [andy@agoodmanonline.com](mailto:andy@agoodmanonline.com).



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Dorothy achieves her first objective - meeting the Wizard of Oz - but this is not the end of her story. *Because of this* meeting, she now has another objective: kill the Wicked Witch of the West and deliver her broomstick to the Wizard. "In shorter stories," says McDonald, "you may have only one 'because of this,' but you need at least one."

### ***Until finally...***

We enter Act III and approach the story's moment of truth. Dorothy succeeds in her task and presents the Wizard with the deceased witch's broom, so now he must make good on his promise to help her return to Kansas. And this he does, but not quite in the way we initially expect.

### ***And ever since that day...***

Once we know what happened, the closing scenes tell us what the story means for the protagonist, for others in the narrative, and (not least of all) for those of us in the audience. When Dorothy awakens in her own bed and realizes she never actually left Kansas, she learns the lesson of the story: what we're looking for is often inside us all along.

The next time you get stuck while writing a story, try walking your narrative through these steps. Even if your characters aren't following a yellow brick road, the seven sentences above can probably help you get where you're going. And your little dog, too.

### ***Free-Range Linking***

You can purchase *Invisible Ink* online at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) or [Barnes & Noble](https://www.barnesandnoble.com), or you can read the entire text for free [here](#).

To read Brian McDonald's blog, [click here](#). And you can also contact McDonald directly via email: [hepkat1950 \(at\) yahoo \(dot\) com](mailto:hepkat1950@yahoo.com).

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## Master Storytellers Wanted

***Take your storytelling skills to the next level this summer.***

If you've completed one of my storytelling workshops and want to learn more about narrative nonfiction writing, the ***Master Storytellers Workshop*** is for you.

In three one-hour classes (with two weeks between each class), you'll have the opportunity to write up to three stories and receive personalized feedback from both your classmates and me.

We'll also explore topics not covered in previous storytelling workshops, including:

- How to craft scenes that make your story come alive
- How to find stories in abstract work
- Different techniques for opening and closing a story



The workshop is limited to just 10 students, so each online session will be highly interactive with plenty of time to discuss your work, but only two seats remain, so register today if you're interested.

The next session will run on July 1st, 15th and 29th (9-10a PT each day). Tuition is \$375 per student. To download a complete course curriculum and register online, [click here](#).

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# Connect With Your Audience

***We'll show you 4 proven ways in our 2-hour online class.***

There are four potential points of connection between you and your target audience. When you know all four and design your communications around them, every minute and dollar you invest will have a better chance of paying off. Fail to connect on even one point, however, and you give your audience an opportunity to walk away.

In ***Strategic Communications: Cutting Through the Clutter***, we'll help ensure you connect with your audiences. In two hours (spread over two weeks), we'll cover:

- The basics of framing
- Message creation and delivery
- Classic case studies from the public-interest sector
- An easy-to-use template for campaign design

Classes will be held on July 7th and 14th from 9-10a PT each day. Tuition is \$250 per student, and discounts are available to organizations registering 3 or more. To register online, [click here](#).



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