



# Communicating Value through Storytelling

**Presenter: Dr. Kate McDowell**

*Welcome Professional Development Alliance member libraries!*

This session will begin at 10:00 a.m. (Central) and run until 11:00 a.m.

Please mute your microphone.

Near the end of the session, you will have an opportunity to ask questions via the chat box or by unmuting your microphone.

This session will be recorded.

Slides and the recording will be shared after the event.



# Communicating Value through Storytelling

# Today's Plan

1. Insights for libraries from storytelling librarians
2. Strategies for communicating in story
3. Structures for informational and emotional stories

RESEARCH PARK

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA CHAMPAIGN



ForefrOnt  
Engaging for impact

**I** ILLINOIS  
Gies College of Business



**I** ILLINOIS  
ACES  
College of Agricultural,  
Consumer and  
Environmental Sciences

**I** ILLINOIS  
College of Engineering

WITH  
**I** | THE CAMPAIGN FOR  
ILLINOIS

**I** ILLINOIS  
Graduate College

# Comfort levels: data and story



What is one valuable  
**contribution**  
that you can **measure**  
and would like to tell as a  
**story?**

# HOW STORYTELLING AFFECTS THE BRAIN

## NEURAL COUPLING

A story activates parts in the brain that allows the listener to turn the story in to their own ideas and experience thanks to a process called neural coupling.

## MIRRORING

Listeners will not only experience the similar brain activity to each other, but also to the speaker.

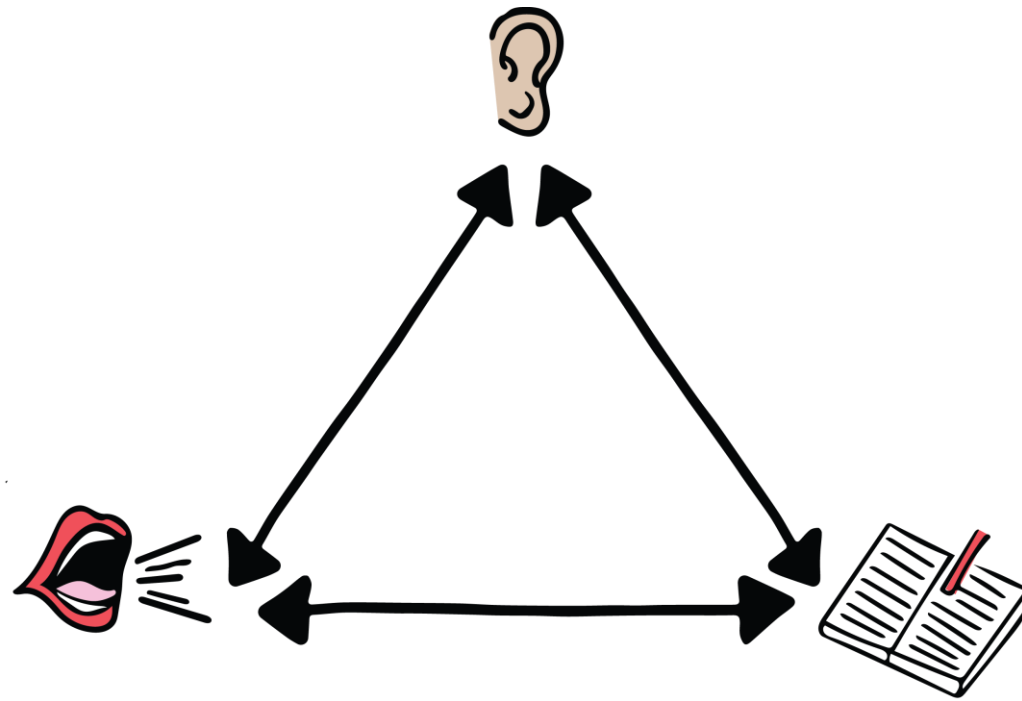


## DOPAMINE

The brain releases dopamine into the system when it experiences an emotionally-charged event, making it easier to remember and with greater accuracy.

## CORTEX ACTIVITY

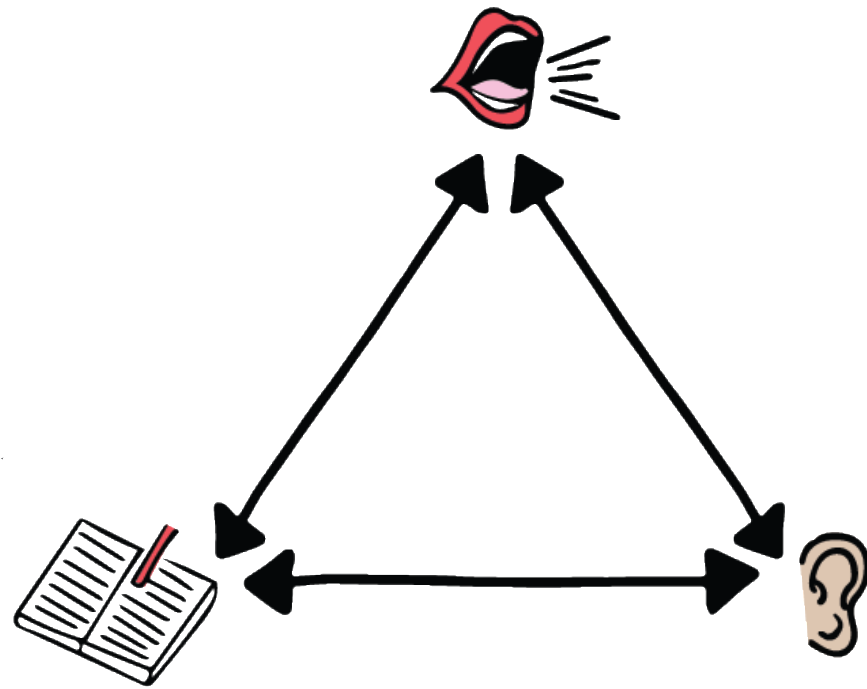
When processing facts, two areas of the brain are activated (Broca's and Wernicke's area). A well-told story can engage many additional areas, including the motor cortex, sensory cortex and frontal cortex.

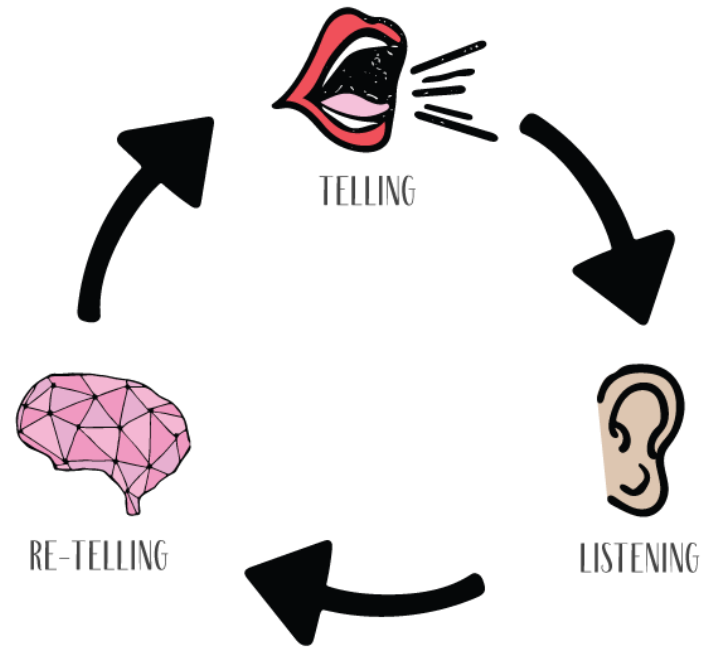


# THE STORYTELLING TRIANGLE

TELLER × TALE × AUDIENCE







## CYCLE OF STORY ACROSS TIME

RECEPTION × REITERATION × REVISIONING × RECREATION

# 100 Years of LIS Storytelling



- Caroline Hewins (left)
- Marie Shedlock
- Ruth Sawyer
- Margaret Read McDonald
- Betsy Hearne (right)

And also

- John Dewey, Bertram Bruce
- Barre Toelken in Folklore
- Doug Lipman in storytelling performance

A large, metallic sphere is the central focus, reflecting a landscape. The reflection shows a calm body of water in the foreground, with several trees of varying heights and colors (some green, some brown) along the shoreline. The sky is a pale, hazy blue. The sphere's surface is highly reflective, showing some light artifacts and a rainbow-like spectrum on the right side. The background behind the sphere is a dark, gradient grey.

Stories open problems to  
collective innovation.




# What is the library?

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- For example, in stories that librarians tell, is the library...
  - The protagonist?
  - A character?
  - A setting?
  - Part of the plot?





A large, multi-level library with circular bookshelves and study desks. The library is filled with books and has a warm, golden light. In the foreground, there are several study desks with computers and people working. The bookshelves are arranged in a circular pattern, and the ceiling has a large, circular light fixture.

# What if the library is the helper?

- Assists the protagonist on a journey
- Provides key treasures (data, information, knowledge, wisdom)
- Creates a sense of place to which the protagonist returns
- Enables triumph because of key treasures





Advocacy means telling  
unheard stories.  
For example, who  
speaks for the stacks?





Who tells  
your stories?





## Case study: Advancement storytelling

- Ethics
- What can you ask? What can you tell?
- Listening to what matters

Advancement training included leadership development workshops and storytelling coaching.



- × PEOPLE'S STORIES
- × A CULTURE'S STORIES
- × AN INSTITUTION'S STORIES

WHO OWNS THE STORY?

# Nonprofit Stories

- Outward-facing stories
  - Origin, start, history
  - Major growth
  - Moments of mission accomplished
- Stories told from insiders to outsiders
  - Behind the scenes processes
  - Conflicts & transformations
  - Unsung heroes



# Best Practices in Advancement Storytelling

- Listen
- Build a story collage
- Stories about gifts lead to gifts, and the moral of the story is partnership
- Avoid squirrels and understand the limits of emotional appeals
- Make the ask
- Become swept up in the saga together
- Communicate the organization's story



McDowell, K., & Cook, E. (2017). Using 'Storytelling thinking' for advancement. *Journal of Education Advancement & Marketing*, 1(4), 320-328.

A large, solid orange oval shape centered on a white background. The oval has a slight gradient and a white outline.

Strategies

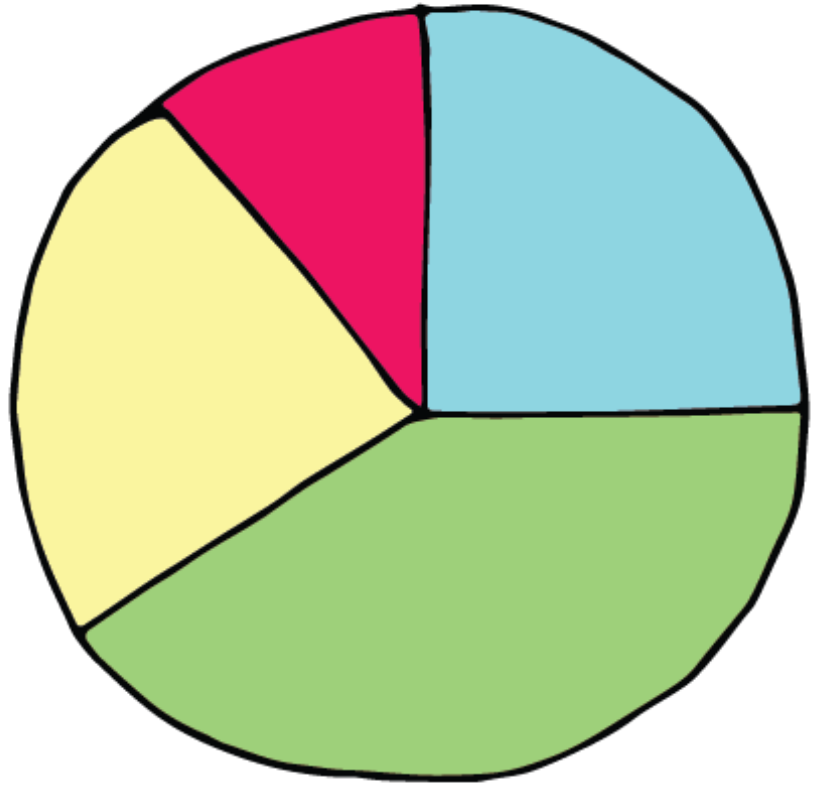
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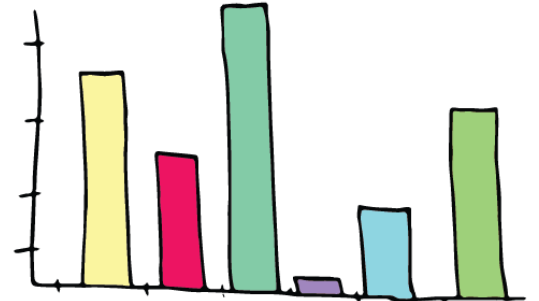
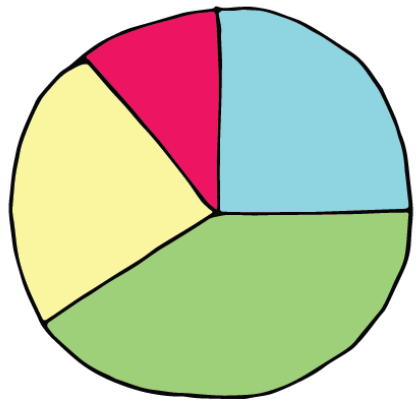


Library data needs  
story before storage

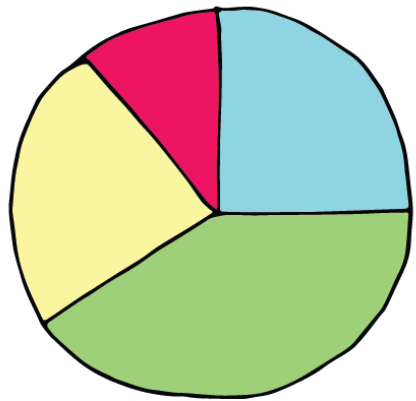












# Library data storytelling research

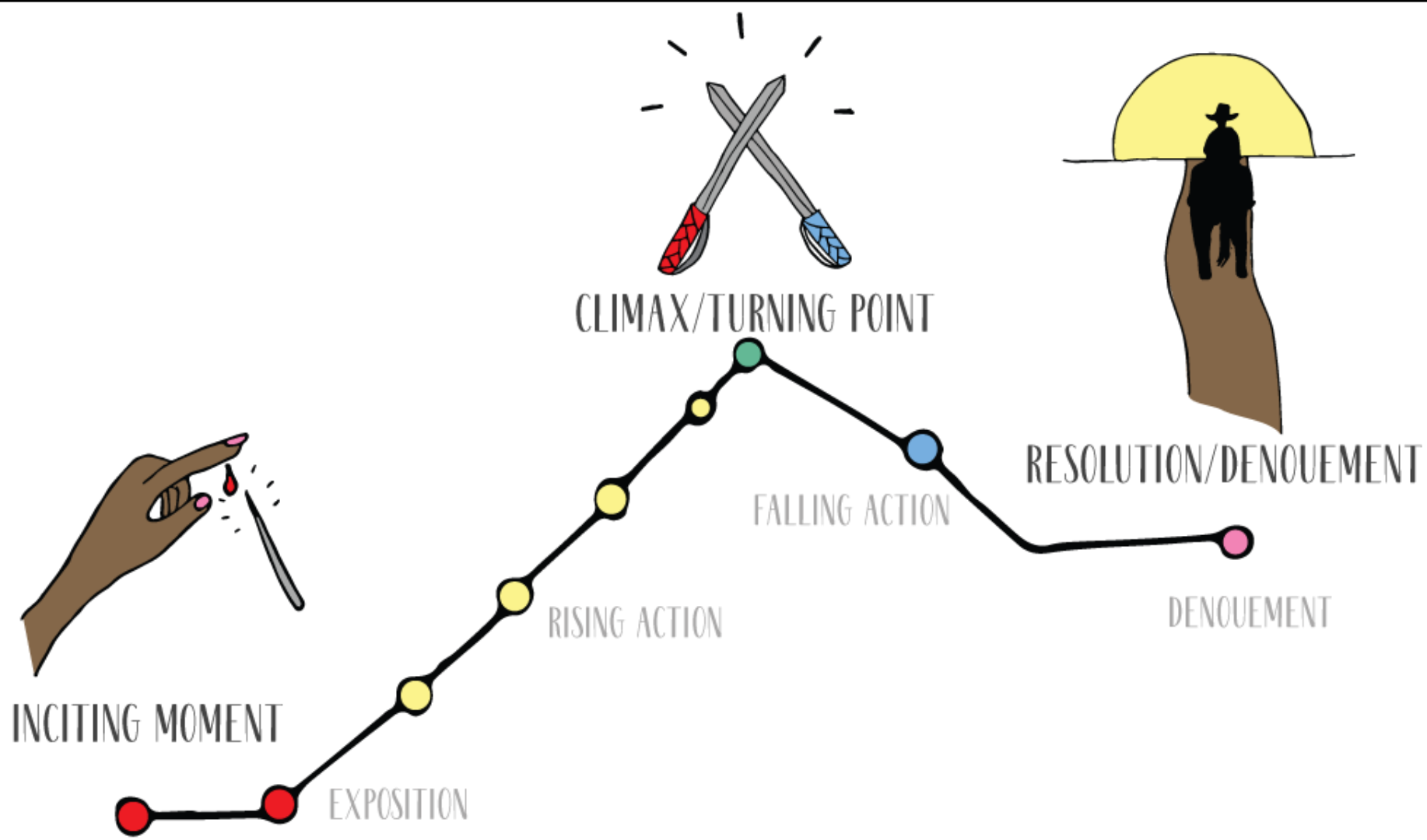
- 26 interviews in process of thematic analysis (Braun, V. and Clarke, 2006), and Data Storytelling Obstacles Questionnaire has received 38 responses.
- Initial interview findings include that libraries are predominately retelling stories they have told for a long time.
- Initial questionnaire responses indicate that, of 8 possible obstacles, the top three are:
  - too little time
  - don't have data they need
  - too little focus on storytelling with not enough connection to data

# Preview of DSTL

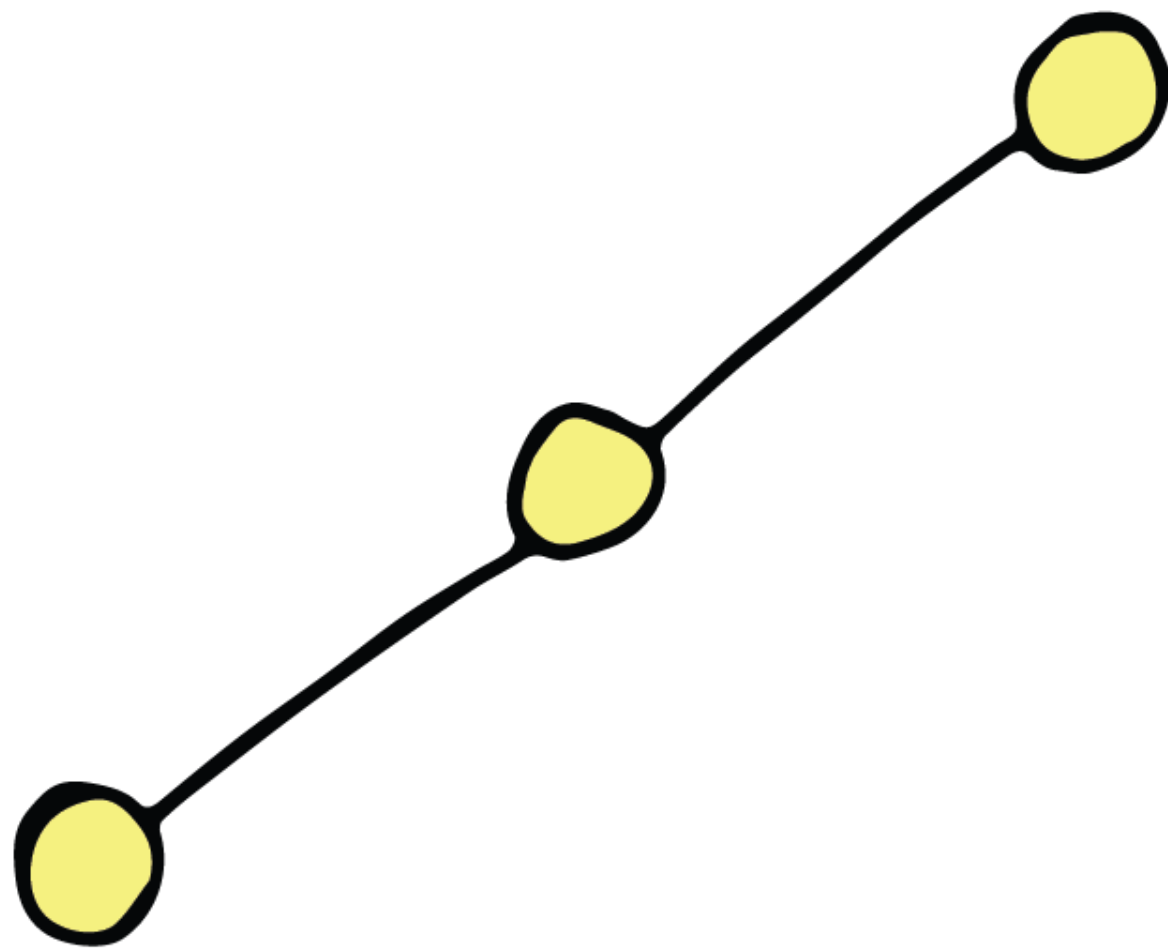
- The goal of this project is to plan, develop, and pilot a **Data Storytelling Toolkit for Libraries (DSTL)**, derived from the data storytelling course and refined with input from participating public libraries and community college libraries in order to serve data and communication needs of libraries and position them to serve their communities.

# Finding library data stories

- Depth of the information/social problem
- Scope of response
- Constraints or parameters

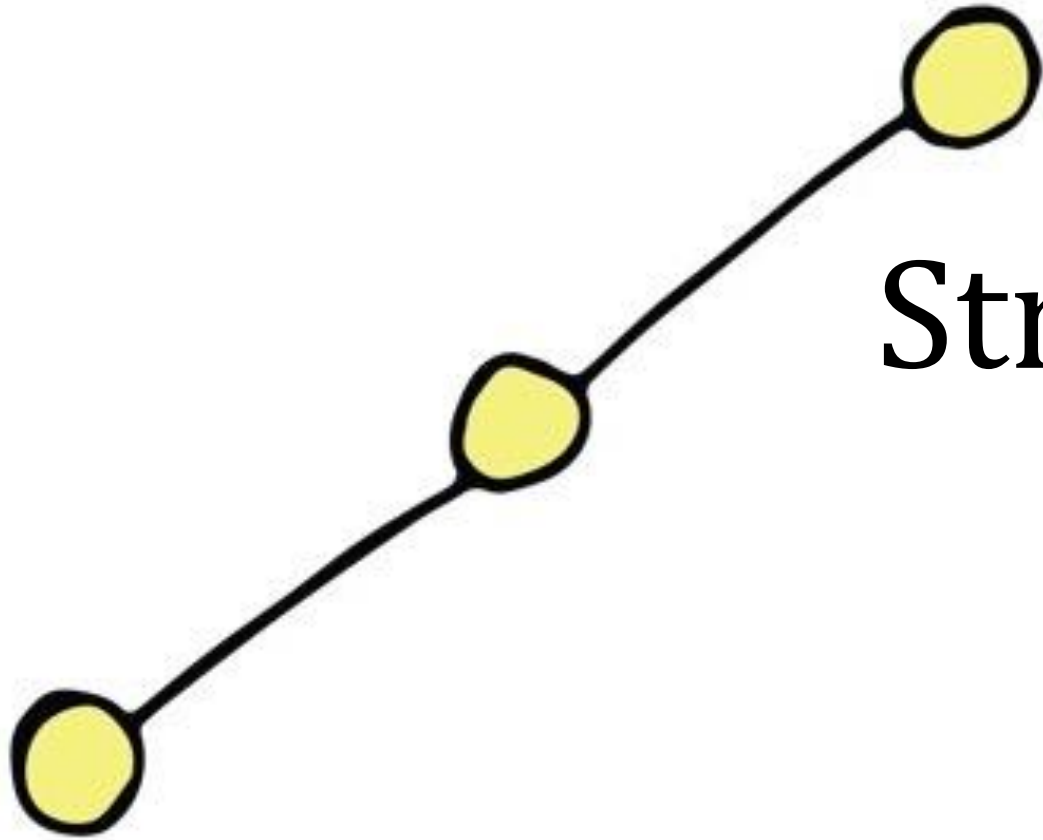


# CHRONOLOGICAL STRUCTURE



RISING ACTION





Trouble

Struggle

Steps in  
data  
storytelling

Data as character

Trouble to struggle

Setting establishes plot



# Strategies in Action

## 1. Data as character

- What are the numbers? What do they mean? What are they showing?

## 2. Trouble to struggle

- How can the data be retold as a character taking action? How can you make the story compelling?

## 3. Setting establishes plot

- What is just enough context to set up the action? What can you cut to get to the action faster?

# Developing stories

What is one valuable contribution that you can measure and would like to tell as a story?

1. What information problem are you trying to solve?  
What are the data sources?
2. What changes, has changed, or needs to change over time in this data?
3. What's the shortest version?
  1. What happens? What's the struggle?
  2. What are the numbers? How are they meaningful?
  3. What context is needed? What context can be cut?





# Data Storytelling Strategies: Developing Stories

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- Anything can be measured
- Finding stories in data
  - Where's the action?
  - What changes?
  - What's the meaning?



# COUNTING

*How We Use*



*Numbers to Decide*



*What Matters*



## DEBORAH STONE



## Data Storytelling Strategies: Value and counting

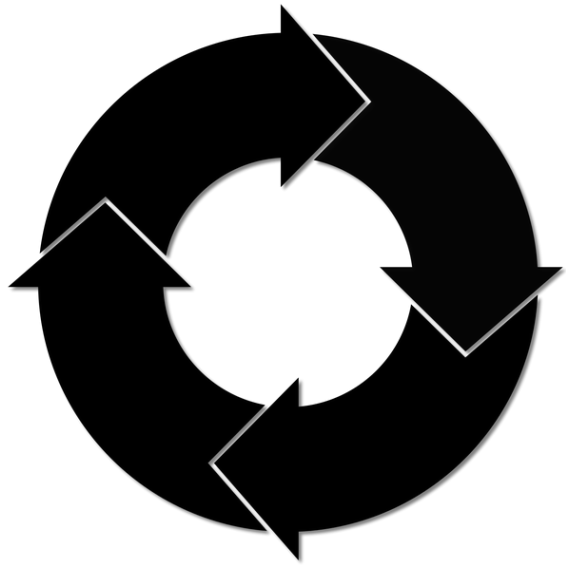
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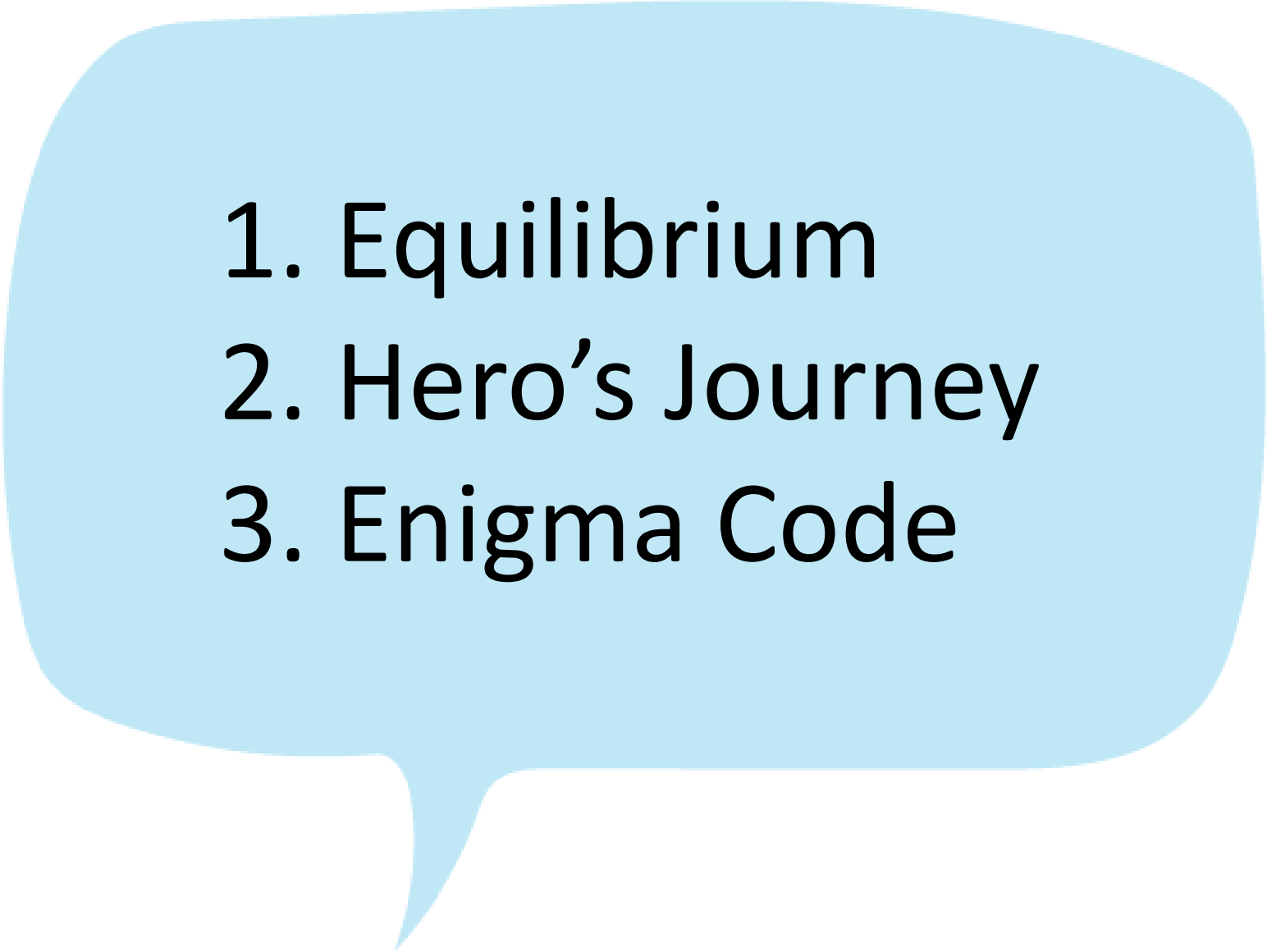
- Numbers don't have to be intimidating
- Numbers are not more real than other kinds of data.
  - “Counting is a lot like being a judge. Before we can *count up* “somethings” we have to decide what *counts* as a something.” (p. 179)
- Finding ways to measure value requires creativity and integrity

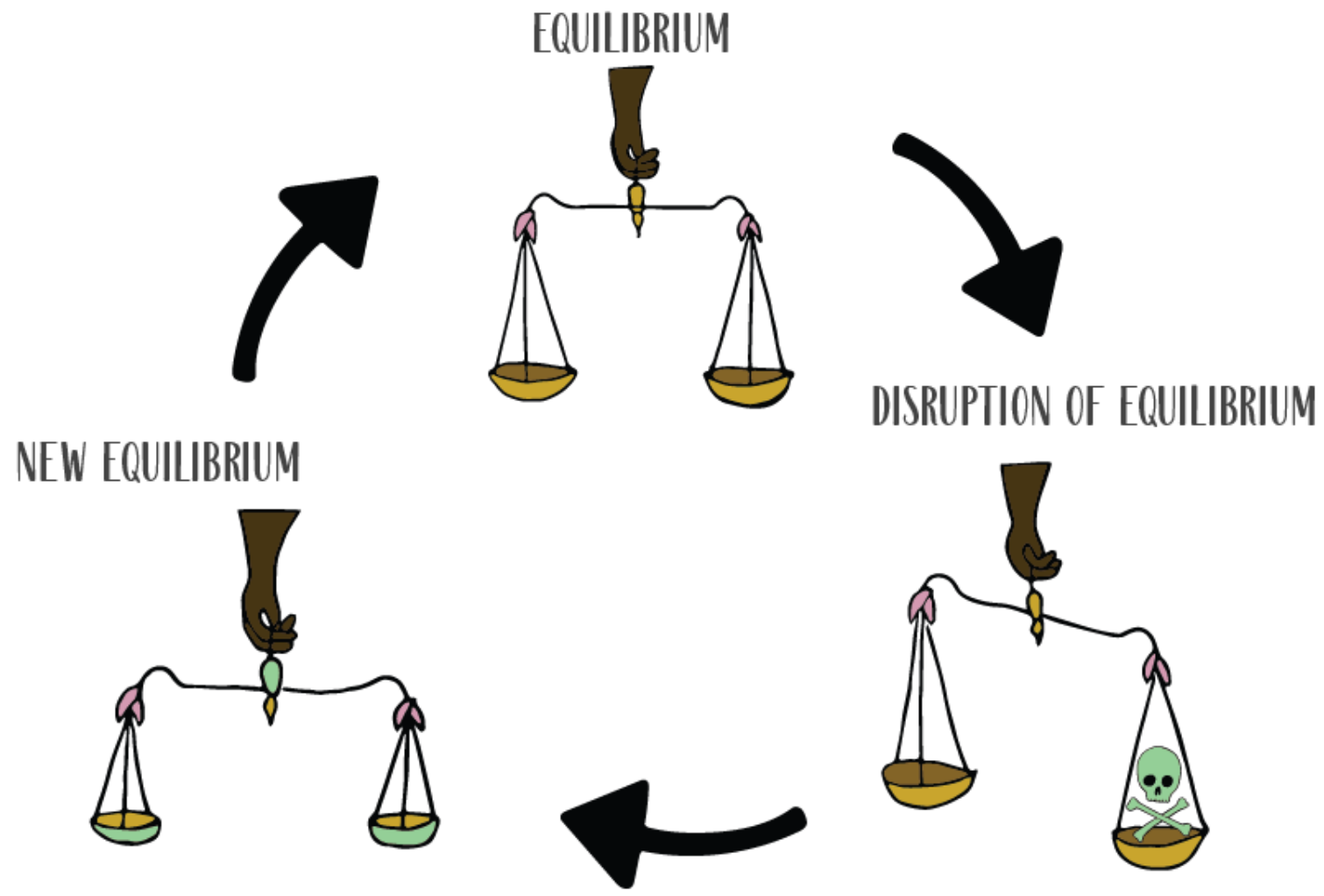
A large, solid orange oval shape centered on a white background. The oval has a slight gradient and a thin white border.

Structures

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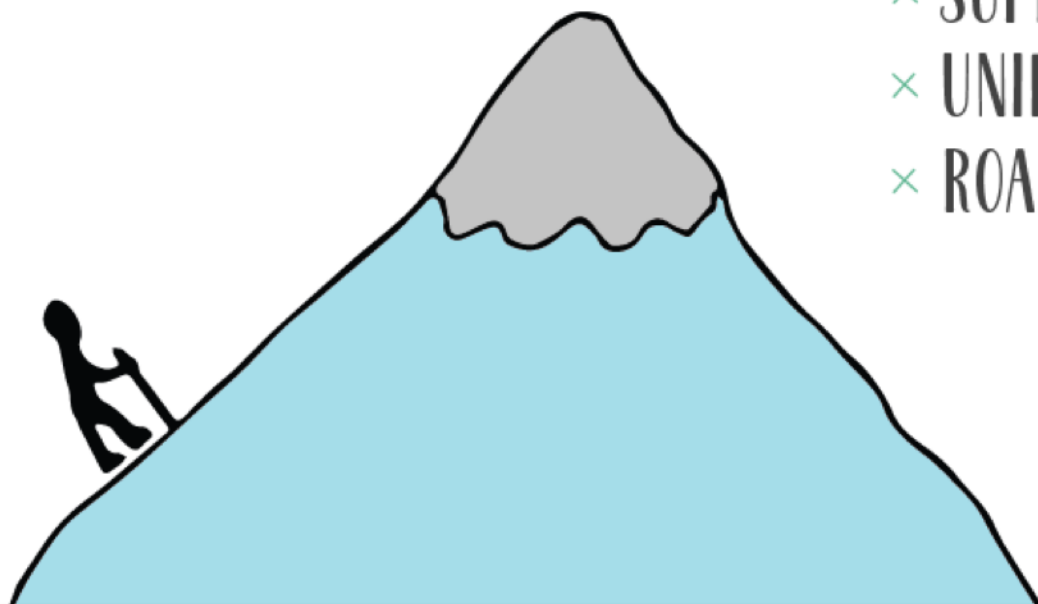
- 
1. Equilibrium
  2. Hero's Journey
  3. Enigma Code



# EQUILIBRIUM STORIES





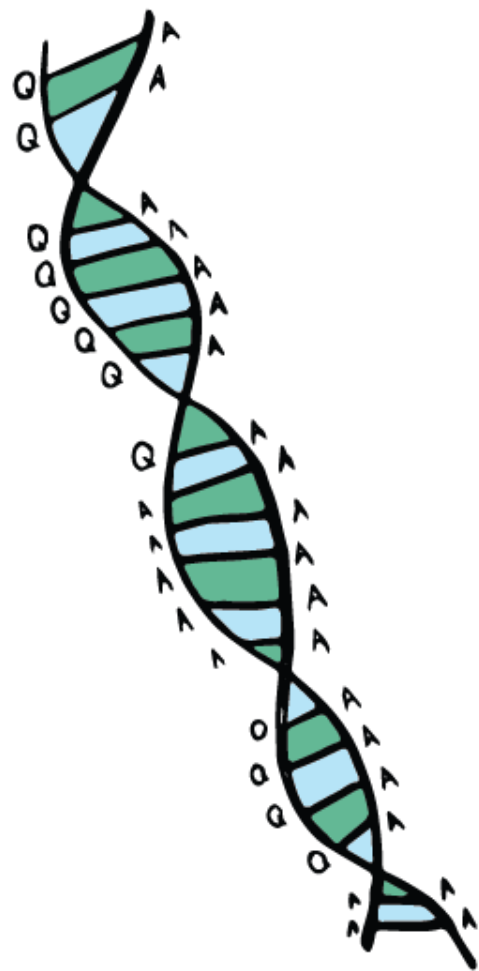


- × CALL TO ADVENTURE
- × SUPREME ORDEAL/INITIATION
- × UNIFICATION/TRANSFORMATION
- × ROAD BACK/HERO'S RETURN

HERO'S JOURNEY

**KAPOW!!!**

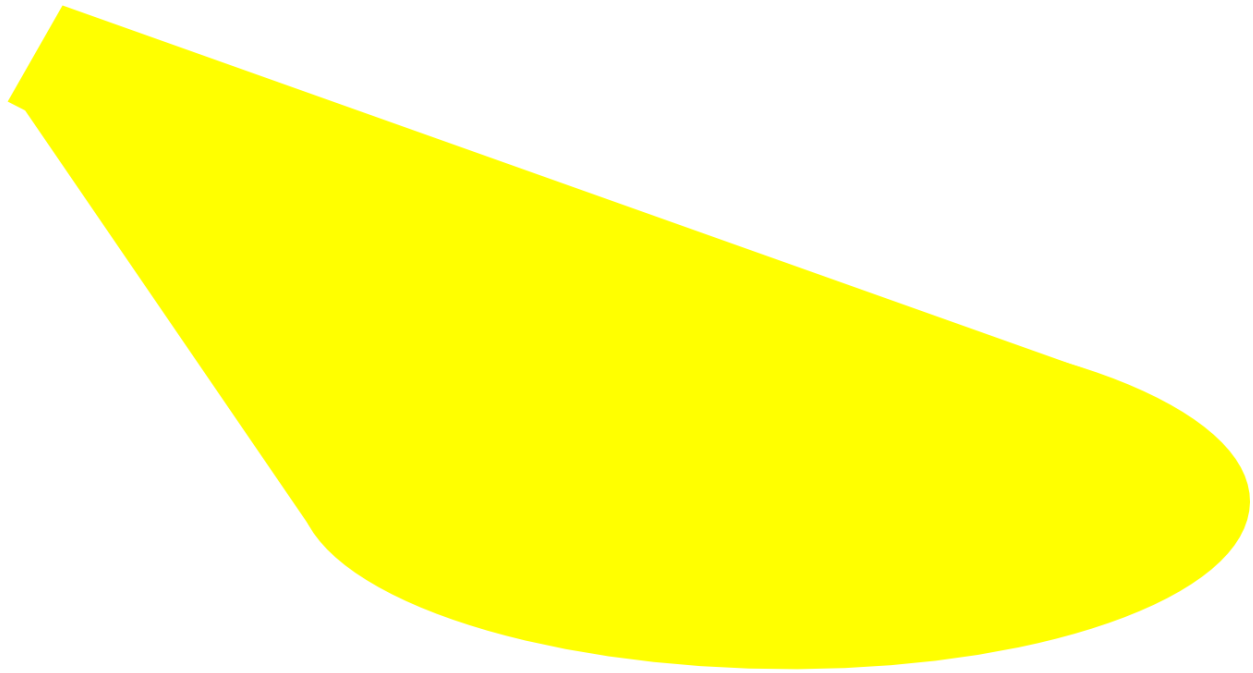
A stylized comic book sound effect. The word "KAPOW!!!" is written in a bold, red, sans-serif font with a thick black outline. The text is slanted upwards to the right. It is centered within a yellow starburst shape that has a jagged, blue border. The entire graphic is set against a plain white background.



QUESTIONS  
(CLUES SUSPENSE)

ANSWERS  
(EXPLANATIONS RESOLUTION)

ENIGMA CODE





inquiry

uncertainty

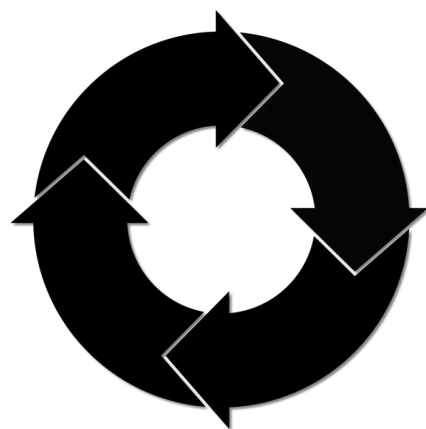
question

mystery

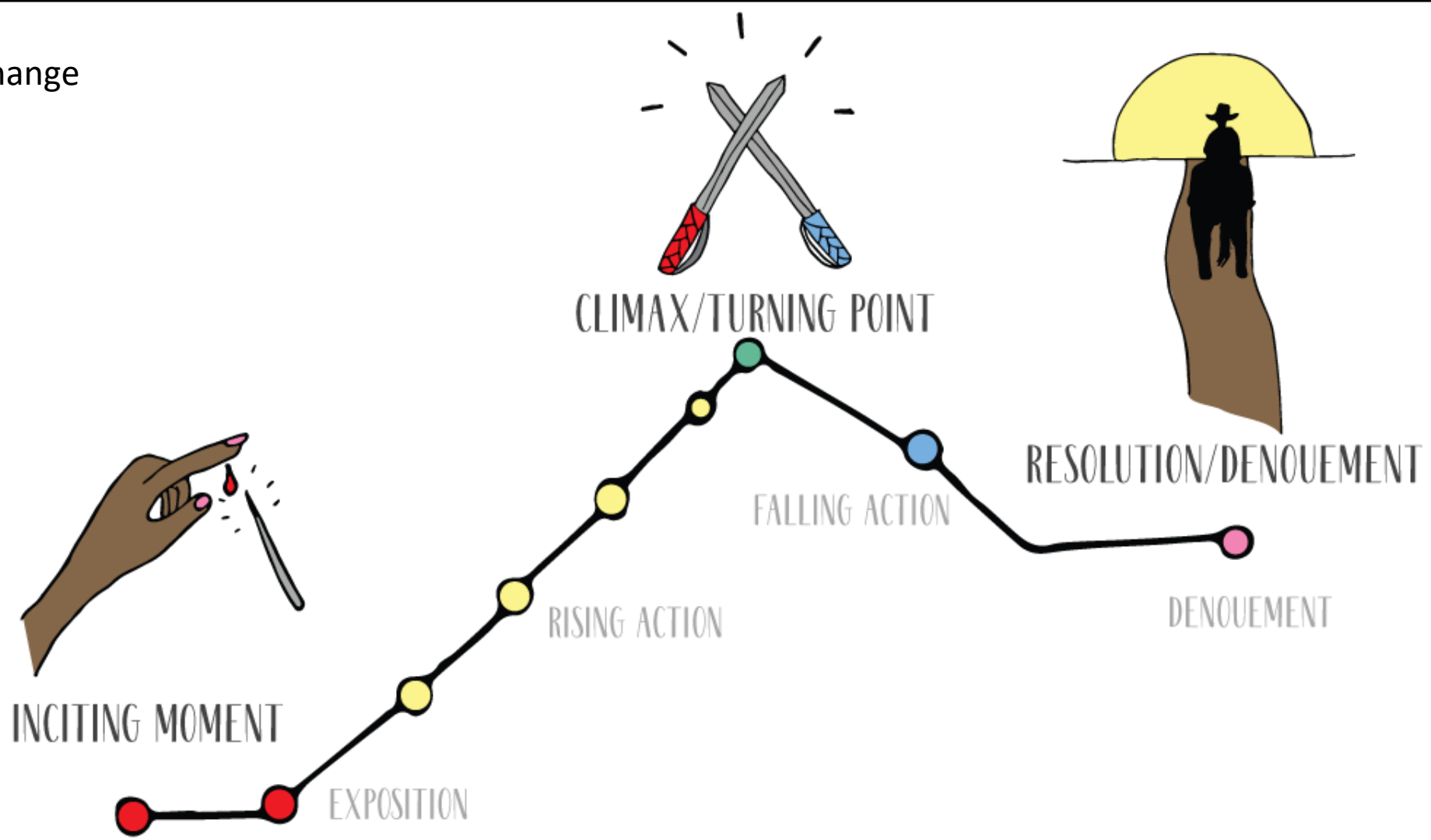
data

information

solution



School Name Change



# CHRONOLOGICAL STRUCTURE



# Structures in Action

- Does the story inform with evidence of value?
- Does the story show impact for real people?
- How will you balance emotional and informational content?
- Who will be your test audiences?



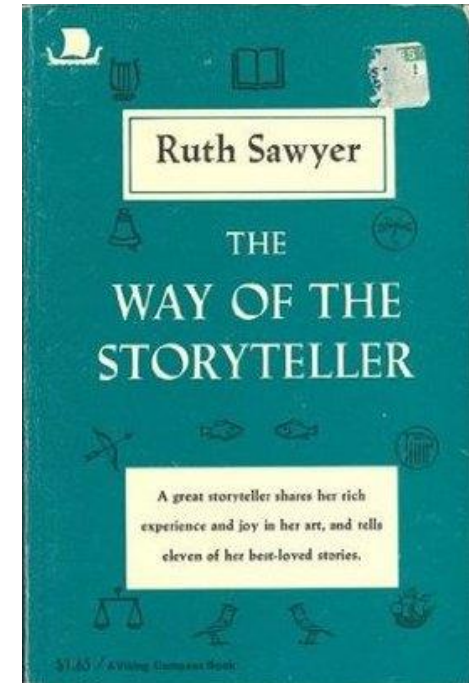


STORYTELLING  
THINKING

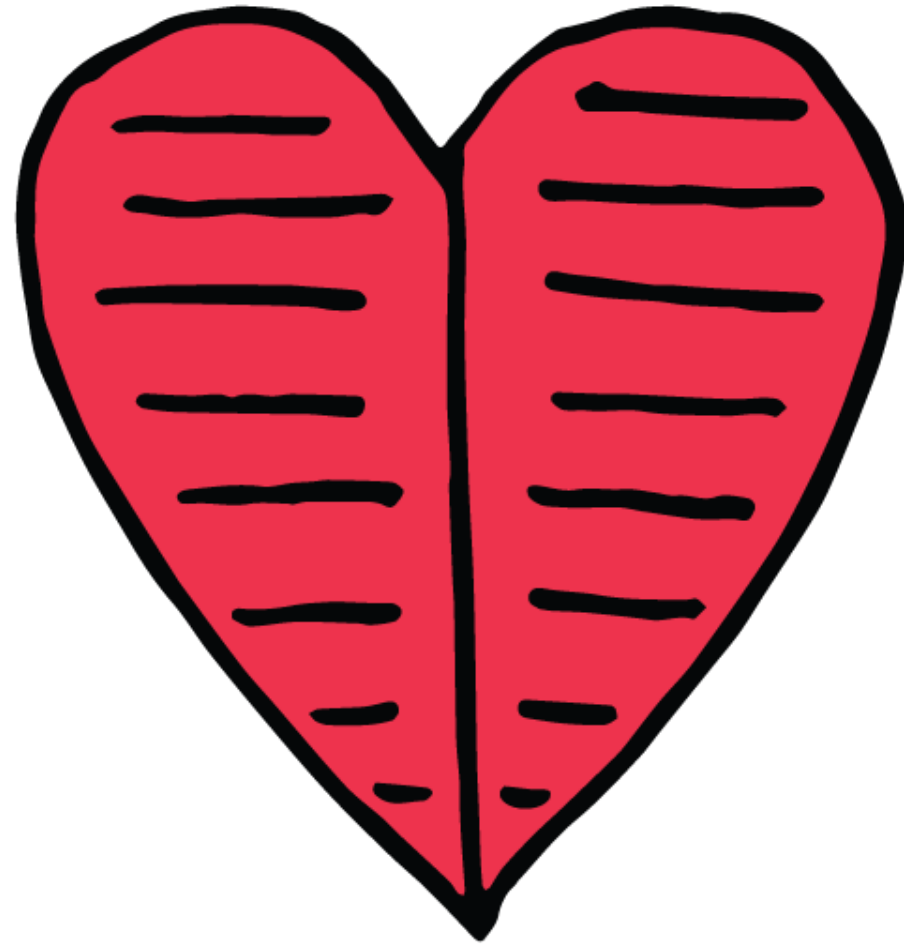
# Storytelling Paradoxes

Longevity of storytelling practice in LIS

- Enchantment and Rigor
- Planning and Flexibility
- Aesthetic power and Humility



McDowell, K. (2018). Paradoxes of Storytelling in Librarianship. *Journal of New Librarianship*, 4 (7) p. 32-37, 10.21173/newlibs/4/7



TELLING IT BY HEART



QUESTIONS? THANK YOU!

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# Who is serving as storyteller?

- Who tells your stories?
- What roles do they have in the organization?
- What obstacles are there to those tellers telling your stories effectively?

