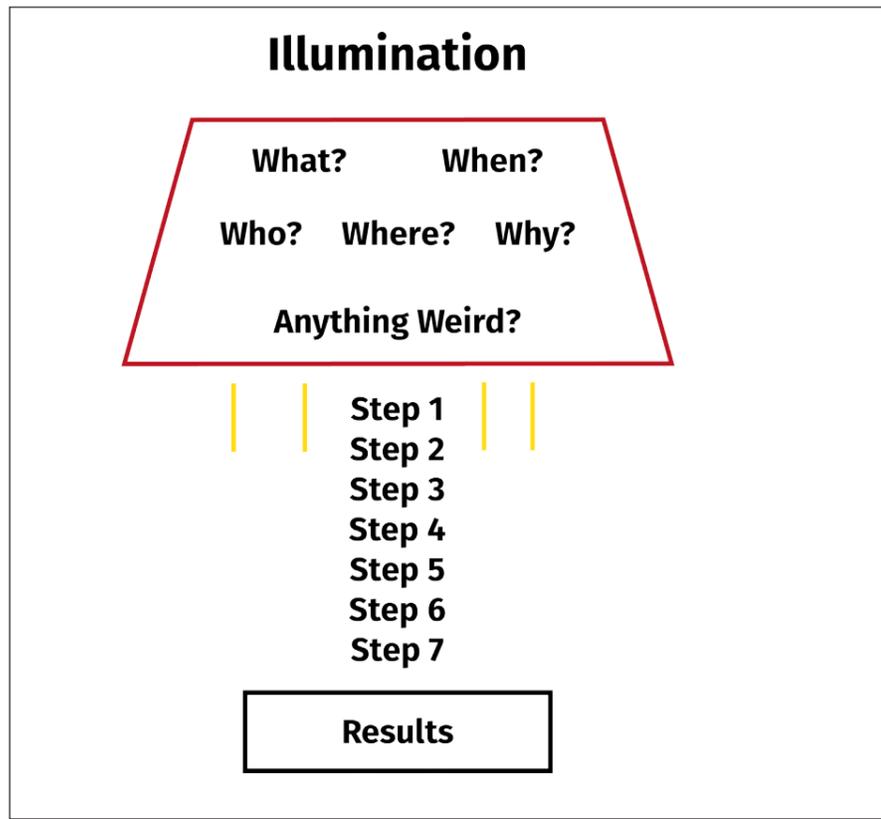


Fred's Technical Story Shapes



Lamp shaped stories explain a concept, procedure, and outcome. User manuals, how to articles, and tutorials use this shape, often in a fractal manner.

Tell your audience why, when, and where they should perform the task. Explain anything weird, unexpected, or non-standard. Give the steps (7+/-2). End with how they'll know they got the expected result.

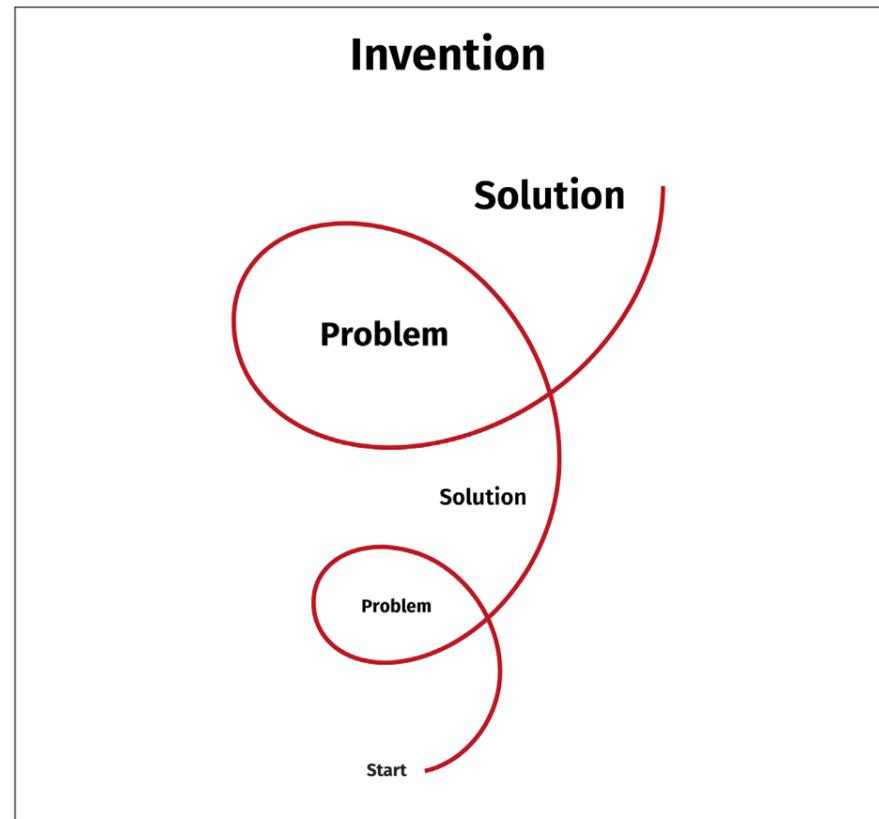
Use the simple present tense and speak directly and clearly to your reader.

Example:

Instant coffee is a fast way to get an energy boost. Drink instant coffee hot or cold, at home, the office, or outdoors. You can flavor instant coffee as you like.

1. Add 2 teaspoons of instant coffee into a cup or glass.
2. Add 1 cup of hot or cold water.
3. Stir together.
4. Add optional milk, sugar, or syrups.

Your instant coffee tastes good and wakes you up, anywhere, hot or cold.



Tornado shaped stories help you share the pain and joy of solving problems.

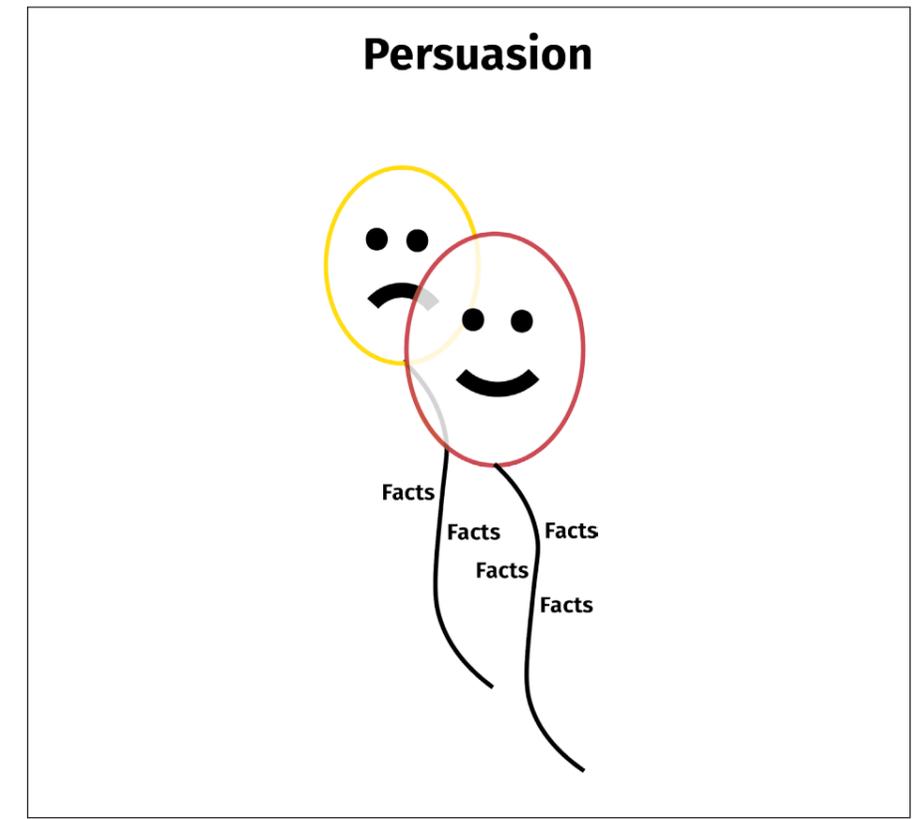
Start with describing your problem, and tell how you fixed it the easy way. Soon, you learn that the easy fix causes other failures, and you now have a larger problem to solve.

Readers' fascination is found in your mistakes, learning along the way, and exploring alternatives with you. To add drama, include your 5 senses: What does failure smell like? What is the taste of solving a problem, and how does it make your skin feel? Try the first person.

Give technical details, show charts, tables and graphs. But keep the story flowing, swinging from problem to solution, at least twice but no more than four times.

End your story with the present (hopefully improved) state of your system, and what you learned from the often frustrating process of solving problems.

The tornado shaped story is often long, and broken into chapters or installments. Use this spiral story shape for creating sustained interest in an ongoing project. Share the adventures, and hardships, and triumphs of your work as if speaking to a friend who works in the same area as you, confidently including the technical details.



Balloon shaped stories persuade people by engaging emotions, then presenting facts supporting the emotions. Politicians and salespeople often use this shape.

Tell a short sad story of failure, then immediately tell a longer happy story of success. The stories overlap in subject, but differ in approach, with your favored solution giving the happy result.

Now you've activated your audience's emotions, you can give them the facts, figures, evidence, and explanations. (Do not attempt to persuade with facts alone.)

Example:

There once was a child who refused to eat vegetables. She got sick and died. Her mother was very sad.

There was another child who also didn't like vegetables, but ate them as told. She grew up strong and smart, becoming an astronaut. Her mother was very proud.

- Vegetables are important for growing up strong and healthy
- Vegetables have vitamins and minerals.
- You can eat vegetables cooked, or raw, and with sauces.
- You should eat several vegetables every day.