

BRINGING MORE EFFECTIVE STORYTELLING TO MEDICAL PUBLICATIONS

Traditionally, stories include several key elements: characters, setting, plot and an inciting incident to catalyse the rest of the story through climax and resolution. Stories also have causality - cause-and-effect relationships between events that give the story meaning and trigger emotion.

What makes a story powerful?

Storytelling is becoming more critical than ever. In medical publications, healthcare providers (HCPs) face an increasing amount of journal articles and data. With this information overload, communicating the data requires impactful storytelling to increase the effectiveness of clinical publications.

Research from the fields of narrative theory, psychology and linguistics suggests that several additional elements can be used to increase a story's effectiveness. These include using a time or location, grabbing the reader's attention, specific recommendations, sense of immediacy, use of emotional tone, and simplicity and clarity.

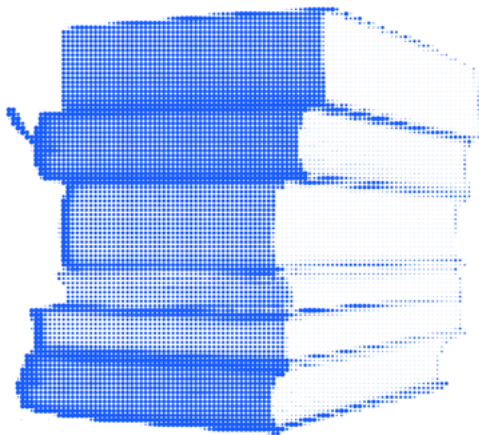


Storytelling in medical publications

Historically, storytelling had certain negative connotations within science; for example, construed as promotional or noncompliant reporting of clinical data. However, when used properly, the mechanics of storytelling can help improve clarity and readability, and place clinical data in the appropriate context for peer-reviewed publications.

Incorporating storytelling into the traditional IMRAD (Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion) structure of clinical manuscripts is another challenge. With the rise of publication extenders such as plain-language summaries, infographics and audio/visual enhancers, authors now have more formats to leverage for effective storytelling while reporting and describing clinical data, as well as increasing their reach to different audiences.

Crafting a simple story and then considering ways to enhance the immediacy, originality and emotional tone can also make a difference. In complex fields such as genetic medicines, education gaps are widespread among clinicians and non-experts who want to keep up with the latest advances. We explored the extent to which narrative style is used in industry-supported journal articles on genetic medicines. Briefly, we used dictionary-based text analysis software and human assessment to measure 11 narrative elements in the abstracts of 1,145 articles published between 2018 and 2022. We looked at how closely these abstracts resembled a typical story narrative and how effective storytelling was. Two key conclusions were that manuscript type matters: review articles scored higher for narrativity compared with primary articles; and



that increased emotional tone was associated with increased citation count and a higher Altmetric Attention Score. While there's always some tension between emotion and rationality in science, this preliminary finding suggests that authors may explore ways to humanise their writing while taking care not to lose authority within the constraints of journal-style restrictions.

Pharmaceutical and publisher perspectives

When working with authors, both pharmaceutical sponsors and publishers may consider different aspects of storytelling, based on their respective roles in the traditional publication process. For example, sponsor teams may partner closely with medical affairs to develop storytelling upstream of publication development through the scientific platform. This living, dynamic tool is a powerful source for specific, compelling, aligned language based on published evidence, and should be a touchstone in planning and developing publications.

Many journals and publishers are focusing on downstream aspects, such as improving health equity through better access to responsibly developed content. With the rise of publication extenders – either accompanying publications or standalone – more journals than ever are offering opportunities for clinical data storytelling that augment the IMRAD structure. Appropriately developed extenders can help responsibly disseminated content reach wider audiences seeking this information.

It's clear that, when working with authors to develop impactful storytelling for clinical publications, many factors should be considered. Storytelling mechanics, narrative elements, language guided by the scientific platform, selection of extenders and an appropriate target journal are aspects that publications professionals should be proactively discussing with pharmaceutical sponsors and authors.



Practical considerations

It is never too early to include storytelling in publication planning, including defining key audience stakeholders and clinical context, proactively working with authors to plan extenders and working with authors on appropriate target journal selection.

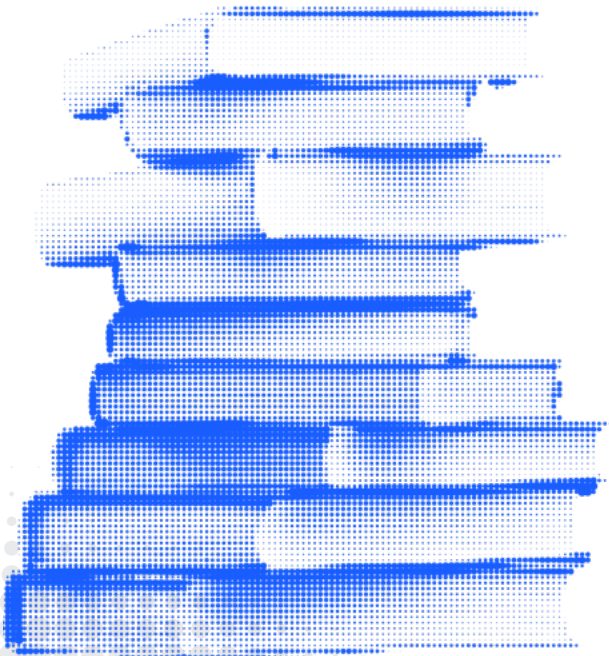
Consider leveraging storyboarding principles to map the data story: how will extenders help add to the data/story? What additional context can authors provide to explain why this data makes a difference? How can that best be described, and in what format?

Implement storytelling mechanics within your writing. For example, when describing the unmet need of a disease, include an inciting incident and a call to action to help create urgency and grab the reader's attention.

Finally, build in 'view and review' steps to ensure the data story is coming to life as envisioned. Leverage visual storytelling through figures and extenders. Read for impact: how would the publication help various audience readers?

Conclusions

We believe that authors and medical publications professionals should explore ways to incorporate storytelling elements that improve the resonance of the clinical or scientific content with their audiences – and help responsibly developed, impactful publications and the data they report reach more diverse audiences and help improve the lives of patients. ■



References are available on request.



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