Stories for the Non-Believer: Credibility, Psychology, and Persuasion

Estelle McKee and Jaclyn Kelley-Widmer Cornell Law School AALS Clinical Conference, May 2019

CREDIBILITYBelieving the story

PSYCHOLOGY Understanding the reader

PERSUASIONChanging the reader's mind

Flash Fiction

Use "schemas" to control how readers identify information.

Example 1:

JERMAINE'S POST-SCRIPT TO HIS SEVENTH-GRADE POEM ASSIGNMENT

"Ms. Tyler, the girl part was about Shantell. Please don't tell anyone."

-Christoffer Molnar

On October 22, Jermaine Smith, an African-American student in the seventh grade, submitted a poem in response to an assignment by his seventh-grade teacher, Ms. Elaine Tyler. After the poem he wrote a note asking Ms. Tyler to refrain from telling others that the portion of his poem referring to a girl was about a classmate named Shantell Jones.

Journalism & Legal Story-Telling

Use a "lede" to engage the reader.

Example 2:

RICHMOND, Va. — Before the first hearings on the morning docket, the line starts to clog the lobby of the John Marshall Courthouse. No cellphones are allowed inside, but many of the people who've been summoned don't learn that until they arrive. "Put it in your car," the sheriff's deputies suggest at the metal detector. That advice is no help to renters who have come by bus. To make it inside, some tuck their phones in the bushes nearby.

This courthouse handles every eviction in Richmond, a city with one of the highest eviction rates in the country, according to new data covering dozens of states and compiled by a team led by the Princeton sociologist Matthew Desmond.

-Emily Badger and Quoctrung Bui, *In 83 Million Eviction Records, a Sweeping and Intimate New Look at Housing in America,* N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 7, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/04/07/upshot/millions-of-eviction-records-a-sweeping-new-look-at-housing-in-america.html.

Evil Textbooks

Use syntax and punctuation to persuade the reader.

Example 3:

Some slaves reported that their masters treated them kindly. To protect their investment, some slaveholders provided adequate food and clothing for their slaves. However, severe treatment was very common. Whippings, brandings, and even worse torture were all part of American slavery.

-Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Texas United States History, Ch. 2 sec. 5

Cognitive Load

Help the reader learn quickly.

INTRINSIC

The mental effort needed to understand the information

GERMANE

Using working memory to activate schemas; connect new and old information

EXTRANEOUS

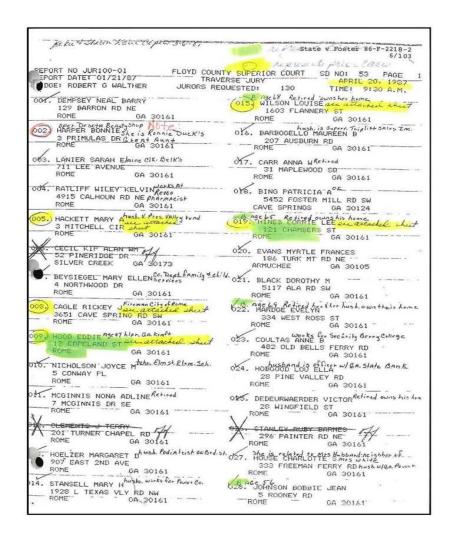
Mental energy spent because of how the storyteller delivers information

Example 4:

Quokka: a stocky herbivorous marsupial (*Setonix brachyurus* of the family Macropodidae) of southwestern Australia that has a short tail.

Example 5:

First, the prosecution marked the name of each black prospective juror in green highlighter on four different copies of the jury list. H. 903-26.⁵ Each of the four lists includes a key in the top-right corner of the first page indicating that "[Green highlighting] Represents Blacks." H. 903, 909, 915, 921.



H. 903.

⁵ See H. 202 (the prosecution's investigator explaining that the four lists are "four different versions of the same document [with] different handwritten notations on them").