Tell Me A Story of Science

By Randy Olson Tell Me A Story of Science Want to generate interest in your research? Here’s how. “Heard any good talks?” That’s what you hear in the lobby of science meetings. The standard reply is, “I heard a great talk this afternoon—the speaker told a really neat story about ...” And there you have it. He or she told a good story. You want to know how to interest the public in your

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And there you have it. He or she told a good story. You want to know how to interest the public in your research? Tell a good story.

As a scientist, I never quite knew this, but since becoming a filmmaker, it's obvious.

At age thirty-eight I resigned from my tenured professorship of marine biology and entered film school at the University of Southern California. From the first day, we were confronted with one basic principle—the most powerful means of mass communication is through the telling of stories. From Greek mythology to today's blockbuster movies, it's clear—tell a good story and the world will listen.

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It begins with a single, simple question: "What is your source of tension?" This is the heart of a good story. This question seemed trivial to me when I began film school. It didn't register until a decade later when I finally directed my own documentary feature film, "Flock of Dodos," about the controversy over the teaching of evolution versus intelligent design.

As I hit a brick wall in the editing and found myself sitting for days staring at a mountain of wonderful interview footage, I began flashing back to that question. Like a life preserver thrown to me in a stormy ocean, the question became my salvation.

As I dug deeper, I realized the answer itself tends to be a question. Just look at one of the simplest and most popular of fiction genres, the murder mystery—the source of tension is a question and virtually its own genre—"Who dunnit?"

Great stories and great scientific investigations are built around great questions.

The more I immersed myself in this world of questions, the more I began to flash back to one of the highest compliments for a scientist—when someone says, "That scientist is asking great questions."

And there you have it. The Rosetta Stone. The link between the science world and literature. Great stories and great scientific investigations are built around great questions.

But maybe you'll say, "Storytelling is just for fiction." Sorry, but that's not true. This is a shortcoming of today's science education—the failure to make scientists realize they are storytellers, every bit as much as novelists. They just don't like to admit it, or really even think about it. They tend to think stories mean Star Wars and Harry Potter. The truth is, stories are as equally important in nonfiction as fiction. They are the way we understand our world.

You want the linchpin of proof of the similarity? Scientists write their papers in the same three-act structure that novelists and filmmakers use to tell their stories. The standard format of a scientific research paper consists of an Introduction (Act I, in which the question is presented); Methods and Results (Act II, in which the question is explored); and Discussion (Act III, in which the question is answered). Thesis, antithesis, synthesis—same, same.

All of which leaves me over the years answering this question to friends and journalists: "How in the world did you go all the way from scientist to filmmaker?" These days my answer is simple: "It wasn't much of a change. The two careers involve the same basic process—storytelling."

Randy Olson runs Prairie Starfish Productions in Los Angeles, California. Olson's book "Don't Be Such a Scientist" is published by Island Press.