



# Storytelling Resource Kit for Queensland startups



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Queensland  
Government

## Acknowledgement of Country

*The Department of Tourism, Innovation and Sport acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians and recognises their culture, history, diversity and their deep connection to the land, waters and seas of Queensland and the Torres Strait. We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which we operate and wish to pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.*

*Marketing is no longer about the stuff you make, but about the stories you tell.*

**Seth Godin, best-selling author and entrepreneur**

*Organisation and management studies, no less than consumer studies, cultural studies, media and communication studies, oral history, as well as substantial segments of legal studies, accounting, and studies of the professions and science, have enthusiastically adopted the idea that, in creating a meaningful universe, people resort to stories....stories make experience meaningful, stories connect us with one another; stories make the characters come alive, stories provide an opportunity for a renewed sense of organizational community.*

**Renowned Greek-British sociologist Professor Yiannis Gabriel from the University of Bath, UK**

*People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.*

**American writer, poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou**

## Introduction

Innovation is vital to Queensland's economic prosperity – modernising our traditional industries, bolstering our regional economies, and establishing whole new high-value jobs and industries, whether that is in cleantech, edtech, sport tech or agtech.

The beauty of innovation is that it's all about actively looking for solutions, of thinking and acting outside the box, of viewing problems as challenges rather than as complications, of listening and learning and working together, of recognising that nothing is beyond our capability.

Innovation – which by definition is about the generation of new ideas – is something we can all do.

In fact, innovation works best in organisations with inclusive cultures – where everyone's ideas are welcome – from those working at the coalface coming up with ideas about business improvement based on their direct customer service experience to the top executives.

Innovation happens when people are curious, collaborate and build connections.

At Advance Queensland, we are keen to spread the innovation message – that innovation is as much a part of Queensland culture as sport and sun.

The best way to spread the innovation message is if our entrepreneurs and innovators tell their stories.

This is why we produced this storytelling resource kit.

By you telling your stories, you inspire others to innovate.

You showcase the Queensland innovation story.

## The importance of storytelling

Storytelling is a powerful communication tool – not only in helping you communicate with your customers and potential investors, but also within your organisation, assisting in reinforcing cultural values.

Scientists have discovered that stories have the ability to stimulate the creation of oxytocin in the brain, the chemical that helps build relationships as well promoting trust and empathy with others.

Psychologists have also discovered that stories can transport us into the world of narrative – helping us engage with those around us in a far more effective way than merely telling the facts alone.

So learning how to tell your business story is extremely important.

The skill is in telling a personal story and attaching it your business message – that way, your story will have more resonance.

Application for a good business story includes: pitching, media interviews, website, blogs, LinkedIn, podcasts, and public speaking.

This is a really good video by Professor Paul Zak from Claremont Graduate University in Southern California explaining what happens in our brains when we hear a story. **The science of storytelling** - [The Brain Science of Storytelling - YouTube](#)



# Overview

## Before you start – key questions to ask yourself

- What is it that I actually do?
- What makes me different?
- What am I trying to achieve?
- Who is my audience?

## The Elements of Storytelling

- The storyteller
- The key message
- Plot
- Style

## Stagecraft

# Before you start – key questions to ask yourself

## What is that I actually do?

If you can't answer that question, don't do anything until you can. Nothing else matters. This is important because so many start-ups are unable to explain what they do. That has ramifications for your business. If you can't explain what you do, plainly and simply, then you have a problem. You need to really think through what you do – and the best way to do that is stand back and reflect on how someone else might view your business. Can they understand it.

Some good questions to help you get to that point are below. Ask yourself these. With your answers, write them down. Interrogate your responses – are they strong and do they make sense?

Key questions:

What are you?

Why are you?

What problem are you solving?

How are you solving it?

Why should people care?

## What makes me different?

What is your unique selling proposition (USP)?

What sets you apart from your competition?

Once you understand your USP, successful storytelling is about beginning with the end in mind – how would you like people to feel about you, your product and your company.

## What am I trying to achieve?

It's also equally important to reflect on what you are trying to achieve. What do you want to get out of this? That will help you develop your theme/key message. And once you've cracked what your key message is, that will help you determine your narrative structure.

Why are you doing this?

Is it to win customers?

Is it to attract investment?

Is it for team building?

Is it a brand exercise?

Is it to showcase what you do to the broader community?

Is it all of the above?

## Who is my audience?

Understanding who your audience is very important. More on this below

Is it potential investors?

Is it potential customers?

Is it my staff?

Is it the general public?



## Your audience

Temper your story for your audience.

For an audience of potential investors, your slant will be a pitch looking to attract investment.

For an audience of potential customers, the pitch will be about attracting custom.

For the general public it could be about brand awareness, about inspiring others, about informing and or educating what it's like to be an entrepreneur/innovator.

For staff, it will be about generating an inclusive culture – one team working together. It's important that everyone in your organisation is on the same page. They know what their common purpose is and why. They feel part of the business – not just a cog in the wheel. This is especially important as you grow – to maintain that narrative. That requires work from you end – you've got to keep your team together. They can easily lose touch.

That doesn't mean you have to generate wholly different stories for each audience. Each version could be nuanced for that audience. The important aspect is that in all your storytelling, that your story is personal. Bring your audience on the journey with you.

But don't tell your entire life story – this is why having a key message to mould your story around is important. Craft your story around your key message – your story should have a point. When crafting a story, you should have a definite idea of what you're building toward. There's nothing worse than a pointless story.

There is no doubt it can be difficult to choose the important points that you should include. We have a tendency to include every detail and end up boring our audience with facts that dilute the central story arc. Trust your audience will be able to follow your story – don't overwhelm them with unnecessary backstory or confuse them by going off the central narrative on tangents that don't add to your story.

# The mechanics – how to construct your story

## The elements of storytelling

The storyteller

The key message

Plot

Style

## The Storyteller

The main character in the story is you – you are the protagonist. The storytelling format you use will be in the first person – you are telling the story.

It's important that you engage with your audience and one of the most effective ways of doing that is to create empathy. And to create empathy, you need to be relatable.

The audience should see themselves in you.

Frailties, defeats, confusion and success are all human conditions – we find someone who acts like us more relatable.

By opening yourself up, by being vulnerable – you draw your audience in. And your story becomes more powerful.

You can bring in other characters if they are an important part of your narrative – but make sure you don't go off on a tangent. They are characters in your story.

It's equally important to remember to tell your story, not your product. People want insight into the people behind the product – why the product was created and what the vision of this product may be.

A good approach to business storytelling is to wrap your business message in a personal story.

This is the key message in this short video from Gabrielle Dolan. Gabrielle is a global thought leader in storytelling and business communication and has worked with thousands of high-profile business leaders. The video also has some good advice on what not to do – **What is business storytelling?** - [What is business storytelling? - YouTube](#)



There are many ways to personalise your story:

- Tell the tale of what drove you to found your start-up

- Tell the tale of how a customer came to you with a specific challenge and you helped them solve it
- Tell the story of your successes and failures and what you learned along the way
- Introduce yourself and your fellow founders on your website
- Highlight stories of your employees, clients and satisfied customers

## The key message

The key message is the understanding that the storyteller seeks to communicate – know why you are telling your story is key to organising the narrative.

It gives a story focus.

Think of the key message as the glue that holds your story together – what you wish to get across.

Having a key message means that your story is built around a unifying idea – making it easier to elicit support.

It can be what's driving you – the need to find a solution to a challenge. And that could be because you want to better society, you want to help people, you want to make your contribution to tackling climate change, you want to impress your family, you want to show you can do something no one else has, you've been asked to solve a specific problem by a customer and you set out to find the solution – thus demonstrating what and your company can do.

It could be about how tough it is to be an entrepreneur, but at the end of the day, the rewards are worth it – whether that's financial, intellectual and/or emotional.

It could also be about the importance of innovation – innovation is key to helping us deal with our challenges – big and small. That innovation is an integral part of who we are as Queenslanders – like sun and sport. It's how we roll.

But remember – one key message per story. Don't try to pack too many messages in the same story. Keep it simple – and easy for an audience to follow.

Below is a great example of a key message. Notice as well how the storyteller evokes empathy straight away with the audience. The storyteller is Kristen Robbins and it was a pitch she gave about her start-up The Workshops Alternative at the Startup Gippsland Showcase in 2019 – [The Worksheds: Alternative Education Options - Startup Gippsland Pitch - YouTube](#)



## The story arc – the Three Act Plot

Storytelling needs to be organised in a way which is easy to follow.

If an audience has to work hard to follow your story, they will lose attention.

Successful storytelling is not only about keeping your audience engaged but making it easy for them to share your story when they return home. And a clear structure will help this.

Your story needs to follow a logical train of thought.

As a starting point, you may like to think about the story of your business. Did your business start with a dream? Did you turn your childhood passion into a business? What elements of your story would be appealing to your audience?

Once you have an idea in your head – before you actually start writing your story – sit down and plan out your narrative. Put together a skeleton on which to build your story.

Below we have set out a narrative model called the Three Act Plot – a pretty simple format you can follow to create your story. There are of course plenty of other models – including the monomyth, nested loops and sparklines – but this is a good one to start with. It basically sets out a beginning, a middle, and an end.

What's good about the Three Act Plot is that gives you a way to clearly structure your story – you can think about how to provide a clear beginning and end, with plot points marking out key events in the story.

## The elements of the Three Act Plot

### Act I

- **The set up**
  - **Plot Point 1**

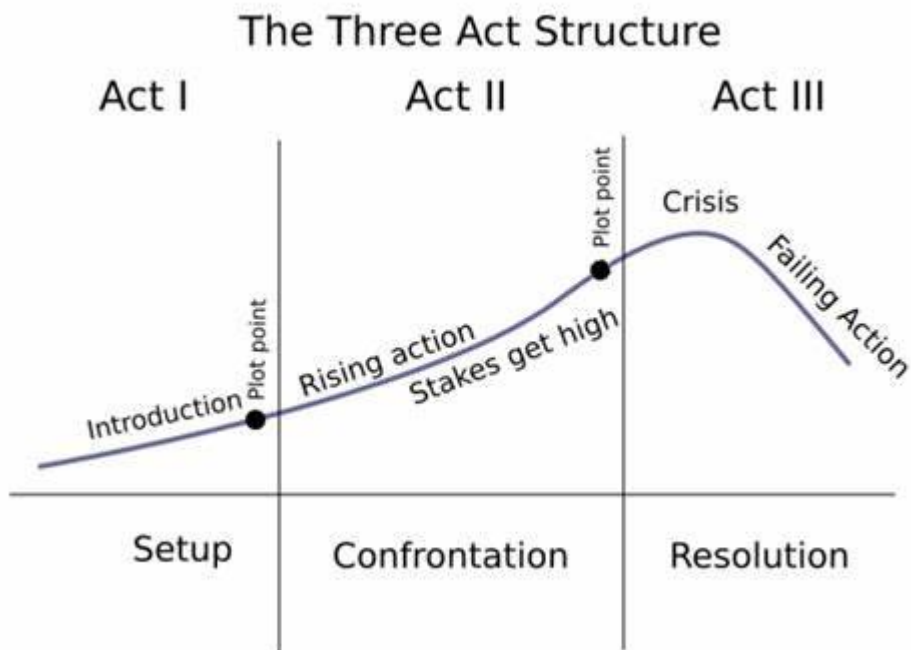
### Act II

- **Rising Action**
  - **Plot Point 2**
- **The Climax**
- **Falling Action**

## **Act III**

- **Resolution**

# The Three-Act Structure





## Act I – The set up

This is where you set the scene – the story could be about your business - what life was like before the incident that changed your direction.

Or it could be the story of how you helped a client - a client comes to you with a problem and asks you to solve it.

An example – as a young man working in manufacturing, you notice that when older workers leave, the organisation loses a lot of experience and it's difficult for younger workers to build that experience up. This loss of knowledge and experience has real repercussions for the business. There doesn't seem to be anything that can capture that knowledge and experience and pass it on.

### Plot Point 1

Something happens. It has a profound impact on you. Your life will never be the same again. There is a challenge and you set out to try and find a solution. You see an opportunity and you set out to grab it.

For example – you're a young engineering student on a ski holiday in New Zealand – wondering what you're going to do once you finish uni. You're skiing down a slope. You fall and hit your head. You're lucky – you're a bit shook, but it wasn't too bad. You regret not wearing a helmet because you know it could have been serious. But when you look around the ski slopes to see how many people are wearing helmets, you notice hardly any are. But what they are wearing are beanies. You have the thought – what if I could make a beanie that could turn into head protection on impact. That starts you off on your journey to discover that tech and set up a business to commercialise it. What's more, you have been studying nanotechnology – you think you can do it.

Taking the manufacturing story as an example – you're an older man. You've been working in immersive technology. You've been thinking for years about your experience in manufacturing when you were younger and the loss of knowledge and experience when older workers retire. You think you may have a solution – what if you could use immersive tech – whereby older workers pass on their knowledge to younger workers in real time, capturing the user's perspective as they apply their skills. You take the plunge and set up a start-up to develop and commercialise the technology.

## Act II – Rising Action

The journey has begun. You are on the quest.

Remember to continually raise the stakes of your journey – this is what makes a story gripping.

This is where you describe the struggle. The journey is not easy. Great stories have narratives that have all sorts of obstacles and hardships that make it tough for the protagonist. This is the confrontation in your story. It's the drama. An audience can relate to this. We understand. It creates a strong link.

Setting up a business is not easy. It involves risk. You learn as you go along. You have to try and raise capital. You worry that you're not going to make it. These are what make a story – if it's all plain-sailing, you won't have much of a story.

Drama is the lifeblood of any story. It's what drives the story along.

*A story without a challenge simply isn't very interesting. "Good storytellers understand that a story needs conflict" ... Is there a competitor that needs to be bested? A market challenge that needs to be overcome? A change-resistant industry that needs to be transformed? Don't be afraid to suggest the road ahead will be difficult. "We actually like to be told it's going to be hard," ... "Smart leaders tell employees, 'This is going to be tough. But if we all pull together and hang in there, we'll achieve something amazing in the end'." A well-crafted story embedded with that kind of rallying cry means "you don't have to demand change or effort," ... "People will become your partners in change", because they want to be part of the journey.*

**Carolyn O'Hara, *How to Tell a Great Story*, Harvard Business School, 30 July 2014 - [How to Tell a Great Story \(hbr.org\)](http://hbr.org)**

Example – Your child has a disability. You want to make a wheelchair that can roll easily on sand and into the sea – so your child can experience a beach holiday. You've started making a prototype. You try different types of wheels until you find the right ones. You work what kind of carriage is best. You try a certain paint, but it doesn't work because sea water damages it. Sand gets into the mechanism, etc. But you keep going, experimenting, trying out different materials and solutions until you get there. You develop a very basic prototype.

Take the manufacturing story – you've put all your life savings into your company. You're operating out of your kitchen at home. You're worried if you've made the right decision. Your first attempts at trying to find a partner are not going well.

## **Plot Point 2**

Everything seems to be going well and then bang all seems lost. You're looking defeat straight in the face. The prototype you're developing is not going according to plan. You have a falling out with your partner. The challenge seems insurmountable.

Taking the wheelchair example above – the prototype works, to an extent. It needs a lot of improvement. You need help with that. But everywhere you go – no one seems interested. You're going nowhere and it looks like it's never going to get off the ground.

Take the manufacturing example – you're behind in your loan repayments. Interest rate rises are not helping. You're thinking that you'll have to give it up and go back to being an employee. The tech is proving harder to crack than you thought.

### **The Climax**

This is the turning point in the story. Something happens to turn the situation around – you have a eureka moment, you get help when you most need it, you find the right person at the right time, you confront your biggest challenge and you overcome it.

A climax includes three elements:

- You discover something about yourself and/or another character in your story
- You have an epiphany
- It's here you can reveal the key message of your story.

Taking the wheelchair example above again – you've been trying to get a partner and then you get a call from a small engineering company in Logan. They want to work with you. They want to build the next iteration. You're excited because it means you're on the right track. You started off this journey to help your child experience a beach holiday – and in the process you are helping many other children and their families.

Take the manufacturing story example – your company gets a big break. You get the chance to pitch your technology to BHP. This is your chance. It's make or break.

## **Act III – Falling Action**

This is the part of the story that shows the result of the climax.

You win the day. You've overcome your obstacles. You have succeeded. The future looks a lot brighter.

You could fit in here how the customer reacted – what your work has meant for them.

Taking the beanie helmet idea above – you've developed a beanie that works. You have set up a start-up. You've drawn the attention of some major investors. Your company is up and running and people are using your beanies. You're getting positive feedback from customers. You're now starting to look beyond Australia and New Zealand – you see opportunity in the United States and Europe.

### **Resolution**

The important thing here is to make sure your audience know your story has ended.

Here is a good example of how the Three-Act Structure can be applied to tell a video story. Two US based YouTube creators show how they did one of their most successful videos using the Three-Act Structure.

[Using The 3-Act Structure To Tell A Strong Story - YouTube](#)



## How to apply the Three-Act Structure in business storytelling

So how do you apply the Three-Act Structure to telling your business story.

Here we have international marketing effectiveness expert James Hurman, author of *The Case for Creativity* and *Future Demand* and founder of New Zealand strategy consultancy Previously Unavailable, explain the effectiveness of the Three-Act Structure in business storytelling. One of the case studies he looks at is the famous 2004 Dove Campaign for Real Beauty marketing campaign and the power of the Three-Act Structured Story – **The simple story every company can tell**, [TEDxAuckland - The simple story every company can tell | James Hurman | TEDxAuckland - YouTube](#)



Here we have an excellent article from Three Girls Media Inc in which writer Nick Sweeney looks at how the Three-Act Structure can be applied to developing a strong content marketing strategy - [How To Use Three-Act Structure To Create Compelling Content Marketing \(threegirlsmedia.com\)](#)

# Using the three-act structure in your business storytelling

## Act I

We get to know the protagonist – this is you as the founder.

Here you present a problem. This could be a need that is failing to be met or a niche that has not been sufficiently catered to.

## Act II

The protagonist meets a challenge or series of challenges. But as the protagonist takes on each challenge, we as an audience see the protagonist grow – their skills improve, they learn, they cope, they move on. Eventually this leads to the climax where the protagonist proves their value or solves a problem – in effect, becoming the hero of the story.

## Act III

Here we tie up the loose ends and hint at what may happen in the future.

## Example

**Act 1** – you're a young engineering student on a ski holiday in New Zealand – wondering what you're going to do once you finish uni.

**Plot Point 1** – you hate wearing the ski safety helmet. You have a fall. You're lucky. It could have been worse. You notice that hardly anyone on the slope is wearing a helmet. They are wearing beanies. What if you could turn a beanie into a helmet. You've been studying nanotech. You think there might a solution in that. You're off.

**Act 2** – developing the tech is not easy. You have your ups and downs. But you get there. The prototype works. You set up a start-up to commercialise it. You put together the business and technical case in support of your tech. But no one wants to back you. You can't find a manufacturer to help you manufacture your product.

**Plot Point 2** – all seems lost. You have a good product. But no one is interested. That KFC job you did as a student looks like it's beckoning again.

**The climax** – you get a chance to pitch to VALD. This is it – your make-or-break moment. You have to dig deep – you can do this. Everything to this point has prepared you for this.

**Act 3** – you win the pitch. VALD swings behind you.

**Resolution** - The future is looking good. There is interest from the US and Europe.

**Key message** – this for other emerging entrepreneurs. Resilience and determination are important. It is tough being an entrepreneur – it's not easy. But your commitment to your innovation will see you through.

# WORKSHEET – DEVELOPING THE STRUCTURAL FRAMEWORK FOR YOUR STORY

PRINT OUT THESE NEXT TWO PAGES – WILL HELP YOU STRUCTURE YOUR STORY

**Title of your story:**

## **ACT I**

The set up:

Plot Point 1:

## **ACT II**

Rising Action:



Plot Point 2:

The Climax:

## **ACT III**

Falling Action:

Resolution:

# Style

Style is the way you speak, rather than what you speak about.

It's often referred to as your voice.

You can be humorous, serious, ironical, analytical – but above all, it'll be your personality shining through.

This is a good link the 4 Main Types of Speaking Styles (and How to Master Them All) – which will help you determine which style is idea for you. Obviously, you will determine the style you use for the audience and/or situation you are addressing -

[The 4 Main Types of Speaking Styles \(& How to Master Them All\)](http://icebreakerspeech.com)  
(icebreakerspeech.com)

# Delivering an Acknowledgement of Country that really means something

If you are going to speak in public, it's always good to do an Acknowledgement of Country – in recognition of the Traditional Owners of the country on which you are speaking. An Acknowledgement of Country is a way of showing respect to the Traditional Owners of the land.

This is an excellent video by Shelley Reys – a Djirribul woman from Far North Queensland – who runs a business called Arrilla Indigenous Consulting. This is from a TED talk she gave in Sydney in 2021. Has got some great tips on how to do a good Acknowledgement of Country.

[Deliver an Acknowledgement of Country that really means something | Shelley Reys | TEDxSydney - YouTube](#)



## Stagecraft

Remember – practice makes perfect! It takes time to perfect stagecraft. So practice your storytelling in front of a mirror and with family and friends. Probably some of the best practitioners of how to hold an audience in the palm of the hand are stand-up comedians. Watch how they command a stage – look at their movement across a stage, how they gesture, how they stand, how they relate to their audience.

A few tips:

- Smile
- Be authentic
- Take your time – don't rush - breathe slowly
- Use short pauses at critical times in your story – a good way to command attention
- Remember the audience is not out to get you – they're on your side
- Keep eye contact – look around the room, connect with people – involve them in your story
- Gesture – but don't overdo it
- At the end of your talk, thank your audience

Here is some tips on public speaking for beginners by communication coach Alexander Lyon – [Public Speaking For Beginners - YouTube](#)



## Some general tips on storytelling

Write for the ear – read out loud what you write.

Always remember your audience.

Keep your story simple – avoid jargon, techno-speak, acronyms, big words.

Remember – less is more.

Avoid stereotypes.

Don't be crude or offensive.

Spend time editing your story – you will need to work at it.

Practice telling your story in front of a mirror and/or friends/family.

# Advance Queensland

Advance Queensland is a major Queensland Government initiative dedicated to building and supporting new industries so that Queensland becomes a leading and sustainable world-class innovation economy.

Advance Queensland is about diversity, equity and inclusion – through increasing the number of women, migrant, regional and rural and Indigenous entrepreneurs in Queensland’s innovation economy and tackling the inequalities that these businesses face through addressing barriers in the youth, start-up, scale-up and global stages of the innovation business development pipeline.

This includes supporting these entrepreneurs to develop and sharpen the skills they need to succeed in business through accelerator and mentoring initiatives as well as facilitating those all-important industry connections that open the doors of opportunity.

Advance Queensland is about supporting innovative solutions to address socio-economic and environmental issues.

It’s about strengthening our sovereign capability in advanced manufacturing, food production, defence, communication technologies, aerospace, and energy generation.

It’s about working together with regional and rural communities, drawing on local talent and knowledge and aligning innovation to a region’s unique competitive advantage, to drive business efficiencies, solve pressing industry and community challenges, and generate new products and services that open up whole new income streams for local communities.

It’s about ensuring Queensland delivers the best Olympic Games event ever in 2032 – and that Queenslanders benefit from the legacy of the Games, with the most cutting-edge infrastructure, transport and experiences.

Advance Queensland is focused on delivering programs and activities that:

- support key scientific research and development;
- drive innovation;
- develop entrepreneurial talent;
- support start-ups, scale-ups and mature businesses to deliver new products and services into national and global markets; and
- establish new industries that will provide the jobs of the future and deliver sustainable economic growth.

