

Writing Stories for Change: Workshops on the Fundamentals of Storytelling Jacksonville, Florida: October 13th – 15th

Humans make meaning of their lives through story—the arc of beginning, middle, climax, and THE END. We want to hear the story of our births because we instinctively know, even at a young age, that our first day sets us on a certain course, tells us who we are. We want to know the story of how our parents met because we believe this is the core of marriage, the key to love. When someone dies, we ask *where? how? what were his last words?* because this story prepares us for what death will bring.

Storytelling is a privilege. And it is also a responsibility when you engage in telling the stories of others. If you've never been allowed to read stories similar to your own - whether because of economic disadvantage, bigotry in our schools, or the control the publishing industry has over who is and is not published - it can be difficult to make meaning of your own life. It may feel impossible to voice what has happened to you in a way that makes sense to others. This fact says something about the clients we defend, and how they communicate with us. This fact tells us how important storytelling is.

In this workshop, we will practice what it means to shape personal experience—whether the most tragic of events or the smallest of encounters—into a narrative. Using our own stories, we will learn to tell our truths in light of character development, environmental research, cause and effect, and the facts—which, in turn, will help us learn to hear and decipher our clients' stories, to shape them into the kind of narratives that change the way judges and prosecutors and jurors think.

By the end of the three days, you will have written several brief stories about your own life (what writers call “flash” essays). If you wish, you may choose to let all of your brief stories revolve around a single experience or time in your life that you've always wanted to make sense of.

After the seminar, breakout group leaders will select the best pieces written by each member of their group, and the course instructor will typeset them and share them with conference participants and faculty.

Reading Assignments (essays to read before the seminar)

- Rochelle Spencer, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Woman”
- Toni Jensen, “Carry”
- Aimee Baker, “Beasts of the Field”
- Laurie Easter, “Searching for Gwen”
- Kim Coleman Foote, “Mama’s Boy”

Required Materials

- Several photos that tell the story of particular events in a participant’s life.

October 13

Learning objective: Participants will understand the connection between the records collection and interviews conducted by mitigation specialists as essential to successful narrative development. Members of the defense team will learn about the main components of effective story-telling and why narrative matters to client outcomes. Participants will use their own lived experiences to practice identifying the component parts of a successful narrative and engage in discussions regarding how to unearth those components.

8:15 Plenary Session: Intro to the Importance of Storytelling

9:00 Plenary Session: Taking Inventory

Participants will complete an inventory exercise that asks them to mine their life for experiences they can write about over the course of the seminar. These questions will mimic the kinds of questions we frequently ask our clients. Students will complete the inventory and then share the “surprises” they found in completing it—what stories they managed to recall that they’d forgotten, what stories they realize suddenly are important to them, and what stories they may have chosen to forget. This experience will help participants understand what stories our clients and other witnesses tell us and why—or what stories they don’t want to tell us and why. It will help us understand the way we shape our public and private identities through story and selective memory.

9:30 Plenary Session: Who Populates Our Stories: Intro to Character Development

Taking Inventory • Contradictions • Heroes & Villains • Self-Reflection

10:45 Break

11:00 Writing Groups: Opposites Attract

In this first breakout session, participants will introduce themselves, learn about their first writing prompt, and complete it. The first writing prompt will practice the art of seeing how complicated humans are—no villain is all bad, no hero is all good. In writing about themselves in this way, participants will learn how hard it is to admit our failures, but also how hard it is to share those failures with other people.

12:30 Lunch

2:00 Plenary Session: Character as Conflict: Intro to Narrative Movement

Binary Forces • Metamorphosis • Refusal to Change

2:45 Writing Groups: Change Is Afoot

In this breakout, participants will write about a time in their life when they changed or when they chose not to. They will practice detecting a key line of dialogue OR how to make use of silence instead. The goal: to learn that story is still a story even if stasis is

the outcome. This exercise will also help participants reconsider how to address the “future danger” question.

3:45 Break

4:00 Writing Groups: Workshop

In this first workshop, participants will learn how to workshop, then choose which of the day’s exercises (Opposites Attract or Change Is Afoot) they wish to share with their writing group members. The group will offer constructive feedback for improving the participants’ narratives.

5:15 Plenary Debrief: What We’ve Learned from Character Development

The focus here will be on how mitigation investigation tasks and processes inform successful, rich, and deep character development in ways that engender empathy and connection.

6:00 Sessions Dismissed

October 14

Learning objectives: So often in mitigation work, teams resist investing time into the contextual investigation, focusing instead on the client’s specific character development in the story. This has the potential to make the client one-dimensional. Participants will understand the critical importance of context in narrative development. Discussions throughout the day will include addressing the types of materials and information a defense team needs to provide depth to their narratives.

8:15 Plenary Session: We Adapt to Circumstances: Intro to Setting as Influence

Micro & Macro Settings • Objects • Strange Places

9:15 Writing Groups: Tight Spot

In this breakout, participants will write about an experience that took place in a confined location. The exercise will encourage them to consider the factors, objects, mood, and aggressors in any scene that might influence the outcome of a singular event.

10:30 Break

10:45 Writing Groups: Object Lessons

In this breakout session, participants will write about an object that represents who they are but also plays a pivotal moment in an event in their life—an object that affected the outcome of a particular situation. This exercise is intended to help

participants read crime scenes in an effective manner—what objects either on our person or in a room play a role in moments of change.

12:00 Lunch

1:30 Writing Groups: Workshop

In this workshop, participants will choose which of the environment exercises (Tight Spot or Object Lessons) they wish to share with their writing group members. The group will offer constructive feedback for improving the participants' narratives.

2:45 Plenary Session: Photos, Memory, History, Interviews: An Introduction to Research

Verb Tenses • Punctum & Studium • Hard Facts • Faulty Memories

4:00 Break

4:15 Writing Groups: Photo-Op

In this breakout, participants will write the story of one of the photographs they brought. First, they will quickly brainstorm the details of the photo that speak to the event represented in the picture. Then, the group will break up into pairs, and each participant will explain the photo to their partner, and the partner will ask questions about the photo. The group will discuss what details of the photo they didn't want to share, what details of the photo their partners saw that they never noticed, and how their partner reacted to the photo. Finally, participants will write the story of their photo—which may or may not include the experience of sharing the photo with another person.

6:00 Sessions Dismissed

October 15

Learning objective: Collaboration is essential for defense teams to develop successful client narratives. Participants will understand how different people on a team will view the same information through their own lens of experience and how that enables a richer narrative. Participants will also learn about how to budget/ manage time for drafting successful narratives and the benefits of feedback and reflect on the overall emotional heft of the piece.

8:15 Plenary Debrief: What We've Learned from Exploring Place and Facts

9:00 Plenary Session: Revise, Revise, Revise: Intro to the Process of Re-Visioning a Story

Changing Perspective • Writing Backward • Language

9:45 Break

10:30 Writing Groups: Writing Time

Students will gather with their groups but work individually to polish one of their essays completely. Though this is not at all a realistic amount of time to completely revise an essay, even a short one, this is the allotted time we have, and we are simulating the writing process. Faculty will be available during this time to look at changes and offer additional feedback.

12:00 Lunch

1:30 Writing Groups: A Reading

In this final breakout, students will read aloud one of their flash essays—the one they spent the afternoon polishing.

3:00 Final Plenary Debrief: What We've Learned about Storytelling & Mitigation

3:30 All Sessions Dismissed