

# STORIES AND NARRATIVE ARCS



**HOW DO STORIES HELP US  
BUILD POSITIVE IMPACT?**

# **Stories are a bridge into people**

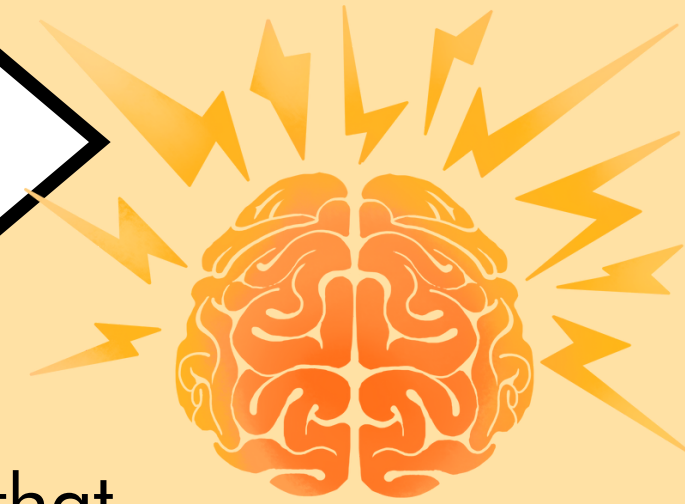
“Human beings are literally hardwired for narrative. Stories are the threads of our lives and weave together to form the fabric of human cultures.

A story can inform or deceive, enlighten or entertain, or all of the above at once.

We live in a world shaped by stories.”

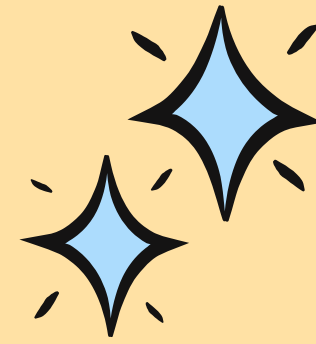
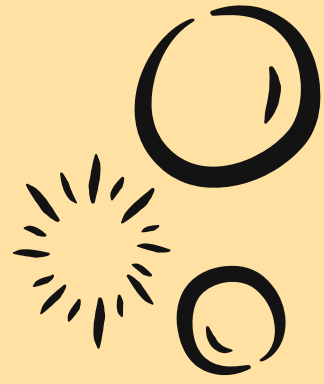
**– Patrick Reinsborough and Doyle Canning**

# Stories fire our brain

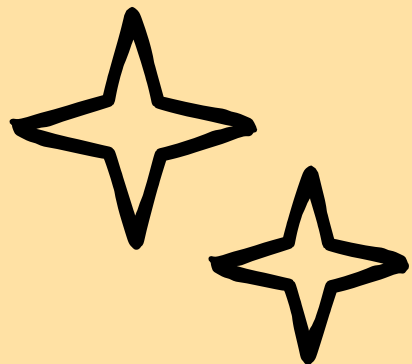


- **Move us**
  - MRI machines show that imaginative language lights up parts of our brain that make us want to act.
- **Encourage empathy**
  - Stories help stimulate parts of the brain that help us connect with others' thoughts and emotions.
- **Help us remember**
  - Powerful and emotional stories cause our brains to release dopamine, which helps us remember details.
- **Promote participation**
  - Our brain produces oxytocin after listening to a character-driven story. Oxytocin helps to spark participation and cooperation

Thank you to Jamila Aisha Brown for these insights.



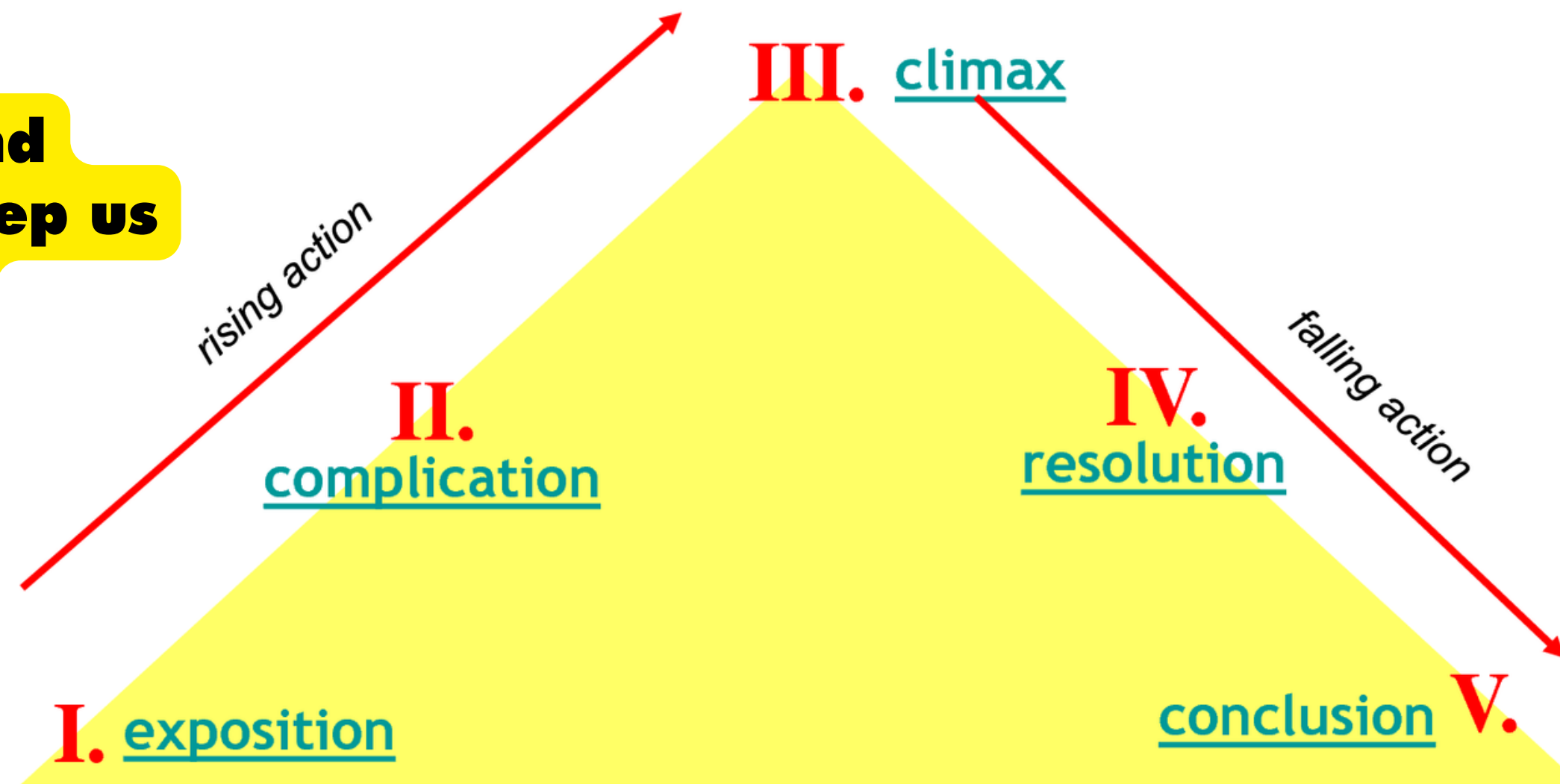
**And.. importantly, stories  
help others understand  
our work, envision  
impact, see change in  
action**



# The dramatic arc

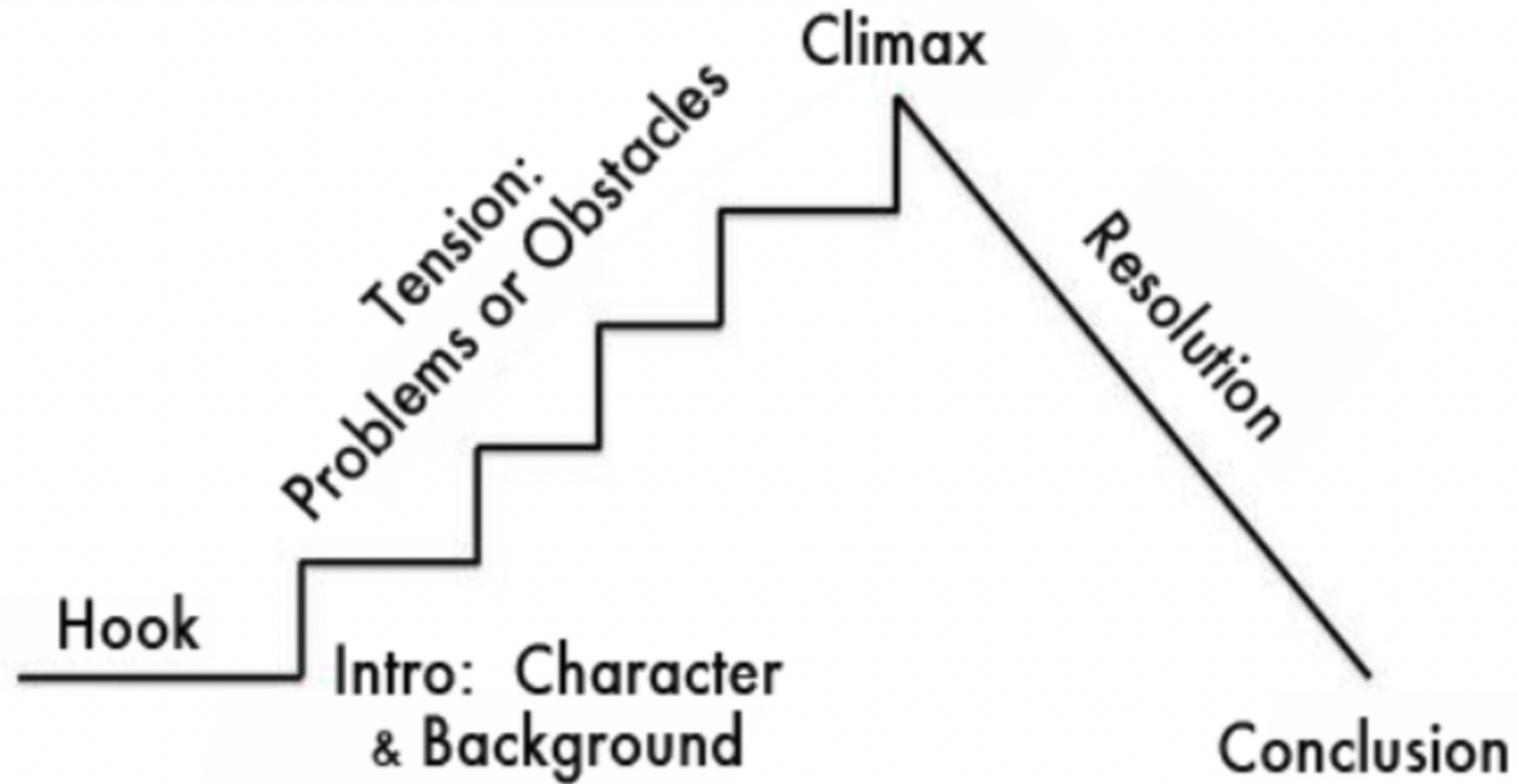
## Freytag's Pyramid

Gustav Freytag was a 19<sup>th</sup> century literary critic (1863) who proposed that Shakespeare's plays (all of which are divided into 5 major sections, called acts) follow this plan as regards the development of their plots.

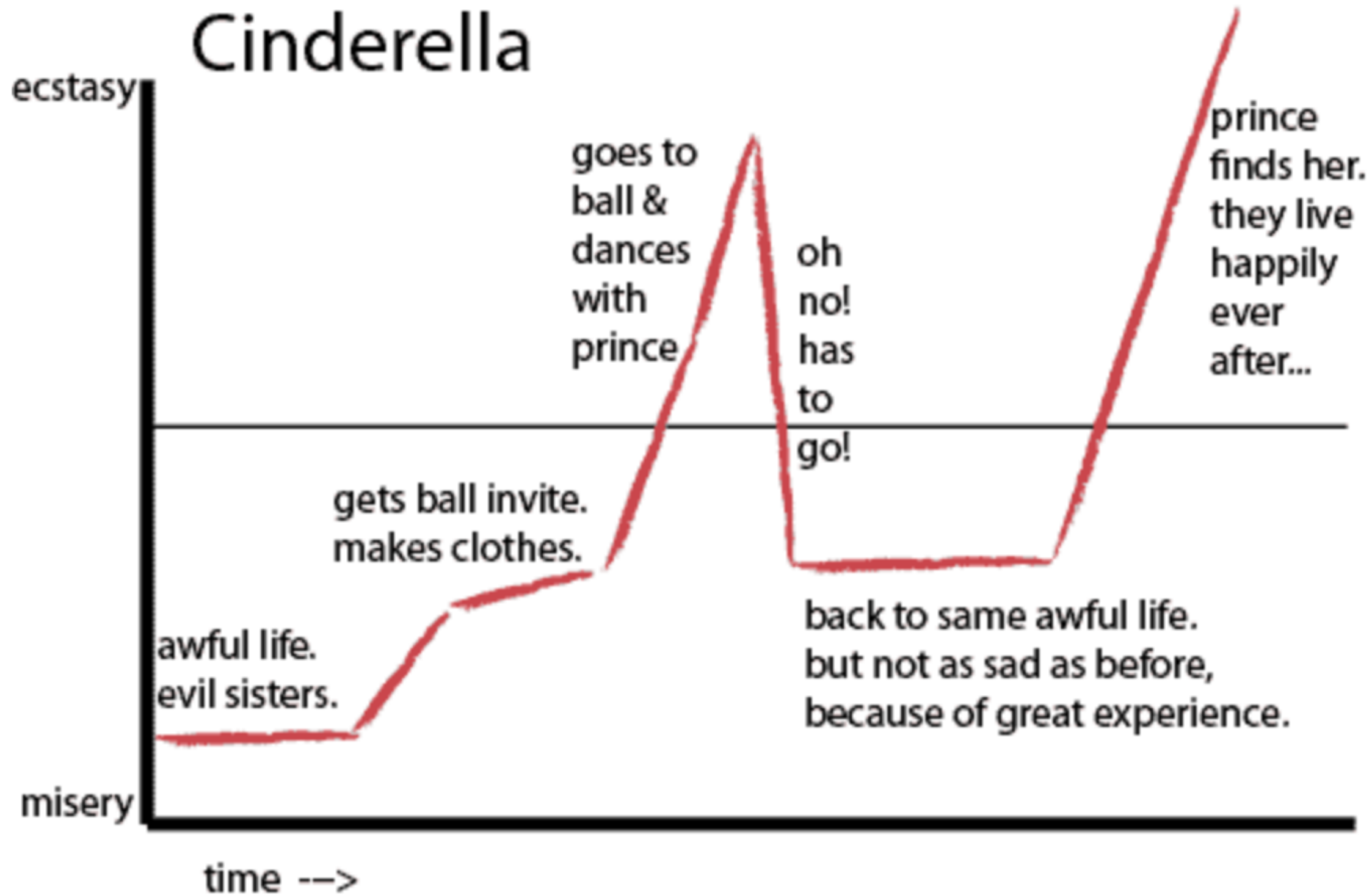


**Tension and connection keep us hooked**

# The hero's dramatic arc



# For example



# **Exercise: story of a seedling as drama**





&



present:

# A NARRATIVE ARC

Designed & Illustrated by:  
Tamsin Lotz



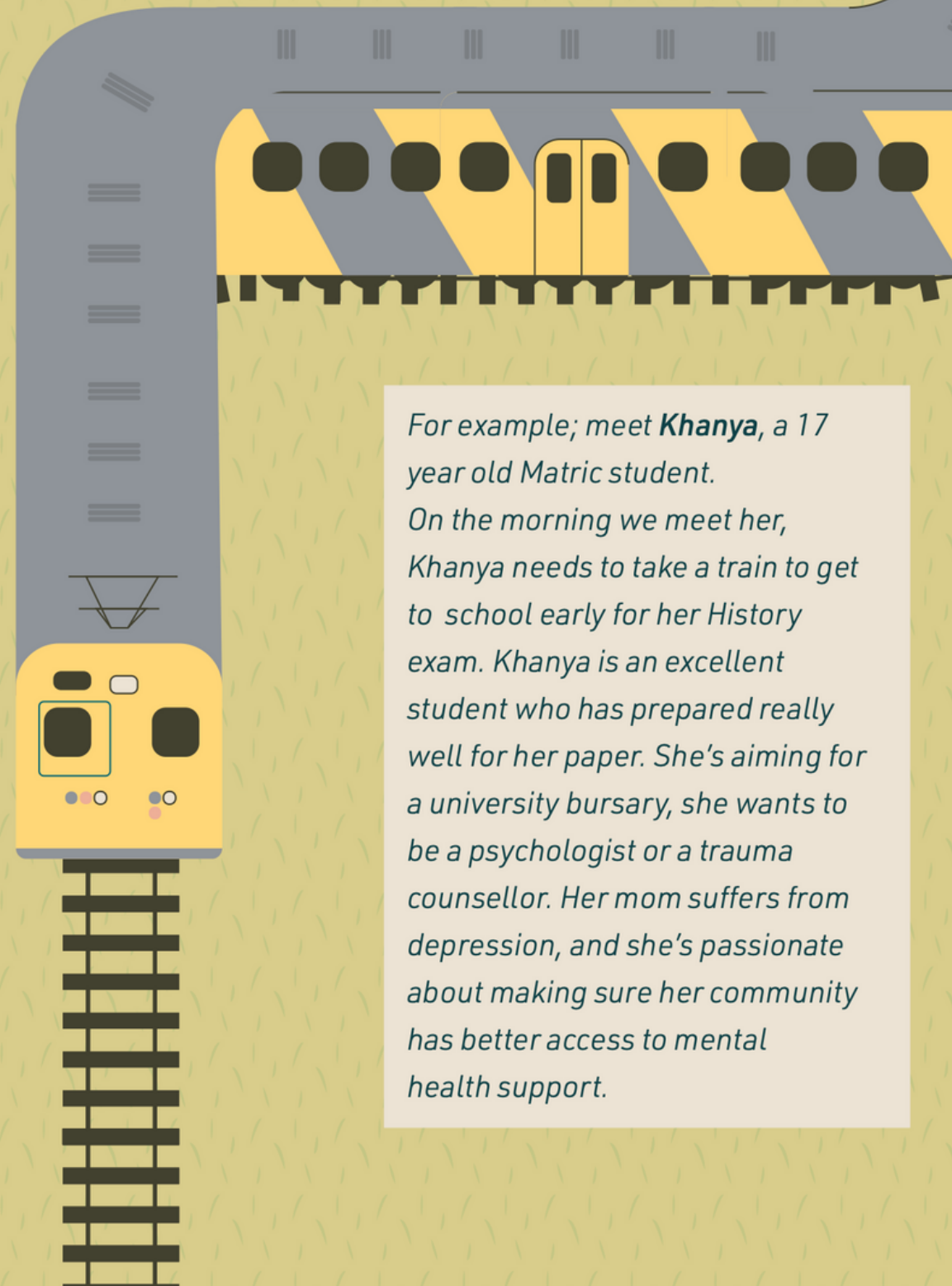
## INTRODUCTION

The introduction to a story is important because it establishes the world of the story, the context and surroundings, as well as of course, the characters.

Throughout the story we would most likely follow the journey of the

### PROTAGONIST,

the lead character person who the story is about. Like all of us, our protagonist has wants, needs and problems. A good introduction introduces us to our protagonist, their world and their central problem and needs. A good introduction should give us the information that helps our audience get to know, and most importantly care about our characters.



*For example; meet **Khanya**, a 17 year old Matric student. On the morning we meet her, Khanya needs to take a train to get to school early for her History exam. Khanya is an excellent student who has prepared really well for her paper. She's aiming for a university bursary, she wants to be a psychologist or a trauma counsellor. Her mom suffers from depression, and she's passionate about making sure her community has better access to mental health support.*



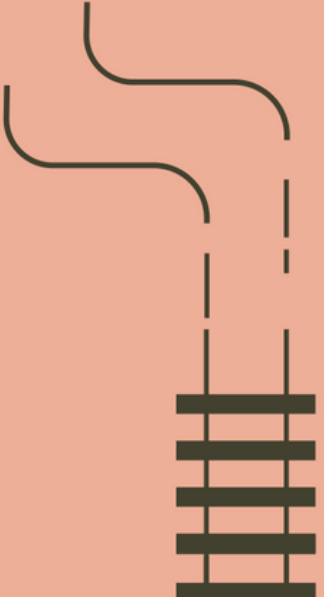
# 2

## COMPLICATIONS

A story wouldn't be exciting if the character's didn't have any complications/conflicts. Hearing a story about someone having a very normal, average day where nothing particularly good, bad or funny happens is not very interesting at all. We need to give our protagonist interesting problems that they will either

surmount/conquer,  
or that will get the better of them.

Complications/conflicts are usually presented to our characters to help them learn something about themselves. It's the kind of "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger" philosophy. This might sound a little cruel, making our poor characters go through hardships, but it does make for a compelling story. Even in our own lives, challenges are what makes us grow and learn.



*So, Khanya, after pushing herself extra hard the night before, getting almost no sleep, wakes up late after missing her alarm.*



# 3

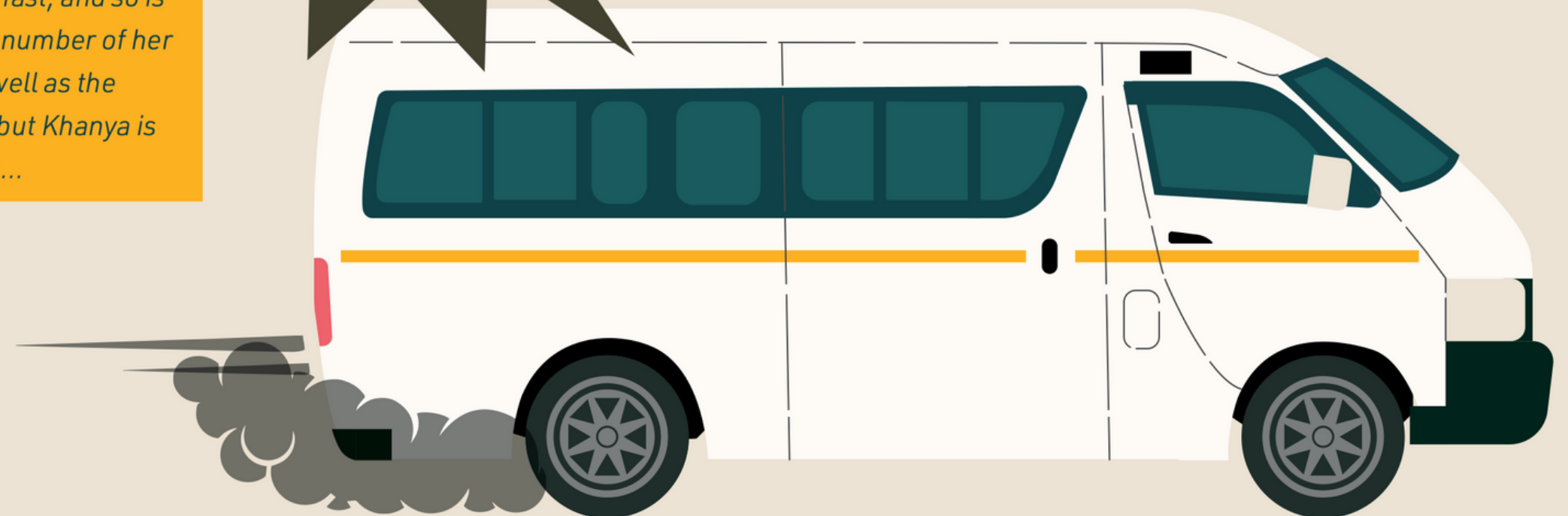
## CLIMAX

You'll know you're at the climax if you find yourself asking,

"What the Hell Now?"

Before the climax, the action has been rising steadily. The climax is the point of the story where the major conflict/complication reaches the highest point of intensity. This is where you should have your audience on the edge of their seats, desperate to find out what happens next!

*Khanya rushes out of the house, down to the train station. Of course, the next train is two hours delayed, thank you PRASA! Khanya needs to take a taxi, but she doesn't have any extra cash, only her monthly train ticket Khanya only has the money she had been saving to get her mother to her first appointment at a local counselling hub. If she pays the taxi fare, she won't have enough money for her mom's session. The taxis are speeding by fast, and so is the time. She has the number of her favourite teacher as well as the number of the clinic, but Khanya is scared to ask for help...*



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# DENOUEMENT/ RESOLUTION

Much like in real life, stories don't always end happily, however to be satisfying to an audience our stories need to come to some sort of resolution. The translation of the French denouement means "the final part of a story where the strands of the plot are drawn together". A story could end tragically or triumphantly or even in an anti-climax. For Khanya's sake, we'll end this story with a happy ending...

*Khanya works up the muster to ask for help, whatsapps the counselling hub and tells them her situation. A staff member from the counselling NGO calls back immediately, she tells Khanya not to worry. The counselling hub's services are there to help her, she tells Khanya that she can pay whatever she can afford and that in times of need Khanya deserves to be cared for by her community. Khanya jumps in the taxi and gets to school just in time to file into the school hall with her classmates and slay the exam.*



**PLEASE DON'T WORRY! THE COUNSELLING HUB IS HERE TO HELP!**



**Examples of hero's arc...using  
people to open up new ways of  
thinking, possible solutions,  
connection**

African Cypher

Zero Dropout School Culture

Humans of New York

On a plate

# “Decolonised storytelling”

- Believes that storytelling is a human craft that belongs to all of us.
- Interrupts the ways stories have been used to oppress different communities.
- Is responsible to the storyteller or the person whose story we are telling.
- Uses stories to empower people and bring communities together.
- Challenges the limited and negative stories that get told about people of colour, the vulnerable genderqueer/trans people, and women, young people and so on.

– Jamila Aisha Brown

# Change the narrative

- Examine a story you want to change;
- Consider how power is shaping this narrative and how it normalises the status quo;
- Use story to help people see and understand a new narrative, with a wider lens;
- Use shared values and priorities in your story to bring people's attention to new perspectives.



# Elements of story



- **Setting and context**
  - Imagery, place, foreshadowing
- **Characters**
  - Personality, back story, motivations, tensions, change over time
- **Narrative arc**
  - How the action moves, what happens, how does it happen?
- **Challenges, climax(es)**
  - Where does the action and tension sit? How and where does it peak?
- **Ending, resolution**
  - What grows, what changes, what is learned?

# Story pro tips

- **Define purpose first**
  - What are you aiming to achieve using this story?
- **Brainstorm themes**
  - What central ideas are you working with? What are your thematic areas that lie beneath or are grappled with visibly in the story?
- **Do you audience work**
  - Make sure you know your ideal readers are and what makes them tick (as much as you can)
  - Tap into people's underlying assumptions about a situation when you build your story.
- **Use foreshadowing**
  - Hint or suggest outcomes to create a sense of tension and connection.

# Story pro tips

- **Aim to offer the new, the unexpected, the different**
  - this could be in your plot or in your formatting, character types and so on.
- **Use the wide angle lens for impact stories**
  - Aim to draw people to the bigger picture of wide angle lens when using story
- **Sketch it out**
  - Use diagrams to plot your story arc over time
- **Consider different points of view**
  - Who is telling the story?