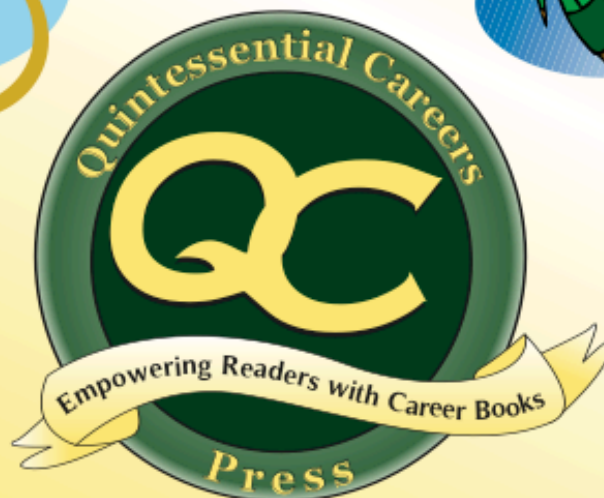


Quint Careers Presents
the Quintessential Guide to...

STORYTELLING THAT PROPELS CAREERS



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By Katharine Hansen, Quintessential Careers Press

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Published 2007

Contents of Full Book

INTRODUCTION: Why Use Story in the Job Search?.....

Part I: Career-Propelling Story Basics

CHAPTER 1: Telling Stories about Change.....

CHAPTER 2: The Quintessential You Story.....

CHAPTER 3: How to Develop Career-Propelling Stories.....

**Next
page**

Part II: Storytelling Media in the Job Search

CHAPTER 4: Networking as Storytelling.....

CHAPTER 5: Resumes that Tell a Story.....

CHAPTER 6: Cover Letters that Tell a Story.....

CHAPTER 7: Portfolios that Tell a Story.....

CHAPTER 8: Interviews that Tell a Story.....

CHAPTER 9: Personal Branding as Storytelling.....

Part III: Continuous Career Storytelling

**CHAPTER 10: Propel Your Career Through On-the-job
Storytelling**

EPILOGUE

.....

Chapter 3: How to Develop Career-Propelling Stories

In addition to the change stories we've seen in Chapter 1, job-seekers need to know how to develop stories about skills, abilities, expertise, personal traits and characteristics, values, and accomplishments. But how do you develop the stories, how do you know which of these qualities to develop stories about, and how do you know how to frame your stories? First, you need to know how to formulate or structure a story.

Story Formulas

Career experts have developed myriad formulas and clever acronyms for how to structure stories in the job search. These formulas have in common the idea of setting the scene for your story by describing the situation, problem, or challenge you faced, explaining what action you took to address the situation, solving the problem or meeting the challenge, and explaining the result of your actions. Results expressed quantitatively, in numbers and percents, for example, are especially effective. An optional inclusion is the learning you gained from this experience. Some of the common formulas and acronyms include:

- ♦ CAR: Challenge, Action, Result
- ♦ CCAR:¹ Context, Challenge, Action, Result
- ♦ PAR: Problem, Action Result
- ♦ PARLA:² Problem, Action, Result, Learning, Application
- ♦ SAR: Situation, Action, Result
- ♦ SCARQ:³ Situation, Challenge, Action, Results-Quantified
- ♦ SHARE:⁴ Situation, Hindrance, Action, Results, Evaluation
- ♦ SIA: Situation, Impact, Analysis
- ♦ SMART:⁵ Situation with Metrics (or Situation and More), Actions, Results, Tie-in
- ♦ SOAR: Situation, Obstacle, Action, Result
- ♦ STAR: Situation, Task, Action, Result

These story formulas are most often prescribed for interviews; thus, you can find a story example for each in Chapter 7 on interview stories.

Develop stories of various lengths and containing assorted amounts of detail for each element of your job search:

- ♦ Short bullet-point version for your resume. Because a resume needs to attract attention quickly, it's a good idea to tell each story so that the result comes first, as in the following bullets about a job-seeker's accomplishment:
- ♦ Beat two-month deadline for operationalizing online scheduling, time/attendance, and payroll system by overseeing fast-track implementation from outside vendor.

- Reduced payroll discrepancies 25 percent and time spent scheduling employees and resolving timesheet-related issues by 50 percent.
- Decreased time spent on reports by 25 percent by customizing reports to track labor/benefits allocation.
- Earned vendor's Certificate for Management's Commitment for Successful Implementation and Design Contribution to Improve Efficiencies.

Read more about resume storytelling in Chapter 4.

- ♦ More detailed paragraph version for your cover letters. In the following example, the same story is told in paragraph form in the job-seeker's cover letter. Note that a cover letter should not rehash the resume, so even if you are highlighting the same accomplishment in both documents, vary your language and the way you frame the story:

I demonstrated my strong project-management skills when the project team I led exceeded all expectations while implementing an outside vendor's system for online scheduling, time/attendance, and payroll. Not only did we crush our two-month deadline, but we also reduced payroll discrepancies, slashed in half the time spent scheduling employees and resolving timesheet-related issues, and cut time spent on reports. The icing on the cake was earning the vendor's Certificate for Management's Commitment for Successful Implementation and Design Contribution to Improve Efficiencies.

Read more about cover-letter stories in Chapter 5.

- ♦ Still more detailed version, composed in a conversational style, for job interviews:

My company was struggling with scheduling employees, monitoring their time and attendance, as well as tying these elements into payroll. We needed a system, preferably online, that would make these tasks more efficient, save time, and reduce errors. When management decided to go with an outside vendor for the new system, they chose me to head up the project team. We were on a tight, two-month deadline, but I led the team to surpass not only the deadline, but the expected results. Under my guidance, we got the vendor's system online so successfully that we reduced payroll discrepancies by 25 percent. Since we've operationalized it, the company has

saved time in scheduling employees and resolving timesheet-related issues; in fact, these processes take half the time they used to. By customizing reports to track labor and benefits allocation, we also cut time spent on reports by a quarter. We did such a great job and made the functions so much more efficient that the vendor recognized us with its Certificate for Management's Commitment for Successful Implementation and Design Contribution to Improve Efficiencies.

Read more about interviewing stories in Chapter 7.

Identifying Characteristics to Highlight in Your Stories

Once you're familiar with these basic accomplishments-driven job-search story structures, the next step is determine what characteristics you wish to showcase about yourself in your stories. The answer is to tell stories that demonstrate the skills, abilities, values, and knowledge that employers seek in the type of job and industry you're targeting.

- ♦ Identify a dozen or so help-wanted ads or Internet job postings that typify the kind of job you seek.
- ♦ List keywords that describe the skills and characteristics required for these jobs. See the end of this chapter for a list of skills and characteristics that employers typically seek.
- ♦ Now, highlight all the skills and characteristics keywords the ads or job postings have in common and make a list of these frequently appearing skills/characteristics.
- ♦ For each skill/characteristic listed, compose a story that illustrates how you have successfully demonstrated that skill or characteristic in your career – or even in your personal life.
- ♦ Be sure to compose stories that come from a variety of aspects of your life and career; don't focus on just one job or extracurricular activity, for example. Draw your stories from fairly recent experience. Employers want to know what you've done lately that could benefit their organization.

Story-framing Devices

Keeping in mind that a successful story must be true and told in context, consider these ideas for story-framing so your

collection of stories comes from various perspectives:

- ♦ A time in your life when this skill/characteristic was tested.⁶
- ♦ A person/event in your life that taught you the importance of this skill/characteristic.⁷
- ♦ A time when you failed to live up to this skill/characteristic and decided never to let it happen again.⁸
- ♦ A movie/story/book/event that exemplifies this skill/characteristic for you.⁹
- ♦ A turning point in your development of this skill/characteristic.
- ♦ A story about tasks and job functions related to this skill/characteristic.
- ♦ A timeline of how you developed and sharpened this skill/characteristic.
- ♦ An example from your personal life (as opposed to career) of deploying this skill/characteristic.
- ♦ Patterns that have emerged in your development of this skill/characteristic.
- ♦ Results you've achieved through using this skill/characteristic.
- ♦ Lessons you've learned while developing and using this skill/characteristic.
- ♦ Ways you've applied this skill/characteristic in diverse situations.
- ♦ A strength or vulnerability from your past that led to developing this skill/characteristic.¹⁰

Following are examples of stories that use some of these frameworks:

I have learned that my role is to do work that makes a difference in people's lives. For the first 20 years, I worked in television news, believing in the people's right to know. For the past six years, I've been in education, helping teachers and their students. My ultimate goal is to be head of a department. (Recognizes a characteristic that has become a career pattern).

I realized I had solid problem-solving skills during my freshmen year after I went to the soup kitchen in Parkersburg to serve food to the less fortunate. I felt that I needed to do something more, so I had an idea that when everybody moved out of the dorms at the end of a semester, instead of throwing nonperishable food away, students could put it in a box,

and I would take it to the local food bank so it could feed the poor. I ended up gathering about six carloads of canned and dry food that would have been thrown away. *(Describes a skill honed in personal life rather than career).*

My leadership skills were called into question by my first evaluation as a district manager. I was rated much lower than I had ever been rated. I realized that, after having been promoted into a new position, I needed to learn a lot more. Determined to never again get a low rating, I learned as much as I possibly could, and this quest for knowledge became the driving force behind my attaining the high rating I achieved for this year. *(Describes failure to live up to skill/characteristic and determination never to let it happen again).*

I solve problems every day in my job, but one recent example I had that truly tested my problem-solving skills involved a woman who called me to question why we refunded part of her premium to her. She's a new policy-holder who was quoted \$2,900 for an annual premium and paid that amount, but in the computer, her annual premium was about \$2,500, so we refunded her the difference. My first hunch was she received a discount for paying in full, but when I calculated the discount percent, it was not adding up. After about two or three iterations of trying various combinations of discounts, I still was unable to figure out why the quote and actual premium were different and figured I was not looking for the right root cause. I decided to manually price her policy from the ground up, and during the process I happened to notice her birthday on her application was written ambiguously and could have been interpreted as 1925 or 1928. I calculated quotes for both ages and realized the reason for the difference. I honored the lower rate since the payment transactions were fully completed. *(Describes a time when skill was tested).*

As an undergrad, I took a course on argument and advocacy and learned a very important concept called Tooling Modeling, which is a logical way of thinking with three parts: claim, grounds, and warrant. The claim is your point; the grounds consists of your proof, evidence, or backing; and your warrant is your logical leap that connects the two. The theory is naturally a little more complicated than

that, but this way of thinking has been my bible for rational thought and was the single most valuable lesson I learned in college. I use this way of thinking when I am presented with problems that require decisions. I structure a rational, logical argument for each likely outcome. I can therefore see where weaknesses exist, either in the grounds or the warrant. I conduct a bump-and-compare between arguments to see which are the strongest, and I go with the most durable argument. I also take a practical approach to decision making in that I try to find out best outcome for the least price or cost. *(Describes a turning point/event event that taught the importance of skill/characteristic).*

I have always had a fascination for how machines work, and whenever my family and I went on holiday, I would always try and get the window-seat on the plane, if only to watch the flaps and air-brakes in action during takeoff and landing. As I continued my education, I felt a compulsion to use my degree in a people-oriented profession. So, while I love machines, I'd like to contribute my engineering skills in a company that affects peoples lives positively. I just like helping people. *(Identifies a strength from the past that led to developing this skill/characteristic)*

More examples of stories that illustrate skills and characteristics

TEAM LEADERSHIP

I found myself applying to my university because my cross-country coach told me not to. He advised me to take the free-ride cross-country scholarship to another school. I reasoned that academics and cross-country would be too much for me to handle there. So I applied to my current university because I felt I could compete comfortably while also excelling in my academics. My high-school coach was not too thrilled. He said, "You are making the biggest mistake of your life." He went on to tell me that the other college had a better cross-country department, and I would be running with a nationally ranked team. I challenged my coach and told him that with leadership and devotion, any team can be nationally ranked. Of course he laughed at my statement and restated that I was making a mistake.

Once I enrolled at my chosen school, I saw that my coach had been correct about the facilities and the character of the people on the team. The team members were not motivated, not

athletic, and needless to say, lost every race they entered. Three other freshman that had walked onto the team joined me in deciding to change the team members' attitudes. However, animosity was abundant between the upperclassman and the freshman. While we won races, the upperclassmen felt inferior, causing internal conflict in the team. Regardless, I was determined to persuade the team to mesh well to create unity. Consequently, the upperclassmen quit the team. Still, after winning our state title, we advanced to the national level, where we were expected to compete against the college my coach had wanted me to attend. We won the meet against that school, beating them out of a third-place medal. The moral of this story is that when I was challenged to do the impossible, my devotion, character, team leadership, and tenacity persevered, while also helping the team.

GOAL-SETTING

I grew up in a poor, broken home, yet decided that golf was my great passion in life. I creatively used my meager resources to buy golf clubs and later a junior membership for \$180 at a local club. Every day for two years, I walked through the woods to the golf course where I would play, practice, and compete throughout high school. I eventually got a job at the club so I could buy myself a few necessities. I wanted to play in college but was nowhere near the player I needed to be to play or even get on the team. So over the summer before college, I worked on my golf game to the point where I won almost every tournament I entered. I spent every hour I had during the day to make myself a better all-around player. I eventually walked on my freshman year and was exempted from qualifying because I played so well in my first outing. Through the years my decision to play golf has influenced every part of my life 100 percent.

I didn't give up on a dream, and although I am not competing with Tiger, I realized all of the good decisions I made were based on the fact that I loved the game, but better yet, didn't give up on a goal.

WORK ETHIC

My stepfather was a role model and a strong influence in my life. He taught me about character; he taught me the tough lessons in life that some people learn too late or not at all. In one instance, he taught me the value of standing up for yourself. When the kids in his family (the "stepfamily") failed to accept me, he advised me that I would have to take the initiative to learn how to handle situations in which people passively exclude me – that I would have to do something that could get their attention. I soon learned to gather a couple of people and start up a card game or another fun activity to direct the focus on the activity instead of clashing personalities. I later realized that through this process, I had learned creative techniques to influence group dynamics.

In another situation, he taught me the value of hard work. After volunteering to do yard work one day, I got tired of the project after mowing the lawn. Hot, sweaty, and tired, I started to leave before the project was done, and he told me I couldn't leave. After several hours of pulling weeds, watering, weed-whacking, fertilizing, trimming, and prepping flower beds while my father supervised from his comfortable lawn chair in the shade, I had learned that completing only a portion of a project is not acceptable when completion is expected; that there usually is a lot more work that goes on in the background of a finished product; that there will always be someone in that comfortable lawn chair watching others work – and that I wanted to be a supervisor in life.

DECISION-MAKING

When I was a receptionist at a photography company, a man came in claiming to be the father of a student who was there to pick up the student's pictures. I asked him for identification, and he said that he had forgotten it. Normally, if the student is present with the parent and verifies that it is the correct parent, then we give the pictures to them. That wasn't the case here. There was no student. I refused to give him the pictures, and he became angry and left. Later that day, a different man came in to pick up those same pictures. This man had photo identification with him, and I told

him about what had occurred earlier that day. He told me that his child was being stalked, and that the family had a restraining order against that man. I took the stalker's image from our security cameras and posted a picture behind the counter that indicated that he was not to have any contact with the pictures of that student. My decision-making skills helped prevent a dangerous situation because he has continued repeatedly to come into the store posing to other employees as the parent of that student.

CUSTOMER SERVICE

As a Customer Service Rep for a video-rental company, I once had an irate customer who left three messages on my voicemail in about 10 minutes demanding a call back. I contacted the customer, who was now even angrier because I had been in a meeting when her call came in. I listened to the customer explain that she was upset because she had purchased a loyalty program membership from us, and then several days later, we were giving away the same memberships at no cost. I apologized to the customer and asked her how I could help. She stated that she wanted her money back and she would no longer be a member. I agreed to refund her money. I then bought her a thank you card and enclosed her refund and a free membership to our loyalty program. I also noticed that several times during the phone conversation, she had stopped to yell at her children, so I also enclosed two coupons for free kids' rentals. I thanked her for her business, apologized for not meeting her expectations, and invited her to bring her children in for a free video rental. I also enclosed my business card and asked her to call me directly if she was ever disappointed in any way while visiting one of our locations. She telephoned me when she received the card and told me that was the nicest thing any person had ever done for her when she was upset with a business. I again thanked her for her business and told her that she was my bread and butter. If she wasn't happy, then I couldn't be either!

Skills and characteristics employers seek

- ♦ Adaptability and transferability of skills (important for career-changers)
- ♦ Administrative support
- ♦ Analytical thinking
- ♦ Areas of expertise
- ♦ Certification and/or degree(s)
- ♦ Communication
- ♦ Computer, technological proficiency
- ♦ Cost savings
- ♦ Creativity
- ♦ Customer/client service

- ♦ Consulting
- ♦ Entrepreneurial/startup skills
- ♦ Indicators of success/good performance/quality
- ♦ Interpersonal
- ♦ Languages
- ♦ Management/leadership/supervision
- ♦ Motivation
- ♦ Multi-cultural/cross-cultural/international
- ♦ Multi-tasking
- ♦ Organizational
- ♦ Problem-solving and troubleshooting
- ♦ Process improvement
- ♦ Quantitative skills
- ♦ Research, strategy, and planning
- ♦ Sales/marketing
- ♦ Team player who can also work independently
- ♦ Team player/team-builder
- ♦ Teaching/training
- ♦ Time management/ability to perform under deadline pressure
- ♦ Willingness to learn/ability to learn quickly
- ♦ Willingness to travel, relocate
- ♦ Work ethic/professionalism

KSAs

The KSA, an acronym for Knowledge – Skills – Abilities, is a close cousin of the resume used primarily in government hiring and is another aspect of career-marketing communication in which storytelling can play a positive role. It's common to be asked to complete a KSA document, typically consisting of 3-6 KSAs, for government jobs and sometimes for non-government positions as well. I include KSAs in this chapter rather than in the section about resumes and other career-marketing communication because the process for composing KSAs is very similar to the process described above. These documents provide an opportunity to memorably elaborate on the skills that distinguish you from other candidates, and you can do so with stories. Jay Christensen, co-author of *On-the-Job Communications for Business, the Professions, Government, and Industry*, encourages his business-communication students to write stories about career experiences that enabled them to achieve the knowledge, skill, or ability they are being asked to describe. With a KSA, you can develop a story, using the story-development frameworks in this chapter, to illustrate the knowledge, skill, or ability the employer requires you to demonstrate. The KSA, Christensen notes, "is the story of some part of the [job-seeker's] work experience lifestyle." As with most stories used in job-search communication, KSAs should include results and quantification where possible.

Here are examples of partial KSA stories (A full KSA statement is about a page to a page and a half for each question asked).

Knowledge

Contracts: I have extensive experience with contracts and expertise in contract interpretation. The Salvation Army selected me to lead multimillion-dollar contract negotiations on corporate-wide benefits between the Salvation Army and healthcare providers. I also specialized in contract law during more than three years as an in-house attorney for SouthComm Communications, Inc., where I reviewed, negotiated, and managed contracts. My contract interpretation skills are highly relevant to a Patent Attorney-Advisor's work because of their applicability to interpreting and analyzing statutes.

Ability

Ability to be organized and perform efficiently and proficiently in a fast-moving production environment under short deadlines: As an in-house attorney at SouthComm Communications, I excelled for more than three years in fast-paced environment in which production against tight deadlines was critical and directly impacted the company's bottom-line sales and revenues. My job was to execute as many leases and other real-estate agreements as possible while limiting the company's exposure to risk. Cell sites could not be constructed to offload heavy-traffic areas without an executed lease, so the company depended on my organizational skills, proficiency, and rapid turnaround during contract negotiations. While speed was essential, I also succeeded in striking a balance between achieving business objectives and minimizing the company's liability.

Skill

Skill in working independently on a wide variety of complex issues and make quick decisions with a high degree of accuracy at various stages of review simultaneously: I have great respect for the value of working independently without supervision to increase the productivity of the entire department and company. As a contract attorney, for example, I perform all work independently during each stage of document review. Law firms hire me with the understanding that they will not have to oversee my work because I produce quality output. They also depend on me to proficiently perform all assigned functions of my job with minimal supervision of staff attorneys and partners.

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