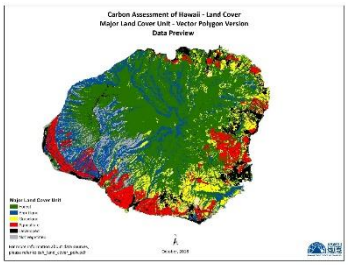
Telling Your Conservation Story
Hawai'i Conservation Conference, July 2025
Presented by L. Michelle Baker, PhD, Founder, The Conservation Writing Pro



Practical conservation is the work of the masses, who can easily be engaged via compelling stories.[1] These abound in the life sciences: living branches of coral, baby turtles waddling to the ocean for their first swim, community transformation through agriculture—the list goes on and on. But scientists are taught to be neutral and objective, so framing the work as a narrative can feel uncomfortable. This workshop, Telling Your Conservation Story, can help alleviate that discomfort by showing you how to match your purpose with your context and audience in a voice that is authentically yours. You'll learn how to write compelling leads, supported by vivid characters and captivating plots, as well as how to integrate these techniques at the paragraph and sentence level, making the narrative granular. You can expect a stepwise process that helps you to write with greater confidence, procrastinate less, and better persuade your intended audience of your work's importance to the world of conservation.

Objectives

- Identify the reasons why and the ways how stories enhance your communications
- Use the Writer's Triangle to frame your narrative in a way that aligns with your purpose, your audience, and your context using a voice that is authentically yours
- Use the journalistic questions to generate raw material and move past writer's block
- Transform raw data into the elements of a good story
- Incorporate storytelling techniques at the sentence and paragraph levels

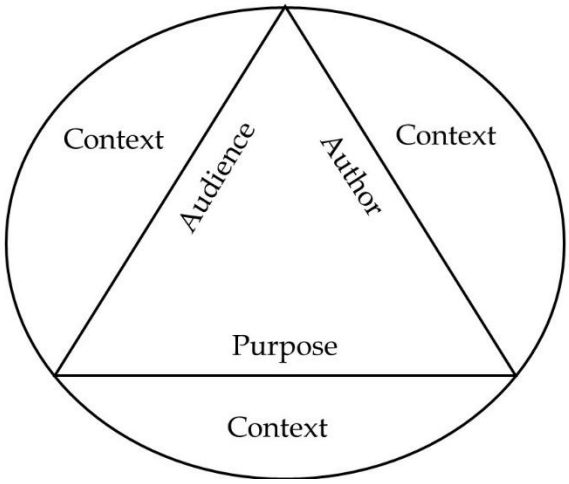
[1] Image credits and presenter information can be found on the final page of this presentation.

What is a Story?

For our purposes, stories are not lies, myths, folktales, or fiction. They are narrative accounts of the work we're doing and why it matters.

Why Do We Tell Our Stories?

- Our brains are wired to learn through narrative.
- Stories are interesting and enjoyable ways of learning.
- Stories help readers understand how and why change happens.
- Readers who identify with a story's settings or characters are more likely to care about its purpose.



Context = Modes of Delivery

- Conference presentations
- Social media
- College admissions essays
- Research papers

Fig. 1. The Writer's Triangle

Turn Your WHY into Your Story's Purpose:

I enjoy working with GIS data ...	*... so I joined a group that maps urban forests.*
I want to see my family's farm succeed ...	*...so I began an agricultural lobby.*
My kuleana is to malāma the ʻāina	*... so I research and catalog taro subspecies.*

Author = Voice

- Teacher—confident expert engaging a community of learners
- Student—curious learner embarking on a voyage of discovery
- Caregiver—tender-hearted nurturer showing aloha
- Steward—strong warrior standing firm in tradition

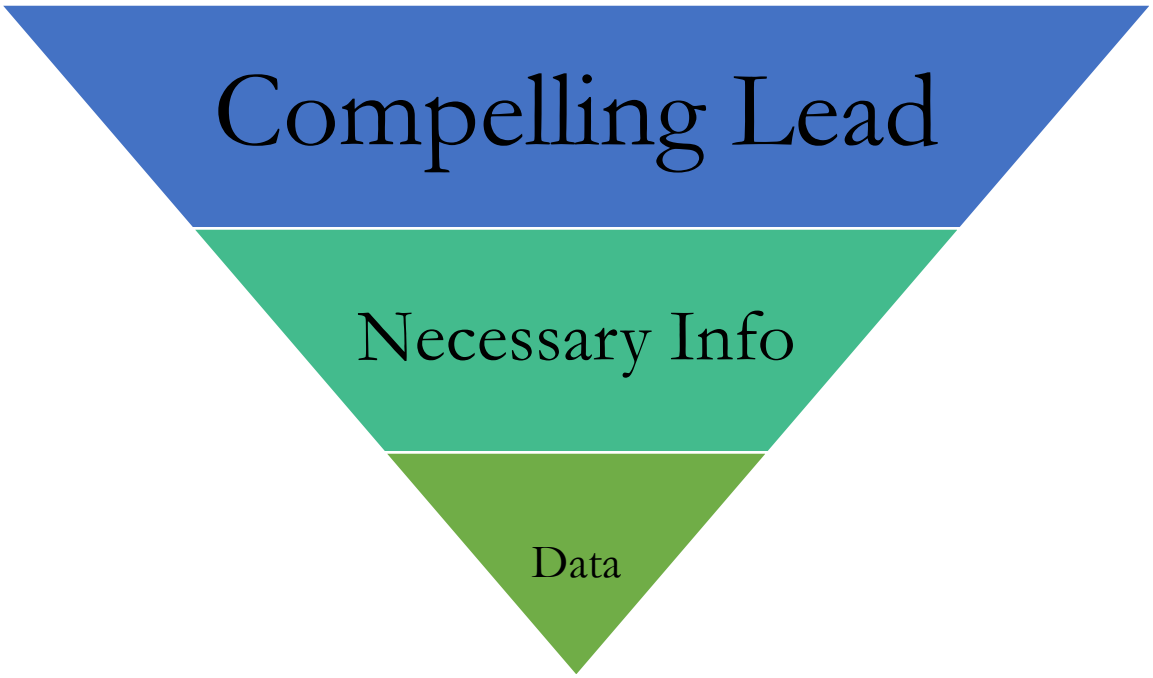
Audience

Questions	Aud. A	Aud. B	Aud. C
Why are they reading my story?			
What knowledge or opinions do they bring?			
What action(s) should they take after reading it?			

Explore Your Topic Using the Journalistic Questions

	Who	What	When	Where	Why	How
Example: Bird Walks	Audubon Society, FWS personnel, locals, and tourists	red-crested cardinals, mynas, Japanese white-eyes, red-vented and whiskered bulbuls, rosy-ringed parakeets, and yellow-fronted canaries	Sundays and Thursdays from 8 to 10:30 a.m.	Kapiʻolani Park	to learn about and appreciate local bird species and conservation efforts	Meet at the Waikiki Aquarium, bring a water bottle and a snack bar, wear good walking shoes and comfortable clothes suitable for the weather. Binocs will be provided for those who do not have them, or you can bring your own

Organize Your Story



What Makes a Compelling Lead?

Perhaps the most important part of a story is its headline, because it helps determine reader engagement. For example, a story about Kilauea's ongoing eruptions can be told from numerous perspectives. Think about a few of these options as you craft an engaging headline:

- possible threats
- effects on the local community
- atmospheric and environmental effects
- earth-shaping, creative, and destructive powers
- research possibilities
- cultural practices

X Jackson Group Foundation, part of Jackson Group Holdings, issues $2M insurance policy for state lands located within Kilauea's lava eruption zones

O Kilauea's threat mitigated for state's most vulnerable properties via a $2M insurance policy

Do	Don't
Call attention to startling statistics	Spotlight corporations or organizations
Ask a thought-provoking question	Frontload the data
Use concrete nouns and strong verbs	Ask yes/no questions

Distinguish Necessary Information from Data

Necessary (Put Toward the Beginning)	Data (Put Toward the End)
Problem	Governments, businesses, & nonprofits
Solution	The science behind the problem or the solution
Astonishing facts	Past or similar efforts
Species and their habitats	Long-term effects
Conservation leaders, innovators, and kupuna	Personal anecdotes and quotes

Let's Get Descriptive

Character

We typically think of characters as people. But in the life sciences, species and habitats act like characters, interacting within and forming ecosystems. Alongside the environmental scientists studying them, species and habitats comprise the compelling characters that keep audiences engaged.

Setting

The time and place of your narrative are more than background information. They can be foregrounded to give people the sense of what being in the moment feels like.

What makes compelling characters and moving settings?

- Animals and their habitats
- People doing interesting work in the field; accomplishing strange, unusual, or challenging feats; or overcoming odds
- Unique personalities, cultures, and partnerships or unexpected intersections of people working together
- The here and now: people are always interested in their own backyards
- The very small (new) or the very large (old)

Making it a Family Thing
***by Brooke Bateman*[2]**

Female Bird Day is a wonderful way to foster this style of birding. Identifying female birds is all about nuance, looking for subtle field marks or behavioral clues, really spending time with a bird. You can't rush birding for females, and you have to ask, "what are the ways we can look at this bird to know if it is a female?" During our May 2020 Female Bird day my 5-year-old daughter, husband, and I set out to find as many female birds we could in our neighborhood on Long Island, NY. During the early days of COVID outdoor days with family were very much welcome, and a slow meander around proved to be the perfect way to spend it. Our first bird, hopping cheerfully in our neighbor's yard was the American Robin. I rejoiced, as this was a bird species my daughter already knew and one that was happily hanging around for us to spend some time with. We noted the colors and behavior and we identified it as female from the field marks in our guide (paler head and breast). Success!

As we moved through the neighborhood some female birds were easy to spot, such as the Northern Cardinal, a species that is clearly dimorphic, with females in a more muted grayish tan with some red. This one the whole family already knew how to identify the females and males. Others were trickier; a fleeting glimpse of a Northern Flicker, who perched for a moment on a branch, we didn't see a dark facial mustache marking- another female for the list. A band of Blue Jays that we spent some time with, waiting to see if we could see any feeding behaviors- the males feed the females- or if we could hear the characteristic growl the female gives off. No luck this time! There was no way for us to tell if any were female. A pair of Ospreys on a nest, the female visibly larger but similar in appearance. We spent time watching them as they took turns around the creek to look for food. There was much excitement over finding a pair of Yellow Crowned-Night Heron sitting up high in a tree together on a nest, Mute Swans with cygnets, Canada Geese with goslings, and Double-Crested Cormorants communally nesting in the trees. None dimorphic, but finding a pair actively breeding allowed us to make the inference.

All up we counted 21 female bird species that day! Not the most generous neighborhood tally of birds we have had on a family outing, but we were all much more the richer for the time we spent learning about and appreciating each bird along the way!

[2] Source: https://femalebirdday.wordpress.com/162-2/

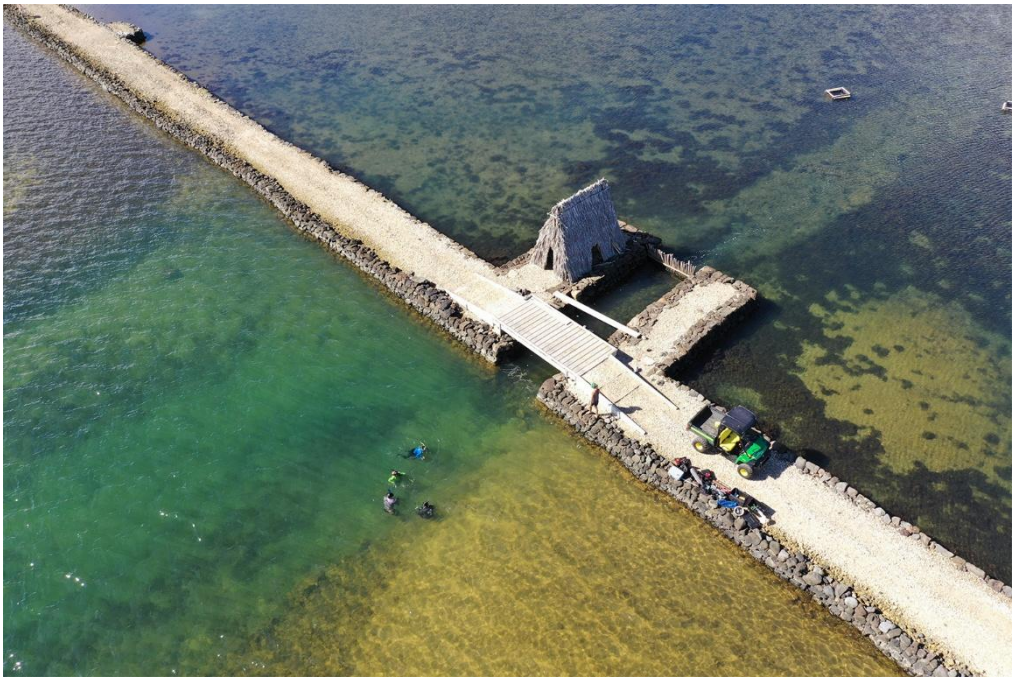
Restoring Indigenous aquaculture heals both ecosystems and communities in Hawai'i [3]
by Keona Blanks

[...] The Indigenous aquaculture systems found in Hawai'i have a unique design that supports the ecosystem in a way that commercial aquaculture doesn't. There are six types of loko i'a in Hawai'i, each designed to complement existing features in the landscape.

The type of fishpond modeled in the study is called a *loko kuapā*, or walled fishpond, where a boundary rock wall encloses part of the ocean at the mouth of a nutrient-rich stream. By trapping nutrient-rich stream water, the enclosed space incubates phytoplankton, triggering algal blooms that feed herbivorous fish, thereby boosting herbivorous fish populations to levels much higher than in unmanaged estuaries.

Sluice gates, or *mākāhā*, are built into the wall to circulate water and allow young fish to move in and out of the pond, while separating larger fish from predators. The young fish leaving the pond often move into the bay's larger ecosystem, where they become a food source for reef fish and fishers alike.

"In this way, the design manipulates preexisting natural conditions so that they're extra productive," said lead author Anne Innes-Gold, a marine biology Ph.D. candidate at HIMB. "Loko i'a are really built to work with the ecosystem, whereas not all forms of aquaculture are made to do that."Unlike commercial aquaculture, these traditional fishponds thrive without feed input and need little management once established." [...]



[3] Source: Mongabay. https://news.mongabay.com/2024/06/restoring-indigenous-aquaculture-heals-both-ecosystems-and-communities-in-hawaii/ June 5, 2024. Accessed Jan 20, 2025

Tips for Developing Compelling Characters and Settings

Use vivid language to describe sensory details, such as colors, textures, and scents. Be aware of any unconscious bias that might lead to the neglect of certain sensations, such as sound, light, or smell. These senses tend to be deprioritized in Western thinking, perhaps as less objective than other descriptions, but including them offers a more complete picture of the species or landscape.

Organize information spatially. For species, this means moving from the crown of the head down to the jaw or its equivalent, then to the neck, to the torso, and finally to the tail and the feet. For a landscape, the most common organization in the Western world is to start at the northern edge and move clockwise to the east, south, and west. However, if a landscape has a dominant feature—such as a marsh, a spring, a lava vent, or a ridge—that may be the most logical place to begin, with subsequent descriptions moving out from and then returning to that feature.

Storytelling at the Sentence and Paragraph Level

The fear on the part of the land trust was that a recommendation from the committee to the Legislature would be for a reduction in its budget.

Who …	**…is doing what?**
land trust	
committee	
Legislature	

Revision:

The land trust feared that the committee would recommend that the Legislature reduce [the trust's] budget.

The spread of introduced forest pest species within the range of Hawaiian honeycreepers is too recent to have documented effects on the honeycreepers. However, defoliation and tree mortality associated with the Koa moth are well documented (e.g., Brown and Smith 2017), and *Myoporum spp.* within the documented range of the honeycreepers are seriously threatened by *Myoporum thrips* (K. Watson, Volcanoes National Park, pers. comm.). Habitat changes associated with these pests could result in adverse effects to Hawaiian honeycreepers.

Who…	**…is Doing What?**

Revision:

Forest pest species have been introduced too recently within the range of Hawaiian honecreepers to have documented effects on them. However, the Koa moth defoliates and kills trees (e.g., Brown and Smith 2017), and *Myoporum thrips* are seriously threatening *Myoporum spp*. within the documented range of the honeycreepers (K. Watson, Volcanoes National Park, pers. comm.). These pests cause habitat changes that could result in adverse effects to Hawaiian honeycreepers.

Image Credits

Page 1, Upper left: State of Hawai`i, Office of Planning and Sustainable Development, Carbon Assessment of Hawaii, https://planning.hawaii.gov/gis/download-gis-data-expanded/

Page 1, Upper right: Hawai`i Wildlife Fund, Green Sea Turtles, Inflatable FilmMaui, These green turtle hatchlings were released during excavation of their nest by HWF and partners. They would have died in the nest had they not been dug out, https://www.wildhawaii.org/wildlife/hawaiian-green-sea-turtle/

Page 1, Middle left: Hanawī and Nakula, Natural Area Reserves, (2019), Saving Kiwikiu, Hawai'i DLNR, https://mauinow.com/2022/04/15/four-native-hawaiian-honeycreepers-face-grim-prospects/

Page 1, Bottom center: Yoohyun Jung/Civil Beat, Waipa Foundation grows taro on its premises, but also buys from other farms to make poi, https://www.civilbeat.org/2021/03/fewer-farmers-are-growing-hawaiis-miracle-food-taro-despite-growing-demand/

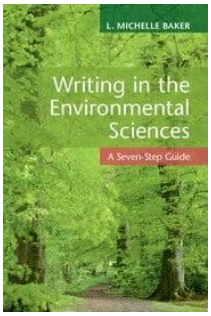
Page 7: Eastern Kingbird gathering nesting material. Photo by Henry T. McLin/Flickr CC2.0

Page 8: Researchers conducting a study close to the wall. Image by Keli'i Kotubetey

All else: Authors' creation

About the Presenter

Michelle Baker earned a PhD in English Language and Literature from the Catholic University of America in 2008. Since then, she has worked at the intersection of environmental science and regulation. She teaches environmental scientists how to write more clearly, consults with government agencies and NGOs on guidance for document creation, and provides technical editing services. She moved to Waikīkī in 2017.



Michelle is the author of *Writing in the Environmental Sciences: A Seven-Step Guide* (Cambridge UP, 2017). The book offers a protocol environmental scientists can use to write any document—technical or regulatory—from scratch. The seven steps outlined in the book encourage environmental scientists to think about writing differently, as a process rather than a product. The book outlines steps that illustrate how to move from on-the-job (as opposed to academic) research to a first draft while considering a document's purpose, its context, and its many readers. Numerous examples are analyzed for the sake of clarity, and every chapter offers detailed suggestions for applying the techniques described as well as checklists so writers can apply the processes as they read.

To discuss your communication challenges and your writing training needs for scientific, technical, and regulatory documents, please call, text, or email:

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