

# PUTTING SYSTEMS IN YOUR STORIES

Complex systems are best explained through the stories of real people who experience them and are affected by them. Read this companion article, [“Using Story to Change Complex Systems,”](#) from the Center for Public Interest Communications as you make your way through this worksheet.

## 1 Map the narrative arc of your story:

**Exposition:** Introduce the characters and set the scene. Who is this story about? Where does it unfold?

**Rising action:** Introduce conflict or the seeds of a problem. How are the people in the story interacting with the system?

**Climax:** Here, your central character faces the central problem—the system and the actors who are making inhumane choices—head-on. It is the moment of greatest vulnerability in the story and the moment in which you want your reader to feel uncertainty about the fate of the central character.

**Falling action:** Resolve conflicts.

**Resolution:** Demonstrate how the conditions have changed, and show the characters resuming their lives in the new reality.

## 2 Review the narrative arc and the details you have included. Which of these are the result of specific systems? Where might you elaborate on those details to make the system more obvious?

## 3 How were those systems created in the first place? What problem were the people who created this system trying to solve when they created the system? What choices did they make that uphold this system?

## 4 What are some of the specific ways this system harms the people the story is about?

## 5 How does your story demonstrate interdependence and community care?

## 6 What are some of the observable places or ways the central character interacts with the system?

## 7 What are some of the ways the system harms everyone—even those it’s meant to help?

## 8 To do systems storytelling well, you need to tell multiple stories at once: the history; the one that is unfolding in the present; and finally, how everyone is harmed.

Heather McGhee’s book *The Sum of Us* includes countless examples of great systems storytelling. One that’s a particularly strong model is in her chapter, “Ignoring the Canary,” in which she tells the story of Janice and Isaiah Tomlin, who were targeted with predatory loans. They have great credit and could have qualified for a low-interest loan, but lenders target the entire community with high-interest subprime loans. The Tomlins end up working with 1,000 other homeowners and win a class-action suit against the lender.

McGhee could have told this story as a hero story, but instead, she weaves together multiple threads: the Tomlins’ desire to

be homeowners and use some of the equity in their home to fund their children’s education; the 2008 financial crisis; and longstanding racism that convinced lenders they could get away with making these kinds of predatory loans, which cause so many to lose their homes.

*Additional Resources:* Sen, Rinku. (June 16, 2021). “Systems Language for Narrative Power.” Narrative Initiative. <https://narrativeinitiative.org/blog/systems-language-for-narrative-power/>