

## Session 1: Stories For The People By The People

*\*Please note that the following are replies to the questions asked during the NYFA online Conference event.*

*Panelists have answered the questions in the context of the conference from their own opinions, inferences and perspectives. These responses **may not** directly represent any other entities or organisations unless otherwise stated.*

### 1. What makes a good story?

**Kane Wheatley Holder:** This is very subjective, but I think as a writer, you'd be wise to view all stories and storytellers as equal. There is no "better genre" or "better filmmaker". My advice is to find greatness in every genre, every writer/content creator, regardless of whether it's your cup of tea or not.

Different stories are for different folks. What works for some may not necessarily work for others. But when you can step away from your personal tastes to LEARN, you'll be better than 90% of the writers/filmmakers out there that live in their own bubble. For example, for some, *Fifty Shades of Grey* was literary garbage, but A LOT of ladies (and men) bought it, liked it, and made the author very wealthy. It is a "good" and effective story when considering those parameters.

For me, a good story has a few other elements:

- 1) *Interesting characters* - whether that means funny, terrifying, outrageous, "real", authentic - you choose. All stories are about who we are as human beings, in my opinion - whether they are actually about aliens, bees, horrific monsters or non-human entities.
- 2) *An original voice and story that isn't cliché or a rip-off of something else.* You can borrow, adapt, be close to something, but what is your original twist on it? What makes it special because YOU are writing it? Aim for that.
- 3) *The correct platform* so the target audience engages with the story with minimal effort. Not everything has to be a movie, a short-film. Pick the right audience and the right platform. There are many devices, genres, mediums (audio, text, video, VR etc), mechanisms, and platforms to tell stories. Your job as a writer/filmmaker/producer is to pick the right one so that the audience "gets it". Twitter posts, IG, Facebook notes are also forms of telling a story, and I've seen posts that have had more eyeballs and audience engagement than most short films or series that take a more traditional approach. A commercial story is only as effective as the number of people that connect with it and talk about it, in my opinion.

If you want to write a story for yourself, go ahead and enjoy it! But if you want a career and to make money, aim to get OTHER people deeply engaged, otherwise, there is no point in creating that story in the first place. You can still tell your personal story and engage people. It's not black and white.

**William Phuan:** This is very subjective and it depends on who you are writing for. For instance, who your audience is, and who you are working with.

If you are working with different publishers, they may have different ideas of the genres and kinds of books they want to publish, depending on their target audience.

If you are pitching a manuscript, you may want to look for a publisher who is more aligned with your vision and the kind of story you are trying to tell.

To me, on a personal level, I would look for an emotional connection to the story. It could be from one of the characters, the setting, or the narrative itself. I think a strong authorial voice is important as well. It could be a familiar story (e.g. coming-of-age), but somehow you can still make it come across as fresh and original because you put your personal stamp on it.

**Kevin Ho:** There are many types of stories so let me cheat and talk about what makes a story suitable for the platforms I commission for instead.

For us, we look for a story that has a main character, a challenge, and something at stake. If one of those three things are missing we find that it becomes difficult to build a story.

These three things are present in a lot of stories you see in mass media. It happens in engineering and "how-it-works" documentaries - the Port of Singapore (the main character) has to clear XX tonnes of cargo every day safely (challenge) or people around the world will not receive essential goods and services (stakes).

It happens in rom-coms too - two people (main characters) must overcome complicating circumstances like class differences or an ex-boyfriend or girlfriend or distance (challenge) or they will live the rest of their lives without their soulmate (stakes).

There are many other aspects that get layered on top of this, but these are the basics. Many story pitches we receive are missing one of those things, especially stakes.

For an in-depth look at storytelling and screenwriting, you could try *Story* by Robert McKee. It's not without criticism but it's very well known.

**Dexter Ong:** Every year, we run a contest called The Watty Awards to discover and celebrate the best stories on Wattpad. What might be helpful in answering this question is sharing the key elements we evaluate in this contest: Character: Your main character propels your entire story. We need to love them, love/hate them, or at least feel something for them in order to let them take us on a journey. If your characters have "it", we're way more likely to want to hop into the passenger seat. Hook: Your idea is your golden ticket. Give us a hook we can sink our teeth into, like a unique concept or a new twist on a beloved cliché. The 'What If' of your story is that important spark that will turn a reader's head. It's definitely something we look for in our nominees. Voice: Your narrative voice is your multi-tool. Use it well and you can shape the story you want. This is where writers show off their creative artistry by weaving ordinary words into something magical. But we know it's easier said than done. That's why it's one of our key criteria for The Watty's World: Your world is your playground, and while we're reading your story, it's ours, too. While great world-building doesn't have to be complicated, it should be specific, clear, and logical within the scope of your story. Give us too little and we're lost. Give us too much and we're buried under the details. Stakes: Your stakes are your North Star. They guide us into caring about a critical moment in time, the characters you've created, the place you've imagined. The writers who manage to grip us right from the get-go with stakes that click are the ones we're least likely to forget. Do check out our 2019 winners <https://wattys.wattpad.com>

**Juan Foo:** Something that touches the heart, stimulates the brain with promises of a range of humanity and belief values.

## **2. Understand that some publishers/competition prefer works that have not been published on any platforms. How do we reconcile that when trying to put our work on such social platforms to get feedback?**

**Kane Wheatley Holder:** First, consider what kind of creator you are.

*Type 1: You tend to have only 1 big idea at a time, and rarely have others.* You view your one big idea as your calling card - the idea that you feel will make you successful in the future. You are precious about the idea and want to ensure it is done right.

*Type 2: You tend to have LOTS of ideas, too many to count.* You have so many ideas that you're fine with writing/developing one, ten, or none. You have lots of choices!

If you are the type to only come up with ideas rarely, and you're precious about your ideas (which is fine!) - then treat it as such. Don't put your story on other platforms or competitions until it's ready. Then you lessen the chance of your big idea having rights issues. Protect the idea with all you have, because it's yours!

If you are the type that has lots of ideas - well, you have lots of ideas so WHY NOT! If one doesn't "make it", you have a bank of many more to succeed with. Put up more ideas to experiment and see what works. Plant many seeds and see what grows.

It's fine to be a "precious" writer or a more "giving away" writer. Just use it with intention and an objective.

**William Phuan:** I think this can actually be part of a self-marketing strategy that can be worked to your advantage.

You can submit your short story to online journals or competitions, or post on social media. If you are garnering a lot of positive responses, this can be your calling card.

Publishers receive tons of manuscripts and they are constantly looking for stories that stand out with the potential to connect with readers. If you can show that your stories have been generating buzz and gaining traction, the publishers will be more inclined to look at your manuscript as it demonstrates track record.

Also, another thing to bear in mind - if your manuscript has been accepted, it will go through an editorial process where changes will be made. You will be working with the editor and publisher to make your story publication-ready. Sometimes, this may involve extensive changes and your final draft may look quite different from the original draft.

**Dexter Ong:** At Wattpad, we frequently work with publishers to discover stories that are already published on our platform. In fact, we have our own publishing division, Wattpad Books where we are identifying stories already popular on Wattpad for publication. Put it this way, if you're a new writer, would it help conversations with publishers if you are able to also say your story has a following on social platforms with readers around the world? Ultimately, it's your choice on how you want to manage your writing journey. Many of our writers are able to develop their writing career and fanbase through Wattpad and then choose to pursue traditional publishing routes, or digital publishing (ebooks) while there are also writers who prefer to remain on Wattpad only. Of course, there are also writers who do not use social platforms and choose to write their manuscripts privately and try to get published through that route. There are many

tools and platforms out there to guide and support your writing journey but ultimately it's your choice how you'd like to pursue it. I think the experience is very different depending on the choice you make. I think Wattpad can provide a fun and collaborative platform for our writers to reach a global reader base and many of our writers successfully build their confidence and develop their writing skills over time on our platform.

**Juan Foo:** That is the risk, as the creator of work, you will need to take.

As mentioned during the conference, writers must also be keen entrepreneurs to find out what opportunities suit their works the best.

In the end, it is also about your own volume of work and what you put out there as a chance to get feedback, breakthrough, or on a negative side, getting ripped-off.

### **3. How can we get inspiration and write stories that strike a chord with the audience?**

**Kane Wheatley Holder:** There are a few ways.

- 1) Read the news. Pen ideas. Create Google Documents or notes and jot anything that is noteworthy all the time. I cover my detailed method here - [https://www.instagram.com/p/B5\\_rKhuAy2R/](https://www.instagram.com/p/B5_rKhuAy2R/).
- 2) Smash two unrelated ideas together to make a new one. For example, Shaolin + Soccer; Lawyer + Can't Lie; Womanizer + telepathy to ONLY read women's thoughts.
- 3) To strike a chord with the audience, KNOW the audience. Research what your audience enjoys, likes, dislikes and is drawn to. Know their habits. Write what the audience expects, but then create twists to make it more original.

Audiences usually want some boxes "ticked". So if it's a horror, you need a scary villain, a supernatural force, a tormented hero, or creepy music.

But, don't follow the formula 100%. Make it original, while tapping into the conventions of a genre. Satisfy their basic requirements for the genre (characters singing for musicals, a scare for horror, science or cool gadgets for sci-fi) first so you'll have an easier time connecting with them. Especially when you have a bonkers approach that might be unfamiliar with the masses.

**Dexter Ong:** At Wattpad, we have a guide and tips we share for writers that you can check out here: <https://www.wattpad.com/writers/resources/get-inspired/>

**Juan Foo:** Read more to learn penmanship. Observe more to absorb humanity. Experience more to gain perspective.

Inspiration is swift when you are sensitive, but it is crucial to have the drive and the savvy to complete it (to write).

#### 4. How do you plan for a story?

**Kane Wheatley Holder:** There are many ways to plan a story, most are already documented in screenwriting books and websites.

The most famous is the 3 Act Structure and basic character building (visible want, internal need, ghost, backstory, characteristics etc). These are the basics but they serve as a great compass for all the stories you create. There are, of course, many other ways (e.g. story clocks, 7 acts, 2 acts, etc).

As a quick litmus test, I would recommend creating outlines and deciding the basic BEG, MID, END of each story, episode or film, straight off the bat. If you can't fill these out, then give it time. This means you will have to LEARN the planning stages for the medium you're attempting to create. For example, if I'm writing a sitcom, I know there is already a way to plan/outline such episodes. You don't need to reinvent the wheel. Try to see if there's meat in the concept before going detailed, or you may waste time.

The other is the theme - try to understand what you are trying to say. A theme is a point of view about humanity, the moral, or what you want the audience to take away. It is also a specific point of view, used to strengthen the story and characters, and directly from YOU the writer/director. So what do you want to say about life, love, young people etc.? It is NOT a 'girl meets boy' or 'underdog story'.

Nail the theme down. For example, in *Finding Nemo*, the theme is "In order to truly love someone, we have to learn to let them go." This theme is specific and is encapsulated by Marlin's journey during the film and the choices he has to make. He starts off not believing the theme (he is anti-theme), but the story FORCES him to change. He literally does physicalises the theme at the end when he has to let Nemo go. By the end, Marlin CHANGES, the catalysts of all great stories.

Every story is about change and transformation in various degrees. If it isn't, then maybe it's a cautionary tale.

So start here:

- 1) What is the structure/outline/beats of THIS story?
- 2) Theme: what am I trying to say?

These should guide you as you write.

**Kevin Ho:** In a network, a lot of discussion takes place at the planning stage. It's expensive to assemble a crew and film something so when the cameras start rolling we really want to know that all plans are in place. Kind of like a high stakes heist.

Assuming I already have a gem of an idea, I bounce between three things.

- 1) Try to fill in the missing elements. That could be the main characters, challenges or stakes, as mentioned in "What makes a good story?" Or it could be other things like tension or world-building.
- 2) Work out the story structure - what happens, when they happen, and how they lead to each other.
- 3) Research. I read a lot about the world my story is supposed to take place in. I also consume a lot of relevant media and try to take inspiration from them. If I'm working on a thriller, I'll watch as many thrillers as I can and analyse them. If the story has issues and I remember that similar issues were solved in a book, I'll read that book again.

I keep my notes on Google Documents rather than on paper because it allows me to move stuff around easily.

**Dexter Ong:** Please do check out our resource guide we have for writers here:

<https://www.wattpad.com/writers/resources/sharpen-your-skills/>

**Juan Foo:** In a very simplistic approach.

What do you want to say (theme)?

How do you want to say it (genre)?

Who will do things and say what you want to say in your story (protagonist)?

What will others say or do against what you want to say in your story (conflict)?

How does all this come together (start writing)?

**5. Within this panel, how do you think we can get more original local stories on screen?  
(Via Wattpad / Singlit / Mediacorp)**

**Kane Wheatley Holder:**

1) Support local stories in all shapes and forms - share them, comment, talk about them, recommend them. Do it regardless of whether you enjoyed it or not.

If we don't support our own stories, who will? The idea here is that by supporting the VERY ACT OF CREATING LOCAL STORIES IN ALL SHAPES AND FORMS, you are opening doors for MORE storytelling and better representation. If we critique too much and shut them down, doors will close. That affects everyone. We are too young a nation, as well as the media industry as a whole, to be shutting doors on ourselves. I NEVER say a story is bad or the writing sucks. It may not be my cup of tea, for reasons I can state, but I know that it DOES have an audience somewhere. I respect the act of creating it, and the time and the care that other people put in. It's great! Now, can I do better?

2) Experiment, experiment, experiment. Use Wattpad, blogs, and all available platforms to tell stories. Sometimes you have to put your money where your mouth is and PROVE that your story deserves to be told. Get feedback. Get data. Use it to sell your story and more. There is a lot of room to do some crazy things locally, using technology and our own ingenuity. We do not have to follow trends or follow what other countries are doing. We just have to find our niche, our way. For example, not every Singapore story needs to be an HDB-focused tale (although I understand it's easy to do and relatable). Can we write a drama instead about Grab car drivers with a Singaporean touch? Can we write a video-game about the Singapore way of life that taps into who we are, while being fun? Can we create stories about superheroes, historically accurate tales, and "parallel universe" stories too? Why not! There are no rules.

3) Develop your digital voice and "business model" like your website, blog, IG, Facebook etc. Be seen. Be heard. You do not need permission to start. Remove 'aspiring' and 'amateur' from your CV and lock-in. People will only listen to you if they can see and hear you. Dedicating yourself to doing it is half the battle won!

**Kevin Ho:** There are many things that affect the number of local stories on screen. Mediacorp is committed to doing what it can to increase that number. A lot of what we do leverages technology that to a young filmmaker may be normal but trust us, it has a pretty big impact!

For example, we've started and maintained meWATCH. A television channel is limited to 24 hours a day. During many of those hours, the audience just isn't around to watch. meWATCH



allows the audience to watch anytime, anywhere, which means we can bring an increased number of hours of local content to a larger number of viewers.

Another thing we've done is to reach out to our audience and encourage them to send stories to Mediacorp. For example, we are working with Wattpad to do a Kin fanfic contest, where people can send their alternate Kin storylines to us. We're actually going to film the winning stories for a Kin "alternate universe" mini-series.

There was actually a time when getting in touch with Mediacorp meant writing a letter with pen and paper, listening closely to the address given by the presenter on TV and then dropping the letter into a postbox. The information revolution has made that process so much easier now.

**Dexter Ong:** As a global large-scale social storytelling platform, we provide opportunities and a space for writers from Singapore to write and share their stories with the world. Our partnership with Mediacorp also means we are constantly looking for local stories or stories written by Singapore writers on our platform to be adapted for screen. In fact we work with partners around the world including in Hollywood to discover stories that can be adapted for screen. Most fundamentally, I think the best way to accomplish this is to encourage budding writers in Singapore to write more. Find a platform that makes sense for you but don't be afraid to write your stories and share it with the world. There might be even be many writing contests out there that you can participate in. Don't be afraid to share your unique local voice. Some stories can be written in ways that are more amenable to screen adaptation and if that's what you're pursuing, consider what kind of cinematic universe you're creating and how your setting and characters are able to translate to screen.