

Why horror stories don't lead to nightmares

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Abstract:

Research data management is now an established information service in academic libraries. The University of Queensland (UQ) Library has successfully used storytelling to promote this vital service. The stories are inevitably entertaining, but always have an educational aspect allowing us to instill best practice. Researchers are both fascinated and motivated by storytelling, particularly when we tell horror stories based on real life examples where a lack of basic data management has been disastrous. We take them on a journey from:

“What’s your worst nightmare?”

Followed by:

“I would never let that happen to me!”

Or sometimes surprisingly even:

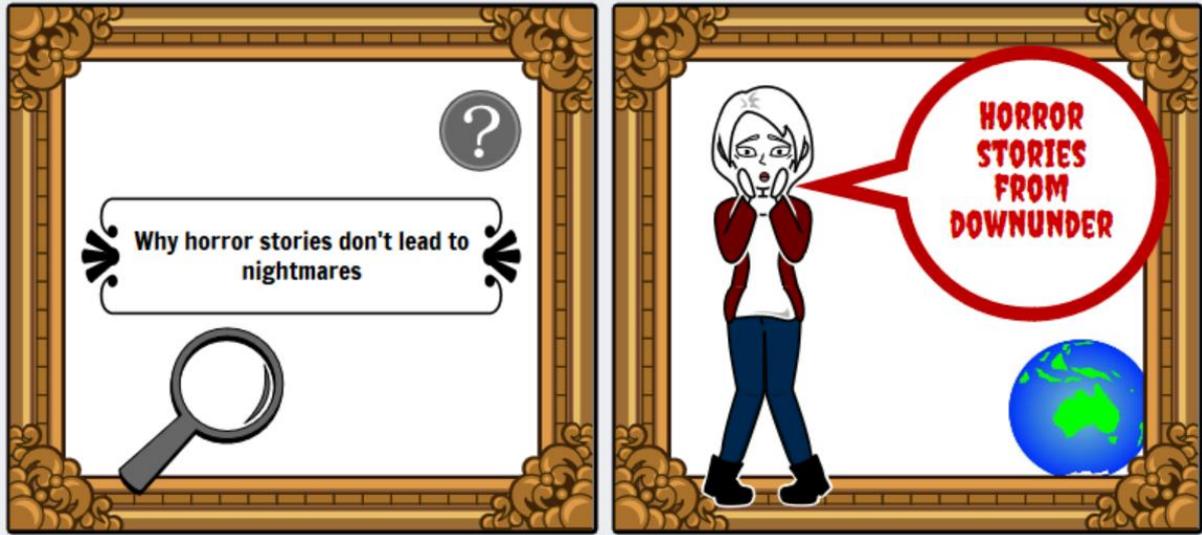
“Yes, I recognise that... my office caught on fire last year...!”

Horror stories have immediate emotional impact that demonstrate the consequences of not doing the right thing. The technology used to deliver the stories varies. As well as one-to-one meetings, we utilize videos, digital posters, illustrations, infographics and library staff have acted in a play that highlights the folly of the lack of research integrity.

We work with a range of sections across UQ – the research ethics unit to educate on compliance and best practice, the IT unit to arrange for data storage and the graduate school to ensure that students create data management plans and actually think about their data management up-front.

We find that with our story telling we are able to add to our repertoire as academics often tell us their own horror stories. It’s our job to keep on telling the stories to make sure our researchers can learn by example and not through experience!

Keywords: Research data management, storytelling, horror stories, information literacy, research integrity

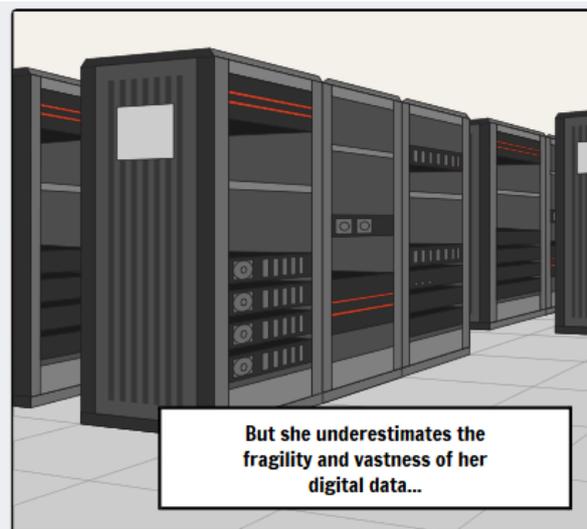
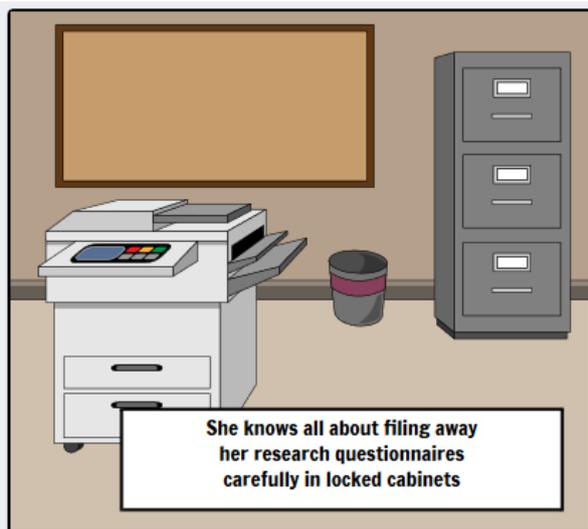


1 INTRODUCTION

The University of Queensland (UQ) is an Australian research university located in Queensland's capital city, Brisbane. UQ is Australia's top ranked university for business and life sciences and attract the majority of its state's top achievers. The main campus occupies much of the riverside inner suburb of St Lucia, southwest of the Brisbane central business district.ⁱ

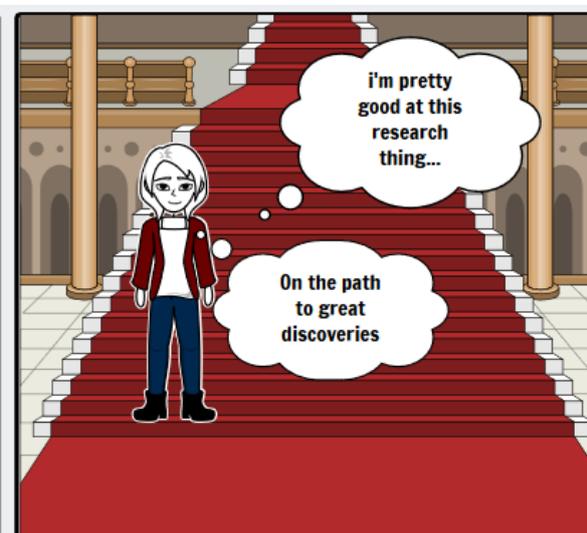
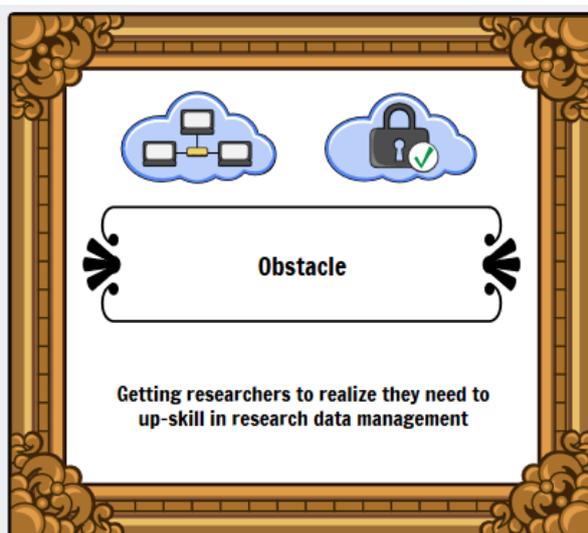
The Library is integral to achieving world-class scholarship at The University of Queensland. We work in partnership with the research community to provide convenient access to quality information, and to manage and provide access to UQ scholarship. We provide information services which are customisable to individual needs and which recognise disciplinary perspectives and their information requirements.ⁱⁱ One of these services centres on research data management support. It is a growing service which trains researchers from multiple disciplines across the university.

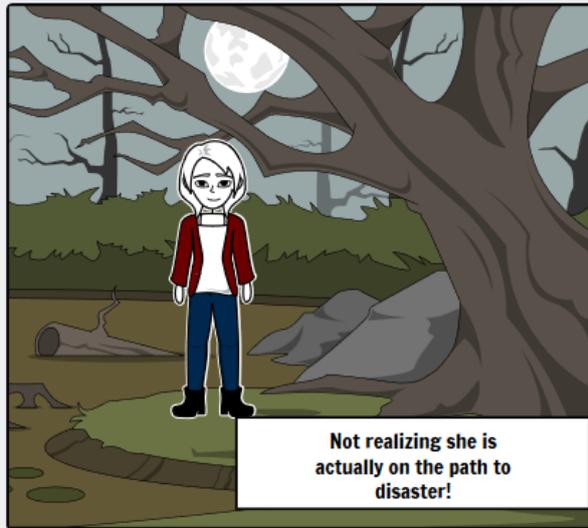




2 OBSTACLE

As librarians, we know the importance of research data management, but do our researchers? Many don't think about data management as something to invest much thought or time on. It is difficult to get them to engage with this "dry" topic, which on the surface doesn't offer much in the way of reward. Unfortunately once you hit a pain point with, for example the loss of research data, it is often too late to go back and rectify the problem retrospectively. Therefore it is critical to get researchers to forward plan and develop strategies for managing their research data as early on in the data lifecycle as possible. Simple techniques such as file-naming standards, version control and keeping well-maintained backups of data can alleviate many problems. The obstacle is to get the researchers to realise this before they hit disaster!

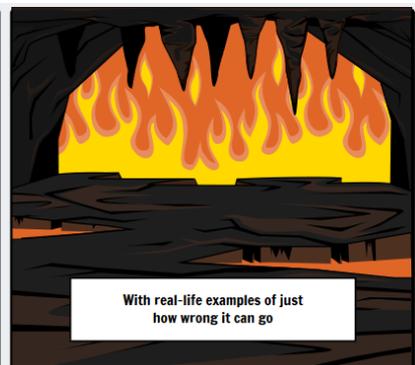
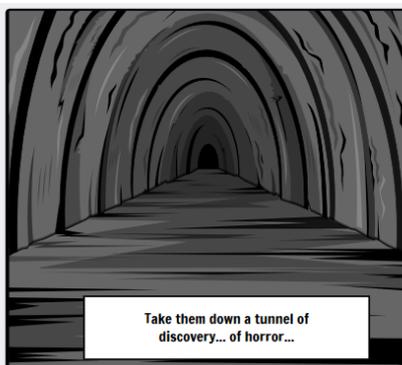




3 TACTICS

What stories do we tell researchers to get them to consider re-evaluating their data management practices? Stories can motivate voluntary changes in behaviour, but they have been shown to be most effective when there is a sense of tension that grabs the attention of the listener and makes them receptive to sharing the emotions of the characters in the narrative.ⁱⁱⁱ Our experience delivering many information literacy sessions in the research data management space has let us try many different types of story in many different ways, and there is one type that always gets the result we are after – that engages and builds the sense of tension that ultimately motivates researchers to want to learn more about how to manage their data. The most effective stories to tell are horror stories!

How do you tell a horror story about data management? Create a narrative about real life situations that we know have happened... if not at UQ then from around the world. A lost backpack containing 5 years of research data, a fire in an office, data leakage or poor data versioning leading to overwriting the “correct” version of the data. All these are nightmare situations for researchers. Our data management horror stories work to both engage and trigger researcher’s imaginations. We want researchers to become participants in the story. We get them to step out of their comfort zone and see potential problems that haven’t occurred yet. This increases empathy for others, and makes them realise research data management is a priority problem that needs to be solved.



4 TWIST

Telling horror stories can be good fun. So long as they don’t happen to you. We have seen in our training sessions researchers go on a journey along with the narrative. From complete denial that

anything bad could possibly happen to them, to the realisation that they've perhaps had a close miss in the past. One researcher even told us that she'd had a fire in her office the year before. All this sharing adds further fuel to our horror story repertoire. We are able to share stories and warn others...

For example, we stress the point of backing data up regularly and in more than one physical location – we don't want researchers to have to own this ad... *"LOST – 1TB Research Data on Portable Hard Drive. Contains 5 years of valuable data! REWARD FOR RETURN"!*



5 CONCLUSION

Stories have the potential to *“create a visceral reaction in your audience - they can actually “feel” the pain associated with the problem, and that they feel the “relief” associated with your solution. There is no way to do this other than storytelling. Your stories need to be meaningful and relevant to your business and to what you're trying to accomplish. Bottom line, storytelling engages a different part of the brain that is not as defensive”*.^{iv}

We have found storytelling to be an invaluable tool in our information literacy belt! Stories make information understandable and memorable. To be most effective they should include realistic characters who suffer a change in fortune.^v Our stories work best because they are believable. Often they are stories we have collected from previous information sessions, which have been told to us so that we can re-tell them. With a little embellishment of course! The horror stories we tell specifically use words that spark the senses making it easier for the brain to imagine, elaborate and recall.^{vi} Researchers listening to the stories develop their own experience. Passing on information via narratives has been shown to be far more effective than just stating facts. There is no need for horror stories to lead to nightmares for our researchers, especially if they heed the warnings!



Acknowledgments

The University of Queensland Library Research Outputs and Impact Team

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