

# FAQ

expert answers to  
frequently asked  
questions

by David Hussman  
david.hussman@devjam.com

## How do you write good user stories?

Poker players talk about “tells” as the things other players do that give away the cards they are holding. Often, the question “How do you write good user stories?” is more of a tell than a problem.

A good story is about someone doing something interesting. A good user story is about someone doing something interesting with software or software doing something interesting for someone. In order to succeed with user stories, you need a few key ingredients:

### STORYTELLERS WITH PRODUCT KNOWLEDGE

User stories are the result of a group of people who realized that no matter how much we specify, people will ask questions. In a courageous move, this group asks people to shift from a mostly written tradition (e.g., formal specifications) to a blend of written and spoken tradition.

If you are not connected to the person who can tell the story, your “tell” will be that you cannot write good stories, but this is not the source of your problem. Once you have the person (or persons) who can tell the story, writing the stories is simplified.

### USERS, USE, AND CONTEXT

Once you have content, you need to provide context. While writing and telling stories, the audience needs to hear about user, use, and context. The context generators I use are:

**Collaborative chartering:** Builds the big picture that tells why you are doing what you are doing

**Pragmatic personas:** Descriptions of users and their interests (who’s buying, who’s buying in)

**Story maps:** User stories visualized in a way that tells the user experience or the big picture

As is normally the case, these are simply tools; you add the real value. Avoid getting lost in the recipe trap of following a prescribed process if it does not serve a purpose. For instance, many people write stories using the following starter template: “As a \_\_\_ I need to \_\_\_ so that\_\_\_.” Over time, this often kills storytelling and promotes sentence reading. When this happens, the narrative value of user stories dies and a slice of context dies along with it.

### TESTABLE OUTCOMES

As Steve Martin said in *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles*, “If you are going to tell a story, have a point.” A last, but essential, step is: Express user value in testable terms. The best stories I see are those with the best story tests. The best tests are those that advocate on behalf of the user and drive toward real value and meaningful outcomes.

Keep your story titles short—around five words or fewer—and express the value in story tests. If you find you are having a hard time creating strong story tests, it may require some digging to ensure you have a good story to tell.

The best way to craft good stories ready for storytelling is to keep the story-writing ceremony low and the story titles short, and to focus on expressing real value in tests that speak to the value of a story and the value across stories.