



## Your Fail-Proof Formula For Telling Powerful Stories

A GREAT STORY CAN HELP US UNDERSTAND PEOPLE WE'VE NEVER MET AND THINGS WE'VE NEVER EXPERIENCED.

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**A compelling story can turn a passable presentation into an exceptional one. Why? Because stories have the** power to color our words with meaning in a way that a whole slew of other rhetorical flourishes can't. Virtually from the time we learn to communicate, we're listening to and telling stories. Even as adults, stories stick in our minds, leaving impressions long after we first hear them. They humanize us, helping us understand people we've never met and things we've never experienced.

Whether you're at a business meeting, a community event, or a family wedding, you can tell a great story that connects with your audience.

### 1. CHOOSE YOUR STORY WISELY

The best stories come from your own experience—from things with which you already have an emotional connection. When you recount something that's happened to you, you'll recall not just the events but also the feelings associated with them. That will color your stories with natural expression, feeling, and movement. If you tell other people's stories, on the other hand, it's much more difficult to add the same level of engagement (unless you're someone like Daniel Day Lewis), and your audience will pick up on the artifice.

The most effective stories are usually the most ordinary ones. Once again, this is because you want your narrative to resonate with your audience on an emotional level. Few people can relate to the time you rode a yak in Nepal, but everyone can relate to the time you were stranded in a storm, getting soaking wet.

Finally, if you're making a presentation, make sure to choose a story that illustrates one of your main points. You might think you have the perfect story, but if it doesn't support the ideas you're trying to convey in your talk, it isn't a good fit. Your story has to create more than just a temporary flash of feeling. So keep the focus on your broader message.

### 2. SET THE SCENE

The first thing to do as you begin to tell your story is set up the narrative situation. Start by establishing the context—give your listeners any key information they'll need in order to understand your story. To that end, only include details that are relevant. Leave the rest out, and be as brief as possible.

For example, here is the situation setup for a story I would tell about planning for success:

In graduate school, I had to direct a play to receive my MFA—Agatha Christie’s *The Mousetrap*. The play was scheduled to be the second show of the summer season, which is typically the least-attended show of the year. When the set was built, I noticed that it blocked more than half the seats in the balcony. I wanted to make some last-minute changes to the set so everyone could see the stage.

### **3. BUILD TOWARDS THE ACTION**

Once you have set the scene, you begin to tell your audience what happened. Make sure you use play-by-play action language and direct dialogue.

The head of the department pushed back: “Why do you want to change the set?”

“Because half the people in the balcony can’t see the stage,” I told him.

“Don’t worry—there won’t be anyone sitting up there,” he replied.

But I stayed firm and said, “No, I want the set changed.” He shrugged his shoulders, muttered “Okay,” and walked away.

### **4. HIT YOUR CLIMAX**

The climax is the peak that your action is building towards. It should be clear and condensed, typically just a few lines of action or dialogue.

Opening night came, and guess what? The balcony was full. The show had completely sold out. The department head came up to me and said, “Good thing you changed the set!”

### **5. MAKE EVERYTHING CONNECT**

The wrap-up is where you interpret the meaning of the story and connect it to the issues you’re discussing.

So, always make sure you plan for success. Don’t give in to the doubters, even in the 11th hour. Don’t think small—think big!

You might think your stories aren’t exciting enough. You might think nobody will care about your life. You might think you just don’t have what it takes to truly connect with your audience. But you’d be wrong. There’s no message that can’t be given a boost by a well-told story, and there’s no story too small to work.