

## How to Tell a Great STORY, for Business or Fun

### We Never Get Tired of Stories

And these days, they're everywhere!

More people are sharing more personal stories (Bruce/Caitlyn Jenner comes to mind). Radio and TV shows, webcasts, stage performances (TED talks), contests, and non-profits (Story Corps) are all devoted to telling stories. Even companies that used to just sell products and services are now trying to "sell" us on their stories.

Whether or not this is a fad, we all know the power a well-told story can have:

- Dramatic stories stay in our minds for decades. (Can you recall a story you heard, or saw on TV or in a movie as a child?)
- Scientists believe that our brains are "wired for stories" — that stories light up our sensory cortex, not just areas that control language. ("[The Science of Storytelling: Why Telling a Story is the Most Powerful Way to Activate Our Brains](#)," LifeHacker)
- In a 2011 experiment at Princeton, fMRI (functional brain scans) were used to show that *listeners' brains synched to that of a storyteller* as they heard her tale. ("[Why Sharing Stories Brings People Together](#)," Psychology Today.)

So, OK, stories are powerful. But before we look at how to construct and deliver them...

### What *Is* a "Story," Anyway?

According to the Random House Unabridged Dictionary, it's *"a narrative, either true or fictitious, in prose or verse, designed to interest, amuse, or instruct the hearer or reader."*

That's well said; and it's also true that, in mainstream Western culture, stories have certain *characteristics*:

## 1. Stories Have a HERO / HEROINE / PROTAGONIST

In other cultures, the "hero" of a story — the entity at the center of the action — might be "the community," or "a god," or "the fates." In mainstream Western culture, stories are usually about an **individual** and the journey of growth or discovery that he or she goes through to reach his or her goal. (And by the way, "protagonist" is another word for "hero / heroine," especially when they're an "anti-hero," or someone who's not acting very heroically!)

## 2. The Hero / Heroine / Protagonist Overcomes OBSTACLES

In the 1950s, an "absurdist" playwright named Samuel Beckett wrote a play called ***Waiting for Godot***. It's about two guys who are waiting by the side of the road, and nothing — literally nothing — happens.

This is clearly a play, because it's acted out onstage, but is it a *story*? In stories, the hero / heroine / protagonist usually grapples with obstacles, and comes out of their efforts either better or worse off.

## 3. Stories Have a "PAYOFF"

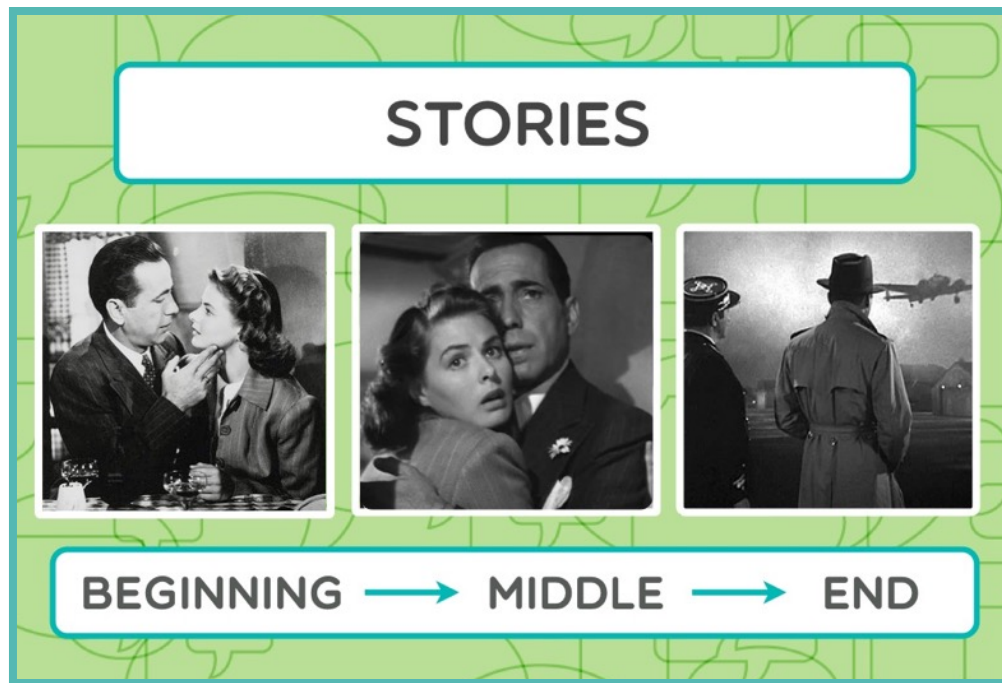
When the hero / heroine / protagonist of a story comes out of their efforts either better or worse off, they usually experience a moment of comprehension, triumph, sorrow, defeat, or rededication. (Think of the kiss that ends a love story, or the moment in ***The Sixth Sense*** when you \*\*\*SPOILER ALERT\*\*\* realized Bruce Willis's character was dead.)

This moment — in which the story comes together and the hero's fate becomes clear — is called the **payoff**, and ideally, it triggers feelings in an audience.

## 4. Stories Have a Beginning, a Middle, and an End

This one is so obvious that it's easy to forget: in our culture, stories are linear (they unfold over time) and have a starting point, a middle section where most of the action takes place, and a conclusion where the threads of the plot are all (or mostly) tied up.

You can shift the order of those sections (you might, for example, start telling your story at the end, then go back to the beginning so we can see how things got the way they are), but you can't leave one of those sections out.



For example: In the classic romance *Casablanca*, Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart) meets up with his former love, Ilsa Lund (Ingrid Bergman), in World War II Africa. She is married to someone else, but Blaine manipulates events so that everyone believes the two of them are going to run away together. In the end, he sends Lund and her husband to safety and stays in Casablanca to re-join the anti-Nazi resistance. Love didn't conquer all, but it created an enduring story with passion, self-sacrifice, and the classic song "As Time Goes By."

### The Lessons of *Casablanca*

Would *Casablanca* work as a story if you dropped out the beginning (where Blaine and Lund are reunited), the middle (where everyone is trying to game everyone else) or the end (where, although he still loves her, Blaine sends Lund flying off into the foggy night)?

Nope!

And yet, when **we** tell stories, we often leave out or shortchange the beginning, the middle, or the end. We do this by:

- Jumping into the action without setting up our characters or the context (this is a story with **no beginning**);

- Setting up a situation and then showing how it looks when it has been changed or improved (what, no *obstacles*? this is a story with **no middle**);
- Telling the entire story and then ending abruptly with a phrase like, "so things turned out OK" (this is a story with **no end**, and thus **no payoff**).

A "not quite" story like these can frustrate your audience, and yet they're easy to avoid when you have a good story and construct it carefully.

So with that in mind, let's look at...

### Choosing a Story to Tell

Whether you're a professional storyteller, a businessperson illustrating a point, or someone who likes to entertain their friends, it helps to have a good story to tell.

So where do you find one?

- If you're a good writer or observer of life, you can **make something up**. You don't have to start from scratch — even greats like Homer, Shakespeare, Toni Morrison, and William Gibson use real trends and events for inspiration — but look for interesting or unusual plots and characters to form the basis of your story.
- You can also **update an existing story**. Leonard Bernstein's Broadway musical *West Side Story* is an update of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The movie *Clueless* is an update of Jane Austen's 1812 novel *Emma*. This approach lets you bring fresh, personal meaning to a story without having to invent it.
- And finally, if your interest is in *telling* a story, not *writing* one, you can **tell someone else's story**. Just don't forget to give that person credit.

Now that you know where stories are lurking, how do you choose one that matches your needs? There are two ways to approach this part of the process. You can:

- **Start with the stories you know** (or find), and then explore *what they mean* by asking yourself: What happened in this story? What point does the story make? What impact is it likely to have on listeners? Make a note in your files, and save that story for a time when it *illustrates the point you want to make*.

Or you can:

- **Start with the impact you want to make**, and go looking for a story that will help you create the desired effect. Talk to your colleagues, go through your files, do some internet research, make up your own story, or update a classic.

In his excellent article, "[A Refresher on Storytelling 101](#)" JD Schramm describes this second approach as the AIM technique (know who your **audience** is, what you **intend** to make them think or feel, and what your **message** will be). **This is very similar to the thought process that's recommended before you create an Instant Speech**, because both good speeches and good stories are designed to **move a specific audience in a particular direction**. So ask yourself: Who is my audience? What do I want them to think or feel? Why should they care?

Schramm's article also links to a great example of storytelling: [Mark Bezos's TED talk](#), which illustrated the concept of a "running start" that Schramm recommends. Bezos could have begun by explaining that volunteer firefighters are very competitive and that he (Mark Bezos) has both a big ego and a love of adventure. But he jumped straight into the story and those things quickly became clear. Bezos also ends with a very effective closing line; it's harder to find one of these than it looks!

## **OK, Enough Theory! Now Take These Three Easy Steps**

### **1. If you haven't yet chosen a story to develop, PICK ONE NOW.**

Notice that I didn't say to pick "a perfect story" or "the world's best story." Just pick **a story** to develop and tell, either by culling through incidents you already know about, or by searching for a story that meets your AIM.

### **2. Now, talk through the BEGINNING of your story OUT LOUD.**

Why out loud? Because a story is an **oral form**, and the best way to develop it is by listening to yourself tell it.

So jump in and start talking through your story. You can use a warm-up phrase like, "Back when I was in grade school..." or "When I think about the future..." or "Until I met John, I thought I understood..." But **don't warm up for longer than one sentence**. Quickly move to the "precipitating incident" (the thing that sets the story in motion):

- "Back when I was in grade school, we didn't know much about Africa. So when this little girl from Kenya joined my second grade class, I was..."
- "When I think about the future, I think about how much our notion of communicating has changed in just the past ten years."
- "Until I met John, I thought I understood how tough it is to run a marathon. But..."

### **Everyone's Favorite Part — *Practicing***

As you tell the beginning of your story out loud, you're almost certain to sound and feel pretty awkward. (Public speaking professionals call that first awkward telling a "stumble-through.") You may have several false starts. You'll probably put in too much detail or too little.

Don't worry about that. Remember that, ***if you could already do this perfectly, you wouldn't need to practice!*** Just keep talking until you've talked through the beginning of your story.

OK, now do it again, trying to make it a little bit better.

Now do it again.

Do it again.

Do it...

Somewhere between repetition 5 and 10, something interesting is probably going to happen: ***The beginning of your story will start sounding pretty smooth.***

That's because, every time you say it out loud, you're making small changes that begin to give the story a *shape*.

When you like the shape you've arrived at, start working on the **middle** of your story, using the same approach, and then the **end**.

When you've got three pretty good sections, start mixing them up and telling them in different order. (I call this "flash-carding" yourself.) By telling the story's sections in random order, you will:

- Avoid getting locked into only doing it one way (from beginning to end),

- Build flexibility, and
- Spend an equal amount of time practicing each section.

Three sections yield six possible orders of practice, which are:

- End-Middle-Beginning
- End-Beginning-Middle
- Middle-End-Beginning
- Middle-Beginning-End
- Beginning-End-Middle
- Beginning-Middle-End

One reason that people often undersell the ending of their stories is that they haven't spent as much time practicing, the end as the beginning. (People often start practicing at the beginning, then get discouraged and quit before they've reached the end.)

That won't happen to you, because you're going to practice using the tips above. Just be sure to do a little bit every day you can — the cumulative effect is greater than one long "cram" session — and try to stay flexible and calm while you're practicing.

### **3. The Final Step to Developing a Story is to Try It Out on Others**

You never want your first telling of a high-stakes story to be with the people you're trying to influence. So practice your story on trusted friends and colleagues, and ask them for specific, constructive, feedback.

Don't expect that feedback to be **technical** ("your build up to the payoff was a little rushed"). Instead, listen for **where the story did and didn't work for them** ("I loved how you described the two people, but I wanted you to take a little more time with the ending.") and experiment with different ways to strengthen the weak points. Then practice until your new version of the story has replaced the old one in your mind.

### **Finally, Be a Flexible Storyteller**

You might think that the point of all this practicing is to help you tell your story **in the exact way you learned it**, but that's not the case.

Rather, you're practicing so that you'll feel so comfortable with the **bones** (structure) of your story that you can make small changes while you're telling it.

Why would you want to do this? Because audiences and storytelling conditions vary from one experience to the next. Even little things like the time of day, the amount of light in the room, how much you slept last night, or what you're wearing can bend your storytelling in a different direction. (For example, at 4 pm, your audience may be tired and hungry, in which case they'll have less patience, and want less detail, than they might have enjoyed first thing in the day.)

Your story isn't set in stone!

On the other hand, don't make changes just to be doing something. Trust your material and your preparation, and in the words of the sages, "if it ain't broke, don't fix it."

### **How Long Does It Take to Develop a Good Story?**

I have no idea.

Seriously, it depends on a lot of things:

- **Did you pick a good story to tell?** (Sometimes, the story that seems like it *should* be perfect just doesn't work, and you have to start over with different material.)
- **Are you able to practice a little bit each day?** As with any performance skill, you're building muscle memory; and that's best done in small, regular sessions.
- **Are you getting good feedback** from supportive friends or colleagues? *Don't* try out your story on someone who's compulsively critical or competitive. Save it for people who are open-minded listeners, thoughtful critics, and want you to succeed.

If all these areas line up right, you may be able to develop a jewel of a story fast.

But why put yourself in a tight time frame? As with a fine wine, your story will need TLC and room to *breathe* so that it can develop its full richness and body.

So let your story breathe.

Make sure *you're* breathing while you tell it!



And pretty soon, you'll be having as much fun as your listeners!

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