


A Refresher on Storytelling 101

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At bedtime, I tell stories to my godchildren, Anna and Noah, when their parents invite me to care for them. Their capacity for stories amazes me. They beg for “just one more” and then “just one more.” It seems we are wired to enjoy a well-told story.

And as we grow up, we do not lose our thirst for stories. I work with future leaders at [Stanford](#) to help them develop compelling stories that achieve their management goals — and I’ve developed a seven-part formula for storytelling success in presentations and business meetings.

Parachute in, don’t preamble. The best storytellers draw us immediately into the action. They capture our attention and set the tone for a unique audience experience. Avoid opening with “I’d like to tell you a story about a time when I learned...” Instead, drop us into the action and draw the lesson out later.

Choose first and final words carefully. We never get a second chance to make a good [first impression](#). One needn’t memorize the story, but great leaders know the first and final words cold ... and can deliver them without hesitation. Take advantage of the impact of a powerful opening and conclusion.

Follow the “Goldilocks” theory of details. Give us “just the right amount.” If you give too many details, we get lost, or worse, bored. If you don’t give us enough detail, we may lack the context to grasp the story fully or to see ourselves inside your tale. If possible, test out your story with a few friends who have a similar background to your audience; let them help you discern the right level of detail.

Focus your delivery on “one person with one thought.” When speaking to a group, focus on one person at a time, for four to seven seconds. As you tell your story, try to connect with each individual if possible. Don’t wash your eye contact over the crowd like a lighthouse, but actually connect with individuals. Consider even “casting” a member of the audience as a character in your story as you tell it.

Consider the power of poetry. Use fewer words to carry more meaning. My high school English teacher, Mr. Wessling, used the analogy of the “magic grain truck” to educate us about poetry. He said “imagine if a magic truck allowed a farmer to haul seven times the amount of grain that a normal truck usually holds?” (Can you tell I grew up in Kansas?) We developed a long list of benefits such a truck would provide: fewer trips, less fuel, more free time, etc. Then he concluded: “Well boys that’s what poetry is. Using just a few carefully chosen and arranged words to carry much more meaning than their usual weight.” That imagery from over three decades ago reminds me of the power of poetry.

Use silence for impact and emphasis. When a composer writes the score for a symphony she places a rest in the music when silence is called for. That rest is as much a part of the music as the notes. Silence is a powerful and underutilized storytelling tool. Matt May

elaborates on this point in his [recent HBR post](#). Intentional silence draws emphasis to what was just said or what is about to come – and allows others to contribute their own interpretations.

Know your AIM. Who is your Audience, what is your Intent, and what is your Message? Using this simple framework from Mary Munter and Lynn Russell’s book [Guide to Presentations](#) assures that the message is clear, captures the audience, and motivates your desired action.

A leader who deploys these seven strategies will deliver a more artful and meaningful story.

Here are two examples. Recently the noted author [Jeffrey Kluger appeared on Late Night with Seth Meyers](#) to plug his new book on narcissism. He effectively uses these seven principles to deliver two concise stories in less than five minutes. One story is about his interaction with astronaut Jim Lovell while writing *Apollo 13*, and his second story is about meeting President Clinton in the oval office. In both short examples he provides just enough detail for us to grasp the setting. While many of us have never been in the oval office, Jeff makes it easy for us to imagine what it felt like and see why the President’s actions had such an impact on him.

For an example of storytelling within a presentation, I’d suggest looking at [Mark Bezos’s 2011 TED Talk: A life lesson from a volunteer firefighter](#). Bezos tells a powerful story, complete with props, in three minutes. In particular his choice of final words, “Save the shoes” serves as a concise and poetic summary of his message. He also chose very deliberately which details of the fire to share, and what to ignore. We know the homeowner is outside, under an umbrella and barefoot; but we don’t know the street name or style of home that is ablaze. Bezos provides only what we need for the story’s point to be made.

Stories can be compelling and entertaining. Stories can teach and influence. Stories make our messages memorable. Use these seven strategies to hone and polish your storytelling skills, and achieve the results you seek as a leader and communicator.