



# Storytelling Essentials

# We All Tell Stories, But Are They Effective?

How do you get people to listen? Not just listen — but also really care about what you are saying, understand it, and invest in it? This is everyone's greatest challenge, especially when it comes to delivering important messages.

The most effective communicators have discovered that a message, no matter how compelling its logic, needs an emotional component to really break through. And, to inject emotion into your message, nothing works better than a story.

An effective story makes the listener remember your message, take it to heart, and tell it to others. That may be why in today's business world, storytelling has become such a highly desirable skill for organizations - for their leaders, sales professionals, managers, team leads, et al.

## **All people tell stories — humans seem hard-wired to communicate through storytelling.**

But there's a big difference between a story and an *impactful* story. An impactful story is not simply a yarn, a case study, personal reminiscence, or anecdote — although it can include any of these components.

To be impactful, a story must capture your listeners' emotional attention, so that they become emotionally involved in rooting for a positive outcome. Effective storytelling uses a simple set of building blocks to create stories that meet different needs — from persuading your customer to take a particular plan of action, to helping your manager understand your point of view, to making a compelling case to your leader for needed change.

## **Remember, a good narrative lights up seven parts of the brain as opposed to facts and figures that light up maybe two.**

And remember, there's science behind the impact of a well told story. While facts and figures light up two parts of the brain (language comprehension and processing), a good narrative

lights up SEVEN parts of the brain (motor, sensory, olfactory, auditory, visual and the 2 language areas). And those five extra parts of the brain are typically where decisions originate via emotion, memories, and visualization. The brain is especially stimulated if the person can SEE themselves in the story – people are more open to information if it’s framed in a way that resonates with how they see the world.

That is especially important in today’s virtual and digital communication environment. Weaving in stories throughout a virtual conversation, presentation or team meeting creates powerful engagement and allows the audience to process your message on both an objective and emotional level. This can significantly offset the limitations of the ‘virtual’ environment.

## What Are The Elements of An Impactful Story?

To be impactful, a story needs the following elements:

**Bookends.** First, every effective story needs a link at the beginning that connects your story to something that’s important to your listener. Second, your story needs a main point at the end that recalls your link and underscores what you want your listener to take away from the story.

Inexperienced storytellers often neglect to include bookends. In addition to “packaging” your story, so to speak, bookends help you maintain a useful focus when planning and telling your story.

**Main Character.** Every story needs a hero, whether it’s you or someone else. It is essential that your hero be on a quest that your listener can identify with and care deeply enough about that they can invest in the journey to resolution.

The bond this creates between the main character and the listener is the story’s emotional driving force, compelling the listener to want to know more. Without this emotional bond with your hero, or main character, your listener won’t care what happens and will simply tune out.

The main character becomes, in essence, the human face of your story. Include any information about the main character that will help your listener better understand and sympathize with his or her situation.

**Background.** Context is what the listener needs in order to grasp the story. An effective background helps the listener visualize the



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main character right in the thick of things. Include critical facts like where, when, and why the main character is in a particular situation, but keep it brief. Your inciting incident — the specific event that sets the story in motion and sends the hero on his or her journey — lives here.

**Conflict.** Also known as obstacles, the conflict turns the main character’s world upside down. These obstacles could be a crisis, challenge, and/or enticing opportunity. In short, these are the events that put your hero in jeopardy and require tough choices.

### Keep Your Character In the Water

Let’s say we drop a swimmer in the ocean. We add a hungry shark, so there’s conflict. We have the swimmer quickly climb into his boat resolving the conflict. Will the listener care? Did we ever capture the listener’s interest? Instead, what if we explain that the swimmer jumped in the water to find his wife’s wedding ring in an attempt to prove to her how much he loved her? And THEN we left the swimmer in the water searching? What if a shark loomed in the distance? A storm came up? His boat began to drift farther and farther away with his wife in it? That sets up a story people might just stick around for.

**Resolution.** This is how the conflict was successfully resolved. How did the main character deal with the turmoil he or she was thrown into? The resolution in a story resolves the obstacles in the hero’s path, and explains how the original quest was either achieved or changed due to the lessons the hero learned during the journey.

For your story to be effective, the resolution shouldn’t be one that happened quickly or easily. Instead, describing how the main character failed before he or she succeeded adds drama to your story.

And what about stories that don’t have a happy ending? A cautionary tale about what went wrong can also be very powerful.

## What Kinds of Stories Are There?

You can use these story elements to build a variety of stories. The best storytellers know how to use a mix of stories: stories about themselves, stories about other people, and even stories about events that haven’t happened yet.

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**A story about yourself.** The trick to making a personal story memorable is full self-disclosure: the good and the bad — the tough and embarrassing moments, the doubts, and inner struggle you went through. Personal stories that are happy tales about how easy something was for you are usually boring: there isn't any conflict and it can sound like bragging.

People usually have more personal stories than they might think, but they don't tell them out of worry that they might not interest others.

A personal story can be about something that happened to you in your personal or work life, or even from your childhood. The trick is to tell the story in such a way that your listeners identify with your struggle.

In business communication the ultimate power of a personal story comes from the lessons — good and bad— you draw from it that are relevant to the listener.

When you tell a story about something that was hard for you, make sure you don't appear to trivialize your struggle. A well-told personal story will help you to establish a more human connection with your listeners, making it easier for them to share their fears and concerns.

### How NOT To Tell a Personal Story

A manager of a marketing team was explaining an upcoming complex change in a database software program. His team was finding the upgrade tough going. To motivate them, the leader said, "Look, I know it's not easy. I was confused myself and was wondering how I could ever explain it to anyone else. But all I had to do was spend some time on it, and now I totally get it." There was a moment's silence, and then, from the back of the room someone said, "Well, good for you."

**A story about another person.** In this kind of story the hero could be a customer, a team member, a leader, a friend, or a family member. When selecting such a story, focus on someone your listener can closely identify with — someone who has struggled and overcome the same kinds of challenges your listener is dealing with.

An ultimate benefit of sharing a story about another person is the expansion of your world by recounting someone else's experience. Ask yourself what the listener would need to know about him or her: what personal qualities, life experiences, and common values do they possess?

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The key to this type of story is getting specific about the person's quest, struggle, and his or her steps to a resolution. It's the difference between saying "John was really busy" and "John needed to support and care for his family, so began his day at six preparing breakfast, followed by walking his dog, and at seven taking the kids to school, so by eight he could open his store."

**A what-if story.** In this kind of before-and-after story (also known as a day-in-the-life story), you contrast how life would be for your listener with your solution in place, versus your listener's present situation.

In a what-if story, you don't have any real knowledge of the other person's experience with your solution or recommendation because it hasn't happened yet. You're saying, in effect, "Let me paint a picture of the kind of world you can enjoy with my recommendation in place."

The power of this kind of story derives from how accurately you are able to pinpoint the problems the listener is now experiencing — problems that your solution will solve. They should come away from your story thinking, "This person really gets me and what I need."

## Be a storyteller.

There's nothing that can replace the impact of an effective story. Without a story, people will remember very little tomorrow of what you said today. With a story, they'll not only remember your message, but also care enough to act on it.

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- Executive and Manager Communications

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