

Speak Better Than 99% of People

A Practical Guide to Storytelling

Great storytelling helps people see an idea, feel its significance, and remember it long after you've finished speaking. Before you start, remember one rule.

The story serves the message.

Start by getting clear on your objective:

What do I want my audience to understand, believe or remember?

Then look for a story that will support this objective. A useful test for short business stories is:

One Person. One Moment. One Change.

HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT STORY

Once you're clear on the message, search in two directions.

LOOK INWARD

Think about your own experience and the people around you. A conversation you still remember. A customer who said something unexpected. A project that went sideways. A decision you found difficult. A moment that changed the way you thought.

LOOK OUTWARD

Search beyond your own experience: your industry, another company, business, history, sport, science or popular culture. Where can you see your message playing out somewhere else?

7 TECHNIQUES TO TELL GREAT STORIES

1 CREATE CURIOSITY

An unanswered question, a piece of information you deliberately hold back, or an unusual opening creates a reason to keep listening. Don't reveal everything immediately.

INSTEAD OF

"I grew up playing darts with my father, so when someone challenged me to a game, I knew I had a good chance of winning."

OPEN WITH SOMETHING THAT MAKES THEM WANT TO KNOW HOW OR WHY

"People have underestimated me my entire life. And for years, I couldn't understand why."

Give people what they need to follow you, but save the payoff until it has earned its moment.

2 CREATE TENSION

Tension comes from uncertainty — there is something your audience now wants resolved.

Will this work?

Will the client say yes?

Were we wrong?

What happens next?

REPORTING

"There was a lot of resistance to the launch."

STORY

"Three weeks before launch, my biggest customer looked across the table at me and said, 'This is never going to work.'"

3 ZOOM INTO A SPECIFIC MOMENT

Weak business stories often stay at helicopter level. A story takes us somewhere.

HELICOPTER LEVEL

"We spent six months developing the product. We faced some challenges. Eventually, we changed our approach."

IN THE MOMENT

"I'm sitting in the meeting when our sales director puts one number on the screen and says, 'I think we've been solving the wrong problem.'"

Start late. Give us only enough context to understand what is happening, then get to the pivotal scene. Use small amounts of:

Dialogue — *"She looked at me and said, 'This will never work here.'"*

Thought — *"I remember thinking, I have absolutely no idea how we're going to fix this by Friday."*

Reaction — *"He closed his laptop and pushed his chair back."*

Selective detail — *"It was 6:30 in the morning when the email arrived."*

4 CHANGE THE PACE

Different parts of a story deserve different amounts of time. Slow down around the moment you want us to experience — use dialogue, thought, reactions and specific details. Then speed up through the information we simply need to know; that's when the helicopter view is fine.

You might spend 30 seconds describing one crucial conversation and then cover the following six months in one sentence. That contrast creates rhythm and keeps the story moving.

5 INTRODUCE SOMETHING UNEXPECTED

Predictability kills attention. A surprising opening, detail, decision or twist makes people mentally re-engage.

In my video breaking down *Ted Lasso's* storytelling mastery (on my YouTube channel), Ted begins a tribute to a beloved dog that died on the pitch by talking about a dog that terrified him as a child. It seems completely unrelated — and makes us think he doesn't like dogs. Then we discover that the dog he once feared eventually became a dog he loved, and the meaning of everything we've already heard changes.

Look for moments where:

- someone responded differently than expected
- your assumption turned out to be wrong
- the obvious solution failed
- something small changed your perspective
- new information changed the meaning of what came before

6 MAKE IT PERSONAL

Stories allow people to see the human being behind the expertise. That matters particularly for leaders. People need to believe you are competent — they also need to feel they can trust and connect with you. A personal story can simply be:

- a conversation you still remember
- a mistake you made
- a moment you changed your mind
- a customer who surprised you
- something you noticed that changed how you lead

Use your experience as a bridge to the audience. The strongest personal stories contain something they can recognise in their own lives, work or decisions.

7 LAND WITH A TAKEAWAY

Never leave people wondering, "*Why did you tell me that?*" A strong ending makes the meaning of the story click into place. Ask:

What did I believe before this happened?

What did I understand afterwards?

Then turn that insight towards your audience.

AVOID

"That was a really important experience for me."

TRY

"That experience taught me that if we wait until an opportunity feels completely safe and obvious, we've probably waited too long."

USE CART TO STRUCTURE YOUR STORY

Once you have found the right story, use CART to shape it.

C

CONTEXT

Give me only what I need to understand the situation. Who? Where? What is happening?

"Three weeks before launch, I'm sitting in a meeting with our biggest customer."

A

ACTION

Take me into the pivotal moment. What was said? What did you think? What changed?

"He closes the presentation, looks across the table and says, 'I don't think our customers will ever use this.'"

R

RESULT

What happened because of that moment? A decision, a result, a failure, an opportunity, a realisation?

"We stopped the launch, went back to customers and discovered we had designed the solution around the wrong problem."

T

TAKEAWAY

Why are you telling me this? What should your audience understand or do differently?

"So when your customer challenges the idea you've spent six months building, don't defend it too quickly. Get curious. They may be showing you the problem you couldn't see."

If you'd like support with this

Storytelling is a skill — and it compounds. If you'd like help applying it across your organisation, I work with senior leaders through two programs:

Speak to Resonate

My six-module flagship program — one-to-one or group — rated 4.95/5 by over 192 leaders at Nestlé, Nespresso, Incyte, Tandem Diabetes Care and more.

shannonjenkins.co/speaktoresonate

The Influential Leader

A premium two-day in-person leadership training in Switzerland, for senior leaders.

shannonjenkins.co/theinfluentialleader

Or write to me directly at hello@shannonjenkins.co

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