

Public speaking tips, techniques, humour, quotes and anecdotes you can use in your next speech or presentation.

For thousands of years before mankind discovered the art of writing, the only effective form of communication was via storytelling. Stories were learned verbatim and passed on from generation to generation as entertainment, education and to instil moral values. Which is why they still have such an effect on us today, and why they can be an incredibly effective way of making a point during a presentation.

Many times, someone will say to me, 'I heard you speak about 4 or 5 years ago. I remember that story you told about the hotel in Sydney.' I've never had anyone say, 'I remember that PowerPoint slide you used with the 3 bullet points.'

Ruth Sawyer said, "It is the easiest thing in the world to tell a story. And the hardest thing is to be a good storyteller."

So here are a few tips to help improve your own storytelling:

1. Always know why you're telling it

'It's a good story' or 'I like it' or 'It always gets a laugh' are not good enough reasons for including a story in a presentation or anecdote. It should only be included if it has relevance to the subject matter being presented and either illustrates a point or creates a feeling or emotion. You are not a raconteur, you're a presenter.

If people were forced to ask themselves why they were telling a story every time they told one, they'd tell a lot less. How many times have you listened to a friend tell you about something that's happened to them, and thought, 'Why on earth are you telling me this? I have no interest in it whatsoever'

2. Know your objective and tell the story with that in mind

Ask yourself, 'What do I want the listeners to feel/think/do at the end of the story?' Once you've answered that question, ask yourself which parts of the story are key to making this happen.

Write the story down, then highlight these key parts. Then 'beef them up.' Add some descriptive words that create visual images (see below). Think what body language you will use as you tell that part.

Pause after any particularly important sentences and look around the audience for a couple of seconds. This effectively underlines what you've just said and tells them it was important.

3. Don't telegraph the story

Don't tell the audience that you are about to tell them a story or anecdote. Don't use phrases like, 'That reminds me of the story about ...' or 'It's a bit like when Winston Churchill was in parliament and' or 'I heard a good story the other day ...'

Just go straight into it. Say 'I was talking to my taxi driver on the way here this morning ...' or 'Last week I was in Dunedin and ...' or 'I was on the phone to a major customer last week ...'

By telegraphing the arrival of the story you alert the audience that a story is on its way, which may provoke the reaction - 'Oh, here's another story. I hope it's a good one and better than his last one.' You should be into the story before anyone realises it IS a story.

This is especially relevant if the story is humorous. By saying, 'I heard a funny story last week ...' Some audience members will mentally challenge you to make them laugh. Avoid the challenge.

4. Understand the difference between a story and an anecdote

An anecdote is a short, true story, usually about a famous figure. The word comes from Greek and is based on their word 'anekdota' meaning unpublished. However, the defining point about an anecdote is that it is about a single event. Maybe a very important event or incident.

On the other hand, a story need not be true, and can be about anyone or anything. It comes from the Latin 'historia' which is 'a record of past events'. A story is a series of events, and therefore tends to be longer and more complex than an anecdote. It should have a plot and multiple characters.

Because anecdotes are short and to the point, they're a great way to open a presentation or speech. For example: "The brilliant scientist Albert Einstein was setting a test for some of his students when his teaching assistant noticed he'd set the same test questions the week before.

"Professor Einstein," he said, "you can't do this. They had these questions last week."

Einstein replied. "This week the answers are different." Sometimes life is like that. In today's rapidly changing Covid world there are no fixed forever answers. The situation is too dynamic!

5. Keep it short and sweet

You only have a set length of time for your presentation and probably have a lot of other material to include, so your story should be long enough to achieve your objective and make your point, and no longer. It is very easy to bore an audience by going on and on about something.

If you write the story down, it is easier to identify redundant words and sentences that can be trimmed without hurting your objective. Remember the slogan: 'KISS' - Keep It Simple, Scribe!

6. Make sure you include some detail

If you're telling a story about something that happened to you, make sure you include some details such as times, dates or places. If you're telling an anecdote about a historical personality, they'll usually believe you. But if the story's about you, they need some evidence that the story is true. While dates and places don't prove anything, they give the illusion of truth. So don't say, 'I was in a McDonald's say, 'I was in the McDonald's in Blenheim... You know, the big one on Main Street. It was mid-afternoon during the school holidays and the place was packed.'

Using names, places, times and dates changes a story from fiction into fact. And if the details are familiar to them in some way (virtually everyone has been in a McDonald's, so they can visualise the scene with ease), it is even more effective.

7. Use words that create vivid imagery

You need to set the scene and bring the story alive by creating vivid images in the audience's brains. Instead of saying 'she looked tired', say 'her face was drawn, her shoulders were slumped; she looked as if she'd just finished a marathon.'

Another technique is to ask the audience to remember or picture something. So instead of saying, 'I was really excited,' you could say, 'Can you remember how excited you felt when you were a little kid and you woke up on Christmas morning and knew Santa had delivered your presents? Well, that's how excited I was.'

Or instead of saying, 'I was on a beautiful Marlborough beach', you could say, 'I want you to picture the most beautiful Marlborough beach you could imagine.' We all have a slightly different picture of a beautiful Marlborough beach, so instead of giving them your version, by doing this you get them to conjure up the one that works for them.

When I speak at conferences about competitive strategy, in order to illustrate a particular point I often tell the story of the Battle of Crecy (1346, part of the Hundred Years' War), when 15,000 Englishmen not only defeated, but annihilated 60,000 Frenchmen. I could just say, 'The English were outnumbered by the French 4:1. But in order to 'set the scene' and underline the hopelessness of the situation for them, I'll say: "I want you to picture this. Over here we have the English army. 15,000 of them, three quarters of whom are peasants. The scum of the earth. They've walked across France for two months and they're exhausted. Their clothes are no more than rags and many of them are barefoot. They're hungry, they're cold and they're soaking wet, because the heavens have just opened and drenched them with a sudden shower. Most of them are rueing the day they ever signed up for this mad adventure.

Now look over here. Because the French army is arriving. There are 60,000 of them. The line of battle stretches for fifteen miles. There are three kings with the army - not only of France, but also of Majorca and Bohemia. There are hundreds of dukes and earls and barons and lords, drawn not only from across France but also from Germany and Italy. There are thousands upon thousands of knights. They're the cream of western chivalry. They're mounted on huge, magnificent war horses which are pawing at the ground, desperate to be allowed to charge, and are dressed in beautifully coloured silk tunics decorated with heraldic beasts and coats of arms to proclaim their rank and status to the world. Their armour is gleaming in the late afternoon sun. What could possibly stand up to this magnificent war machine? They're going to cast these English peasants back across the Channel and teach them a lesson they won't forget for generations.

8. Have people speak in quotes in the first person and the present tense

Instead of 'He said he'd come a long way and was exhausted,' try 'He says: 'I've come a long way. I'm exhausted.' The use of the present tense (i.e. he says not he said) makes the audience feel as if the story is playing out right there and then in front of their eyes (note how I do this in the Crecy story above, e.g. "look over here. Because the French army is arriving". It helps bring your story alive for them.

When recounting a dialogue between two people, use slightly different voices (or accents, if you feel confident enough). Look to the left when one person speaks, then take a step away and look to the right when the other person speaks.