



The Art of Good Storytelling

Storytelling has been used as an important method of communication for thousands of years. In fact, we're hardwired to listen to and remember information communicated this way.

The use of stories in public speaking has a number of advantages. It can help you connect and resonate with your audience, it can ensure your content is interesting and memorable and it can even improve your credibility!

However, there is sometimes a fine line between telling a good story and overwhelming your audience with too much personal narrative or boring them with a bland recital of events.

Therefore, to ensure you are a compelling raconteur, try and keep in mind the following guidelines:

1. Know your message. Try and ensure your story has a point. Remember the expression, 'the moral of the story is'? Ask yourself what the overall message is that you're trying to convey with your story. Once you know that, you'll find your story gains depth and it also helps you trim away any material that may not be relevant. Does your audience

really need to know that you got dressed before you went out?
Probably not.

2. Ease up on the narrative. As humans, we are essentially self-interested. Therefore, when a speaker starts to repeatedly say ‘I did this, I did that, I went here, I saw this, I said that’, the audience will start to glaze over. To counter this, think about your overall message and how you can make your speech relevant to your audience. For example, instead of a speech called ‘How I ran a marathon’ which starts with the line, ‘Last week I ran a marathon...’, you could instead call your speech ‘You’re stronger than you know’ and start with the opening line, ‘Have you ever pushed yourself beyond what you thought you were capable of?’. Note that just by switching from I to you, as a member of the audience this instantly feels more relevant.
3. Engage the audience’s emotions. Emotions are what we all relate to. We love a good film that makes us cry or scares us witless. If you include emotions in your story, you’ll start to connect with your audience. You can do this with the language you use or the events you describe. The expression ‘I was broken’, is much more emotive than ‘it was hard’ and anyone who has ever felt broken will relate to this. However, you can also tap into your audience’s emotions with very simple language; ‘4 million people in the UK are chronically lonely. That means they haven’t spoken to anyone for 3 months. Just imagine for a moment what you were doing 3 months ago and how many people you’ve spoken to since. And then image [long pause], silence instead.’
4. Show don’t tell. ‘A tear trickled down her cheek’ is a much more effective description than, ‘She was crying’. Draw a picture and your audience’s imagination will take over the work and imagine the scene. Be precise. You could say, ‘there were blue flowers’ but ‘there were spikes of Delphiniums’ is much more detailed and descriptive and brings the picture alive.
5. Remember your senses. Think about how a situation smelt, tasted, felt, sounded. ‘It burnt my tongue’ is more vivid than, ‘It was hot’.

6. Think about your structure. As with all speeches, your story needs a beginning, middle and end. But many stories also have 3 additional elements: a hero, a challenge and an outcome. The outcome doesn't have to be a successful one and the hero is not the caped variety. If your story is about when you learned to ride a bike, the hero is you, the challenge is learning to ride, and the outcome is whether you succeeded or failed. The challenge doesn't have to be physical. Maybe you had to make an important decision...that could be the challenge.

7. Keep up the action! Think about the different ways you can excite your audience. Rather than just starting your speech with, 'Last year I decided to run a marathon', what about starting in the middle of the action with 'It was pouring with rain, my legs were burning and my heart was pounding. Ahead still lay 21 km of hard graft'.

8. Remember all your other skills. Use of voice, use of humour, use of gestures. Use all the techniques you have learnt as part of the ASC to enhance your speech. Think of your story as a pencil sketch and your voice, gestures and other skills as the colour!

Everybody has a story. And most people have many. They can be one of your most effective public speaking techniques. Make a list of your stories, think about the moral of your stories and have fun!