

# *Creating and Using Stories in Your Speeches. The Power of Stories*

---

By Patti A. Wood, MA, CSP

Before my mother was married, she worked in a drugstore in Miami Beach during World War II. One night she went out dancing in a hotel ballroom in South Beach. As she was jitterbugging on the dance floor to the big band sound, she looked across the dance floor and saw this cute blond guy. She stopped dancing and said, "Oh my gosh. That's him." My dad was dancing in the same ballroom, looked across the dance floor and saw for the first time this cute blonde girl and he said, "Oh my gosh. That's her." That was on a Wednesday night. On Saturday my father went out and bought a red convertible and an engagement ring. The following Wednesday they got married, and the next day the two of them drove off in that red convertible to Seattle, Washington.

How did that story affect you? Did it capture your attention? Did it bring forth memories of your own? That one paragraph story is at the beginning of one of my keynote speeches on the power of first impressions. I've watched hundreds of audiences hearing that story magically transform from distracted, bored or disinterested audience members into entranced, engaged and entertained listeners.

In this article, we will examine how using stories in your speeches can

- 1) Create a more attentive and interested audience;
- 2) Provide a safe way for you to talk about controversial or sensitive topics;
- 3) Give you a unique opportunity to change minds and behavior;
- 4) Make your message easier to understand and remember;
- 5) Provide a personal connection with your audience;
- 6) Enliven your delivery and energize the audience.

If you think you can't use stories because you are dealing with a business topic or a technical audience, think again. All those political and spiritual leaders who have used storytelling over the centuries can't be wrong. No matter who your audience or what your topic, the power of stories is phenomenal.

1. Stories help create attentive and interested audiences.

I was about to speak to 200 drunk sales representatives. The two-hour open bar and free wine before, during and after dinner had created a crowd as raucous and rowdy as cowboys on payday in a wild-west saloon. The men were whistling, making catcalls, talking and laughing loudly as their national president introduced the president of the international association. As the second man spoke about the direction of their association, the audience members just got louder. In horror, I watched as servers began dispensing dessert wine. If this is how they treat their presidents, how will they treat me, I wondered? As I madly searched my mind for a different opener than the group exercise I had planned, the president began to introduce me. At least I think he was introducing me. The room was so loud at this point that I only saw his lips move before he waved me up on the stage.

I stood silently up on stage—all 5 feet and 101 pounds of me—and didn't move. I was absolutely still and then I began the story of how my parents met. I asked for a show of hands for who had parents

who had lived through World War II. I asked them if they had sweeties whom they instantly knew were “the ones.” The audience got quieter and began to listen. I used body language, voice inflections and gestures in my story. And the power of storytelling worked once again. I managed to gain the attention of what seemed an impossibly distracted audience.

Stories capture us by focusing our attention on something new. If we go to work and see the same old thing every day, and then one day we suddenly see a rose on the reception desk, our attention will be grabbed by the rose. It’s something new, different. Our roving hunter ancestors had to constantly scan their environment for the new in order to survive and thrive. If a primitive hunter found tiger droppings in his environment, he knew it was time for a change of scenery. If she noticed new berries, she might have discovered a food source.

Your audience members are also subconsciously scanning for the new and different in order to focus their attention. If everyone in your meeting begins their presentation with “Good morning” or “Good afternoon” and you do the same thing, you will not create something new to capture the audience’s attention. However, a story immediately alerts the audience that they are going to hear something new and different. They will stop thinking about their voice mail and e-mail messages piling up. They won’t hear the whine of the room’s air conditioner. Instead, it’s as if they enter a trance—they become “entranced” – entering your world and the new world you are creating through story. This is not the spooky “you are getting sleepy” trance we associate with bad black and white horror movies, but a scientifically verifiable altered state: “A period of concentration when a person is aware of the vividness of inner mental and sensory experience, and therefore external stimuli such as sounds and movements assume lesser importance.” (Erickson and Rossi, Hypnotherapy)

Stories invite your audience to use all of their emotions and senses. This creates a level of attention and involvement that a data dump of facts and figures can never maintain.

2. Stories provide a safe way to talk about controversial or sensitive topics.

A speaker was relating the story from the book “Who Moved My Cheese” by Spencer Johnson. In it the mice have great difficulty changing their path through the maze even when the end of the old path has no cheese. The audience laughed as the mice complained about the “company moving their cheese” and listened as a mouse became discouraged and bitter. The audience was able to hear about the faults of the mice as observers and then move into a place where they could identify with certain characteristics of the mice and eventually laugh at themselves.

If instead of telling this story, the speaker had said, “You’re not changing fast enough. You’re being stubborn and stupid. Try something new,” the audience would have closed up as tight as a child’s mouth to a spoonful of castor oil. Stories offer characters who aren’t us, but who are like us in many ways. They give us distance on the situation and yet simultaneously offer us the opportunity to examine that situation.

3. Stories give you a unique power to change minds and behavior.

In one of my favorite books, “The Care of the Soul,” Thomas More suggests, “There are four pathways for inner expedition: silence, song, dance and storytelling.” Sometimes you need to position your audience to be willing to take that inner expedition. As More notes, storytelling can be an effective way to get them in that position.

The reason for this is that stories rich in sensory detail and symbolic content are processed in the creative right hemisphere of the brain. If they linger there without interpretation by the logical and judgmental left hemisphere, they can reach deep within us and allow us to see the world and to see ourselves from a new perspective. This enables us to accept change.

4. Stories connect you to your audience on a personal level.

When we reach deep down into our psyche to find a story and share it, we allow the audience to also reach down into their psyches. The journey we take together bonds us. We share stories in the same primal and communal way that we share a good meal. Time slows down as we linger over a beautiful image or as we slowly taste the details. We laugh at a hearty piece of humor. Together we slowly digest the potent message.

When I tell the story about my parents meeting on the dance floor, audiences tell me they think about their spouses, their own parents and their childhood sweethearts. They connect their lives to the story, thus linking their lives to mine. We form a relationship in 60 seconds. When I mention that when I was a teenager my mother said she and my father never had premarital sex and my response was "... anyone could wait a week, the audience shares in the laughter and the bond is strengthened.

Stories we gather from our families, our co-workers and our customers, stories of success about products and services don't simply transfer facts. They transform audiences with the sharing of universal experiences. We sit around the primordial campfire and say, that was good.

5. Stories make your message easier to understand and remember.

Stories are often rich in sensory information with their sights, sounds, smells, tastes and emotions. All these sensory details engage the right hemisphere where the strongest links to memory reside. Think about your favorite childhood meal. Immediately you can conjure up the details of the kitchen where you sat as a child, the mother or father who cooked the meal or the happiness you felt, knowing you were getting something good to eat. The sensory details in a story enable your listeners to "embody" your message.

In college I had a teacher who gave wonderfully organized lectures, loaded with facts and logically presented material, but I don't remember any of the information. I do remember almost every lecture my mythology professor gave. He told us stories of heroes and villains, of fires and flood, of love and death. These stories engaged our emotions, not just our intellects. No statistic or pie chart will linger in the memory the way the story of Adam and Eve will.

6. Stories will enliven your delivery and energize the audience.

Your whole body can get involved in storytelling--your voice, your physical movements, your gestures and facial expressions. This enlivens your body language and makes your voice more dramatic. These visual movements and auditory enhancements energize your audience, and because nonverbal cues are processed in the right hemisphere, they have more power to persuade your audience. Your audience will respond to your presentation on a visceral level and will associate your speech with a positive feeling.