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To find your own compelling stories, think about events in your life that had an impact on you or that involved some degree of conflict and learning. They don't have to be big, dramatic stories.

The Art of Storytelling

The key to memorable presentations

| By Jean Hamilton

“There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories.” —Ursula K. Le Guin, science fiction writer

Last September, Dr. Glen Stream stood before the governing body of the American Academy of Family Physicians, gathered in Denver for the national organization’s annual meeting, and delivered a campaign speech outlining why the members should vote him president-elect. After communicating a number of his goals, Stream—a Spokane, Washington-based family physician—concluded his speech with a story about one of his patients, a young woman who was preparing to go off to college.

“What do you plan to study?” Stream asked the woman, whom he had treated for much of her life.

“I want to study medicine and become a family doctor,” she said.

Stream told her that he was thrilled but surprised. “What inspired you to decide to be a family physician?”

“You did,” she answered. “I’ve seen how much you care about my family, and I want to help people the way you help people.”

This had been an emotional moment for Stream—one of those rare instances when he was given a glimpse of how he impacts other people’s lives. In his campaign speech, he could have simply said, “My patients respect me.” But by telling this personal story, he brought that message to life and with more depth. The story also resonated with the other doctors in the room by tapping into their

sense of pride in their profession. Stream won the president-elect post.

If there is one thing that all great presenters share, it is the ability to tell authentic stories. When you share a story with an audience, you open up their minds, their imaginations and their hearts—and as a result, the audience becomes more receptive to your message. This is the power of stories.

As a speech coach, one of the main things I work on is helping people—including Stream, whom I had the privilege of coaching on his campaign speech—develop and deliver their own unique stories. If you want to be a great presenter, be an effective leader or even just feel comfortable at a party, it is important to learn the craft of storytelling.

From prehistoric times to the present, from Africa to Asia to North America, humans have shared and told stories. Perhaps this is because our brains are hardwired to remember stories better than we retain

Telling an engaging and relevant story can be an effective tool for connecting with your audience and making them receptive to your message.



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facts. When we hear a story, we make connections to our own lives and our own stories. By becoming emotionally invested in the story, we become actively engaged. If you want your audience to remember your speech and take action, tell stories.

But not just any story will do. First, consider whether a story is relevant to your topic. You can cull stories from an earlier time in your life, but they should shed light on your subject, as Stream's anecdote did by illustrating his character as a physician. For instance, a speech about the importance of discipline could include a story about being on a sports team or in a band, or about learning to drive. Using such a story has an added bonus: Learning struggles can often be funny in retrospect.

In addition, most good stories contain conflict. If there is no challenge to overcome, the story will likely be boring. In his influential work on comparative mythology, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell wrote that compelling stories follow a common structure: The main character has a call to adventure, experiences adversity, learns from that challenge, and returns from the experience a wiser, more complete person.

Conflict comes in many forms. It could be a time you were scared or embarrassed, or it could be a time you made a difficult decision. For example, when my son Jesse was 13 years old, he saw a fellow student trying to sell a Taser on the school bus. Jesse told the bus driver, who didn't do anything. Jesse then wrote about the incident at school, hoping to get the attention of someone in a position of authority.

"I just wanted him to get rid of the Taser," Jesse explained. Yet Jesse felt horrible when he learned the student was to be expelled, because he thought the school had overreacted.

On the bus the following day, my son overheard the student calling out another kid as the tattletale. As Jesse exited the bus, he said, "No, it wasn't him."

"How do you know?"

"It was me," my son replied.

Though some of his fellow students were upset with him, Jesse was glad he told the truth because he didn't want someone else to get blamed for tattling.

Jesse's story features conflict, as well as themes of courage and consequences. I could use it in a speech about the challenges of taking responsibility, which would be far more effective than speaking theoretically about the subject.

To find your own compelling stories, think about events in your life that had an impact on you or that involved some degree of conflict and learning. They don't have to be big, dramatic stories—pay attention to the small moments, as well. Sometimes a short conversation can make great story material. Begin to notice the times when someone says something that makes you say "Ah" or "Really?" or makes you laugh aloud.

Fables and tales are also a rich source, since they often portray universal struggles. I recently told *The Emperor's New Clothes*, because its themes

The use of slight dramatic nuances, such as a pause or a gesture, can convey character and make your story come to life.



Your delivery is also crucial. Above all else, be present. Set up your story succinctly—who, what, when, where—and then immediately jump into the action.

of fear, pride, conformity and honesty are timeless. A story about a customer using your product or service is also a valuable tool for enhancing your company's credibility. A mixture of these different forms of stories can serve a speaker well.

Once you've decided on your tale, the best way to remember it is to discover what Seattle-based communication and storytelling trainer Lindagail Campbell (no relation to Joseph) calls "the bones" of your story. What are the key aspects that hold it together? Once you write these down, your story will have a clear structure and will be easier to recall, without you having to memorize each word. Writing down the bones is also a useful tool for keeping your story fresh and authentic.



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Your delivery is also crucial. Above all else, be present. Set up your story succinctly—who, what, when, where—and then immediately jump into the action. Many people make the mistake of thinking they need to tell everything that happened, and in the exact order. But not all life details are interesting, so just stick to the highlights.

Specific experiences have far more impact than generalities. I worked with Ted Sturdevant, director of the Washington State Department of Ecology, to help him get ready to testify before Congress about the dangers of chemicals such as nonylphenol. In one of our coaching sessions, he listed a large number of problems related to this toxic chemical. The data was interesting, but what captured me was when he said, “For years I’ve

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When your audience sees
you having fun, they begin
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worked on reducing the use of nonylphenol. One day I was in the middle of shaving, with shaving cream slathered all over my face, when I stopped and looked at the ingredients on the can. Sure enough, I read ‘nonylphenol.’”

Hearing this story underscored, for me, the frightening prevalence of the chemical. I encouraged him to use this example and to bring a personal touch to his presentation. As a result, members of Congress told him that they found his testimony refreshing and engaging.

Another way to make a story memorable is to say less and show more. For example, a pause can speak volumes: It can create humor, and it can leave room for a big “aha” moment. Pauses give space for your audience to connect with you and your story.

Another easy way to liven up your story is to use dialogue. Instead of stating that a character said something, become that character, and say it as he or she

Never, ever, keep a lady waiting.



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COURTESY: GLEN STREAM

Dr. Glen Stream utilized a heartfelt story, as well as humor, in his campaign speech for president-elect of the American Academy of Family Physicians. He concluded with the line, “The future is so bright, I gotta wear shades.”

would. Take on that character’s posture. Where does he hold tension? Does she talk high in her throat or low in her belly? Does he speak quickly or slowly? Does she move gracefully or awkwardly? Does he take up a lot of space, or keep his gestures confined? Think of nonverbally showing the essence of each character’s personality by incorporating details such as sounds, color and tension.

Envision your story as you say it—when you see it, the audience sees it. If you are reluctant to be dramatic, consider that even slight nuances conveying character can have a big impact. A small change in your voice or a shift in your weight can make your story “pop.” If you are unfamiliar with how to do all of this, a good presentation coach can give you guidance in just a few sessions.

Don’t be afraid to play. When your audience sees you having fun, they begin to have fun as well. People are more receptive to learning right after they laugh. A well-told story will make your presentation soar, so it’s worth investing your time and energy to develop and fine-tune your stories. If you have been asked to speak or give a presentation, bring your ideas, your sense of humor and, most of all, your stories. **m**

Jean Hamilton, CEO of Speaking Results, is a coach and trainer on presentation skills.



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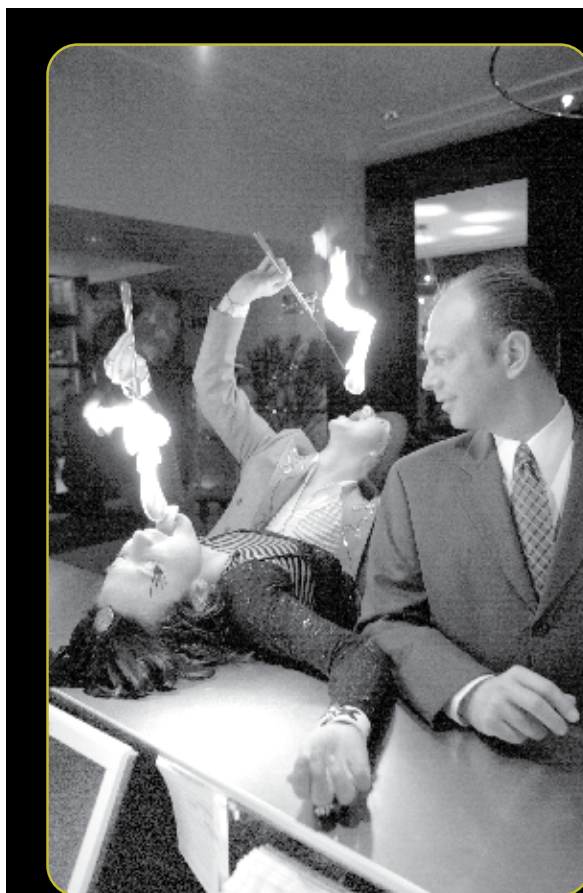
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