

Touch Your Audience with Stories

Listeners will remember the drama and the humor, and chances are good they'll remember your point as well.

It was stormy and almost midnight. On an isolated country road in Missouri, my truck plowed into a section of flash flooding. Water shot up on the right and left and over the hood. The engine died. And it wouldn't start. All I could see was water in every direction and tree branches floating in front of the truck. There would be no traffic until sunrise...

This is a true story. It happened to me. It has become an eight-minute vignette with lessons learned and several laugh lines along the way.

Stories grab your audience. Listeners will remember the drama and the humor, and chances are good they'll remember your point as well.

But what comes first—the story or the point? Personally, I never start with a point and then look for a story or joke to fit it. I used to do that, but I've found that it works better to find the story first and then discover the natural points that flow from it. A good story will usually make at least two or three insightful points. And with a good arsenal of stories, you'll be able to support almost any point you want to make.

You can come up with great stories just by being alert to everyday events. I recommend zeroing in on the following five areas when looking for story material:

1. **Look for difficult and traumatic events.** Obviously, these events aren't funny when they happen, but sometimes an event will generate a thought like "Someday I'll laugh at this." I wasn't laughing the night I was stranded in the flood waters! But after the ordeal is over, I look for the humorous twists. The process of always being on the lookout for stories often becomes a helpful coping device. When a challenge hits you, you might think, "What a speech this will make!"
2. Focus on **lessons learned and personal growth** that resulted from tough times. These provide story material you can use to teach others. I learned several life lessons from the death of my marketing director's grandson. I now share those lessons with my audience.
3. Key in on **funny circumstances.** Returning from a family trip to Orlando, we unloaded all the bags from the car trunk onto a dolly at the airport. The leverage point made the handle of the dolly too low for me to pull comfortably, but it was just right for my mother. As we walked through the terminal, a funny picture hit me as I realized how this must look to other people. My mom was in the center, flanked by me (6'3") and Michael (6'4"). And my mom (5'3" and 70 years old) was pulling all the luggage! When I shared this view with mom and Michael, we stood in the crowded terminal laughing uncontrollably.
4. Focus on **funny things** said by you or someone else. My dad has a dry and subtle sense of humor. In a slow-moving supermarket line, he turned to the woman behind him and said, "I hate these fast moving lines. They stir up so

much dust!" That's Norwegian humor, and it provided the seed for one of my presentations on humor.

5. And then there are **embarrassing moments**. What a gold mine for stories. Fellow humorist, Patsy Dooley, tells us about her first helicopter ride, discovering a weigh-in was required. "Nobody told me about a weigh-in. Weigh-ins are not my favorite adventure!" This event gave her a hilarious 10 minute signature story that has audiences rolling with laughter.

As daily events happen and you're on the lookout for stories, you'll spot potential gems you could use. You need to save the story ideas. Write them down. Or if you're driving, put them on tape or on a digital voice recorder. You may have power steering and power brakes. A micro-recorder is your power memory!

ADDING IMPACT TO YOUR STORY

Later, spend some time developing each story. Tear it in small segments and look for unusual and humorous twists. What are the funny perspectives? What could be learned from this situation? Reflect on the story just before you drop off to sleep and again right after you wake up—creative ideas tend to pop into your head during those times.

Then shape your observations and thoughts into a five-to-seven minute speech vignette. Dress it up with a colorful description. Paint a picture. As much as possible, don't just *tell* them, use your skills to *show* them with descriptive body language to illustrate the story and paint a picture into your listeners' minds. Use photos or props.

And use vocal variety to show your passion and sustain interest. Would an accent add color? Your vocal qualities can help you develop and define characters within your story.

When you deliver the story, and especially when you drive your point home, hold the eye contact for a few extra seconds to land the point.

To add power to your speaking, get into the habit of focusing on events around you. Collect your own personal tales and shape them into powerful signature stories that will touch the hearts and memories of your audience.

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