

# Storytelling Principles and Exercises

*These storytelling ideas are adapted from Bobette Buster's book "Do Story: How to tell your story so the world listens." Use these principles and exercises to get students thinking about the personal side of storytelling. This will help them identify what matters to them and by extension what story they want to tell. For example, a student with a passion for skiing may discover that it is through the lens of skiing that they care deeply about Colorado's climate. Students can also use this information to ask better interview questions and get more relatable, personal information from the subjects of their films. For example, instead of asking a climate scientist what they study, a student might learn from these exercises to ask the scientist a question that reveals the story behind the story, like what drew them to their profession or what moment did they know they wanted to be a climate scientist.*

## Ten Principles of Storytelling

- 1** Tell your story as if you're telling it to a friend: this applies no matter where you are or who your audience is.
- 2** Set the GPS: give the place, time, setting, and any relevant context. Keep it factual, short, and sweet.
- 3** Action! Use active verbs or, as I like to say, "Think Hemingway:" spice up your verb choices but keep them succinct. Invest in a thesaurus (or a free app). Avoid multisyllabic, erudite, four-dollar words, over-intellectualising, philosophising, qualifying. See how many I just used? It's boring to keep reading them, isn't it?
- 4** Juxtapose: take two ideas, images, or thoughts and place them together. Let them collide. Remember German philosopher, Friedrich Hegel, here: that in posing two opposing ideas, a whole new idea is created (thesis + antithesis = synthesis). This tool wakes up your audience, and is the root of all successful stories.
- 5** Gleaming detail: choose one ordinary moment or object that becomes a gleaming detail. Something that best captures and embodies the essence of the story. Make the ordinary extraordinary.
- 6** "Hand over the Spark:" reflect on the experience or idea that originally captivated you and simply hand it to your audience as if it were aflame. Carry the fire.
- 7** Be vulnerable: dare to share the emotion of your story. Be unafraid to ask your audience what you questioned along the way so they share your doubt, confusion, anger, sorrow, insight, glee, delight, joy, or epiphany.
- 8** Tune in to your sense memory: choose the strongest of the five senses in your story and use it to make a deeper connection with your audience. There is always one primary sense that dominates every memory.

**9** Bring yourself: a story is as much about you as anything else.

**10** Let go: hand over your story, let it build to its natural, emotional punchline, then end it and get out fast. Leave the audience wanting more. Less is more.

## Storytelling Exercises

### Exercise 1

**Tell us something about yourself we wouldn't otherwise know.**

Remember: humility and humor go a long, long way. Yes, you're the center of attention, but you have to forget about that. Surrender your ego. This is a great gesture on your part: to reveal yourself to others, in a way that explains who you are, and yet also gives them an insider's understanding of a world they would otherwise never know.

### Exercise 2

**Try and recall a favorite childhood story.**

Something the family always told about you, or you told about yourself.

### Exercise 3

**Tell us about an antagonist or "force of nature" person in your life.**

They could be a teacher, mentor, coach, clergyman, boss, family friend, some older influence in your life--for good or bad.

### Exercise 4

**Tell us about the first time your heart was broken.**

It could be when you were 5, 15, 25, or last week. Try to make this humorous. What absurd or crazy thing did you do? The key thing here is to describe the person briefly. Share something great about the person however small it may seem (remember, the more ordinary the detail, the more universal it will become); then describe the break-up or the moment your heart was broken. Again, describe the ordinary moment, recall the sense memory that intensified for you at that moment. There's always one. Then, describe the action you took to heal, recover, or move on. Expand that moment--give us the action reveal. Avoid saying, "and then I realised..." or "later...". Take us into the vulnerable place. We all have been there. We want to go into that place with you--again. But the takeaway should be how you were changed by this, or rose above it. *Modification for younger students: instead of heartbreak, have students share a disappointing or embarrassing moment (during sports, band, etc.).*

## **Exercise 5**

### **How were you affected by a seminal cultural or sporting event?**

Something like the Olympics, a Royal Wedding, Live Aid, or your team winning the World Cup.

## **Exercise 6**

### **Share a “Cusp of an Era” event.**

It could be graduation from college or a wedding (yours or a significant other), when you left home, or the day you became a mother or father. *Modification for younger students: share what it was like moving from elementary to middle school, or middle to high school.*

## **Exercise 7**

### **Tell us about a powerful, major event that many of us shared.**

Where were you and what were you doing when Princess Diana died, when Kurt Cobain committed suicide, or the day of the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers, for example?

## **Exercise 8**

### **Can you recall a small event that moved you or changed you?**

This could be anything: the YouTube clip of a deaf girl hearing for the first time; the photo of the NYC cop buying shoes and socks for a homeless man with bare feet in terribly cold weather; or something much more personal like witnessing an elderly family member fight impending Alzheimer's.

## **Exercise 9**

### **Sell us on an idea of yours, or a cause that you really care about.**

The key here is not to finger-wag, rant, or preach, or take a self-righteous or snide tone. Rather:

Share your idea as a possibility to consider.

Come up with a gleaming detail, an image.

“Hand over the spark--” relay a small scenario that explains your passion.

Most importantly, how has this changed you? Why do you care so much?

## **Exercise 10**

### **What is a passion of yours and why?**

Be specific. For example, why do you love movies, or surfing, rock-climbing, watching football/golf/tennis, baking bread, or gardening? Ask yourself the following questions:

What is it that you love?

What is it about you that you are revealing?

When did you first “fall in love” with this passion?

What specifically captured your attention or altered your life course forever?

How has this passion changed your life?

# A Few Things to Remember

- In the words of Lionel Logue in the *The King's Speech*, "say it to me, as a friend."
- Be short, be concise. Try not to take more than five to seven minutes for each exercise.
- Never play the victim. Always reveal an action you took or reveal how you changed later upon reflection.
- Be specific. Choose visual examples.
- Remember the five senses and try to evoke one sense memory specific to each story.
- Make sure your story has a beginning, middle, and end.
- Make sure your story has a theme and gleaming detail(s).
- Leave your audience wanting more.
- And remember, be kind. Tell your stories with a smile. Share your passion. Carry the fire.