

# How to Tell a Story

Whether you're telling a joke, telling a fairy tale, or trying to persuade someone with a little empirical evidence, telling a story well is an important skill. While it comes naturally to some, for others this skill is a learned one....

Part 1 of 3:

## Mastering Storytelling Fundamentals

1.



**Engage your audience.** Start your storytelling by interacting with your audience or doing something to grab their attention. Ask them a question, even if it's just rhetorical, that relates to the conclusion, twist, or context for the story you're going to tell. Alternatively you can make a grabbing statement that catches their attention (setting your hook, the equivalent of a click-bait headline). This forces their attention to focus on the idea of your story and makes them want to hear more.<sup>[1]</sup>

1. Fairy tale example: "Have you ever wondered why the moth chases the flame?"
2. Funny story example: "I have the college roommate story to end all college roommate stories. Let's just say it involves a toilet."

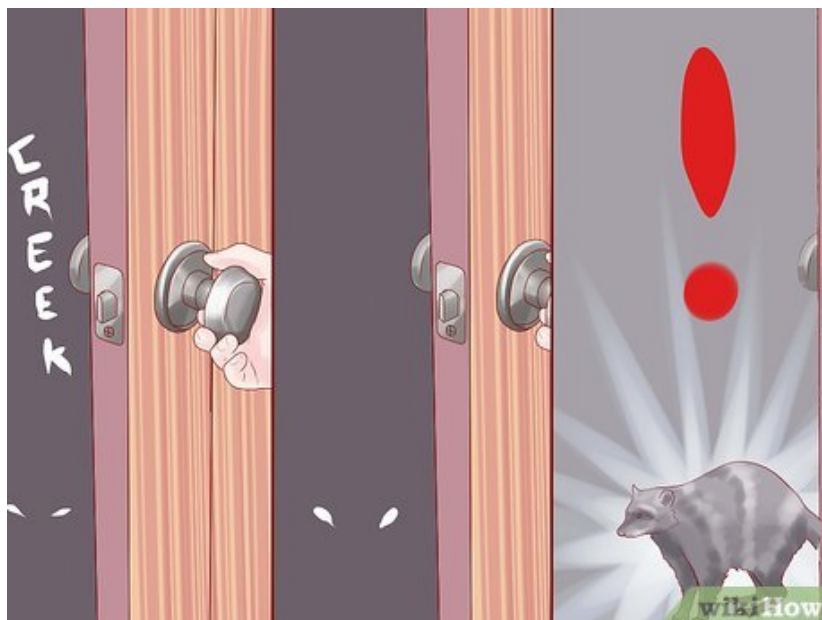
2.



**Build the scene.** Throughout your storytelling, you want to create an immersive experience. You want to tell your audience the story in a way that makes them feel like they're there. Start by giving them context when you start your story. Continue to create the scene by using details which help them picture the action and feel the things you felt. You'll also want to carefully tailor your language: use words which create very strong, very specific emotions.<sup>[2]</sup>

1. Fairy tale example: "Once upon a time, when the world was old and magic still lived and beasts still spoke..."
2. Funny story example: "I'm sort of the quiet, owns-multiple-cats type, right? But my roommate was very much the what's-a-liver partier."

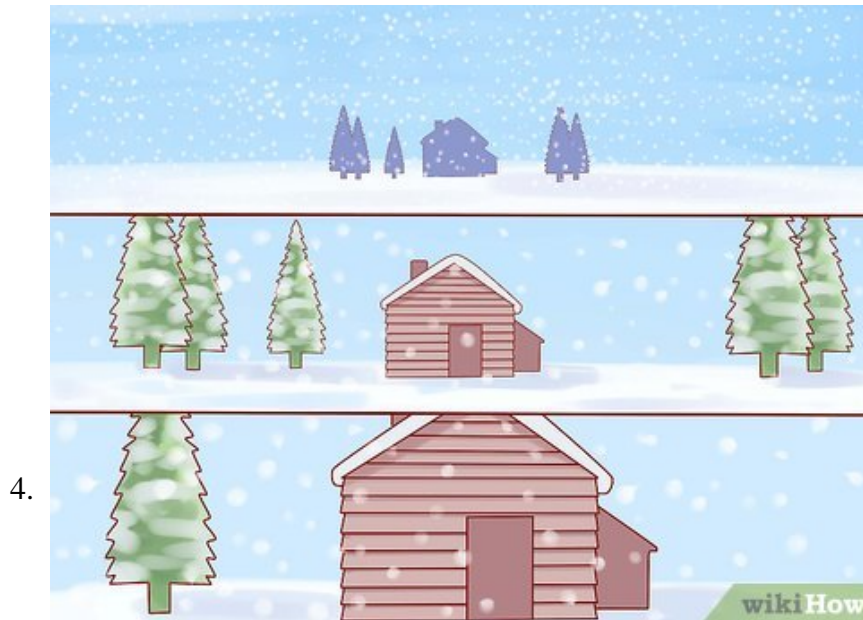
3.



**Build tension and release tension.** Of course, the entire arc of a story should be building tension and releasing tension, until the climactic point in the story and the falling action of the conclusion. But what you need to remember is that a release of tension should come between the tension points. Without this

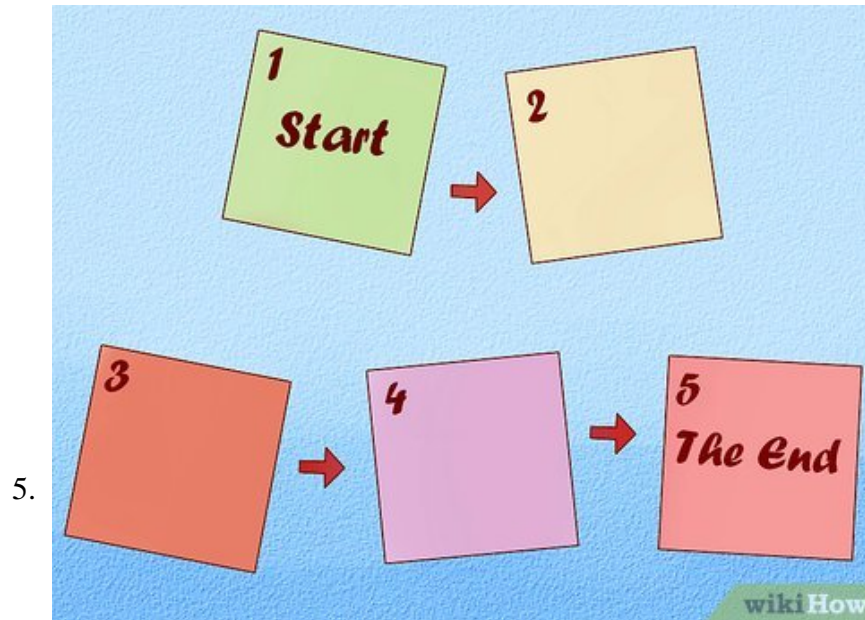
release of tension, a story can feel rushed or too list-like. Real life includes moments between the things that happen to us. Stories should too. This release can be a description of the scene, and quick filling in of semi-relevant details, or a joke if the story is meant to be a bit funny.<sup>[3]</sup>

1. Fairytale example: "Moth approached the tall, white pillar and there was Flame, burning in her glory. Moth felt hooked somewhere around his stomach and the tug of love set in. *Of course, heroes do not rescue their princesses in the same day, and Moth spent many splendid moonlit nights falling deeper in love with Flame.*"
2. Funny story example: "It was a new year and so we moved into this new neighborhood that was nice and...stabby. So...I'm pretty much set to DEFCON 1 at all times. *Good for the blood pressure, you know.*"



**Focus on what's important.** When telling a story, it is important to include details, to create that sense of immersion. However, you don't want the story to take on a "rambling" feel. This is why it's very important to focus on what's important. Cut the details that aren't important for the story, leave the ones that make the story.<sup>[4]</sup>

1. As time allows, keep the details that go the furthest to create proper pacing or set the scene, but adjust as necessary to meet the reactions of your audience. If they start to seem bored, speed it up and pare down to the necessities.



**Keep the flow logical.** This is where knowing your story and practicing become important. You know that person that tells a story and they get partway in and then they're like, "Oh, I forgot to mention..."? Yeah, don't be that guy. Don't stop to back up. This breaks the listener's experience of the story. Tell the story in a way that is logical and flows smoothly.

1. If you do forget a detail, weave it back in without breaking the experience of the story. For example: "Now, the Pied Piper wasn't just after the town's money for no reason. You see, they'd gone back on a deal they'd made with him."



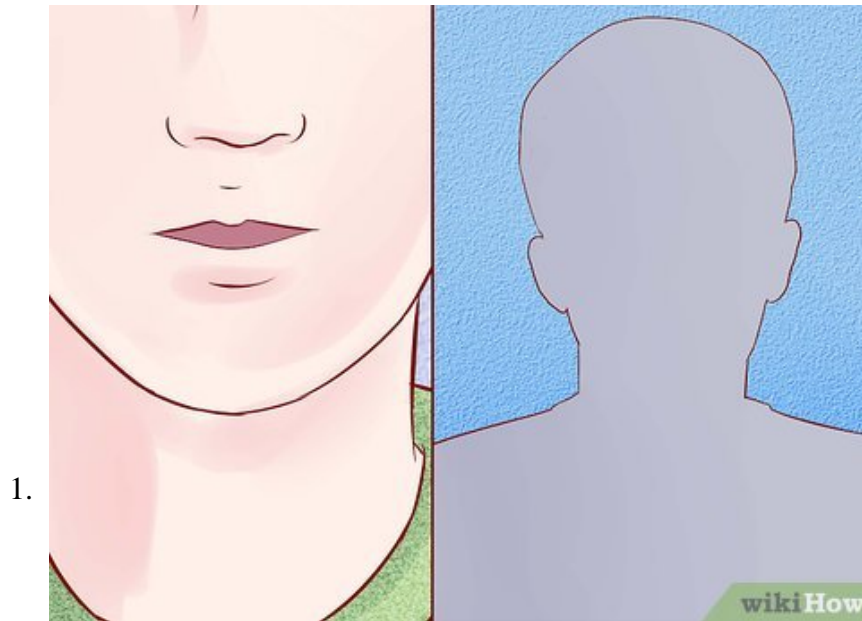
**Make it feel conclusive.** It's awkward when an audience isn't sure if you're done or not so make the conclusion of your story feel conclusive. There are a number of ways to do this, some examples of which are:

1. Ask a question and give an answer. "How crazy is that? I know I'm sure not going to try that again."

2. State the moral. "This, ladies and gentlemen, is an excellent example of why you should never take your cat to work."
3. Use tone and voice carefully. Try generally building in volume and speed until the climax of the story, at which point you should slow back down and lower your voice to show you are done.

Part 2 of 3:

## Using Your Voice and Body



**Create character.** Make the different people in the story feel different. If you "act" them differently, then you can skip the annoying "blank said" parts of the story. You can also make the story feel more immersive. Play with accents, speech patterns, and voices for different people in the story. You can add great comedic value by being silly or stereotyping with the voices.<sup>[5]</sup>

1. For example, characterize your father's voice with an overly deep, gruff sound and add in occasional extras to the dialogue like "[Relevant part of the story.] Also, I am going out to the garage to build a deck. Or part of a deck. Maybe I will just watch a television series where they build a deck."

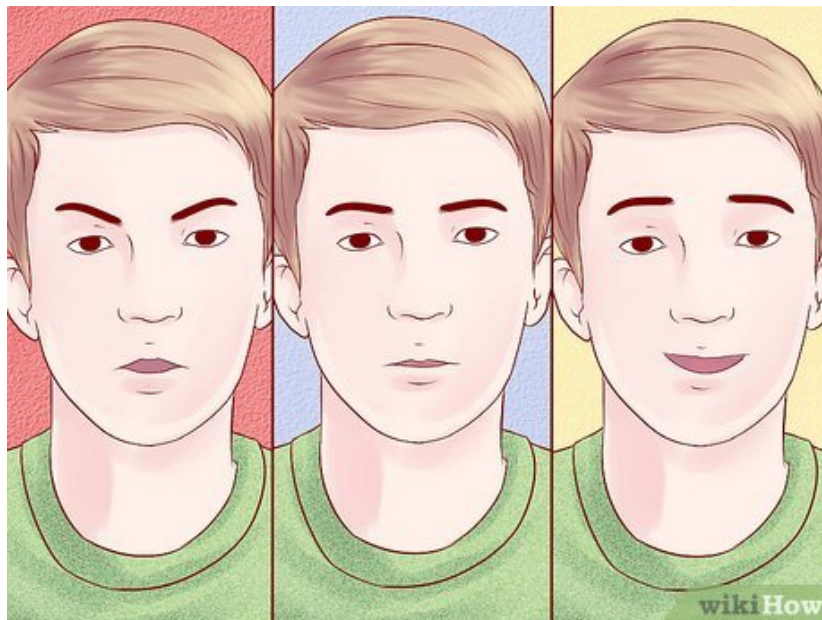
2.



**Make your storytelling "big" or "small".** Match the way your voice sounds to how you want the story to feel at that point. Change your pitch, tone, and volume to make stories seem calm or exciting, depending on where you are in the story. Accelerate your speed and slightly increase volume as you build toward the conclusion. Slow down when you say the conclusion.

1. You should also experiment with dramatic pauses. A moment of silence and a look can add a lot to someone's experience of a story.

3.



**Control your face.** If you want to really become a great storyteller, you have to master your ability to create and change facial expressions to match what you're saying. Your face should be able to basically act out the entire story. If you really want to learn from the master, watch a lot of Youtube videos of John Stewart or Martin Freeman.

1. Remember, facial expressions come in more than 3 flavors. You can convey really complex emotions by using very specific facial expressions.

4.



**Talk with your hands.** Talking with your hands can make you go from seeming like a really stiff, boring story teller to someone who commands the room with a story. Hands convey emotions. Hands keep our audience focused. Hands create a feeling of action. If you don't use your body in any other way, at least start talking with your hands when you tell a story.

1. Of course, you do not want to go over the top. Do not hit anyone in the face or knock over your drink. Or knock your drink into your face.

5.



**Act out the story.** If you can, move your whole body to act out the story. You don't have to reenact every motion, but use your body at key points in the story to direct the listener's attention to that point. You can also use this to great comedic effect, of course.

1. Some stock gestures, such as the Groucho Marx eyebrow lift or the Rodney Dangerfield collar tug, can add extra silliness to a story (Conan O'Brien and Robin Williams frequently used stock gestures).

## Improving Your Storytelling

1.



**Practice.** Practice telling a story a few times before you tell it to other people. Then practice the story with a few people that don't matter much before telling it to anyone important. You want to be comfortable telling the story and get a good feel for when to add in dramatic pauses, and when to engage that big, building tone of excitement.

2.



**Memorize your story.** Make sure you know the story backwards and forwards and then *focus* when you're telling it. This is to help keep you from missing details that are important. It also helps keep the story consistent across tellings, which is important if someone is likely to hear the story more than once.<sup>[6]</sup>

3.



**Be authentic.** Don't turn your stories into "fish stories". You know the ones: where each time you tell it it gets more dramatic and more epic, and the details change to become more mythic and characters become less and less real. Listeners tune out when they hear you tell a story like this. Reel that fish back in and keep your story feeling authentic if you want people to enjoy it.

4.



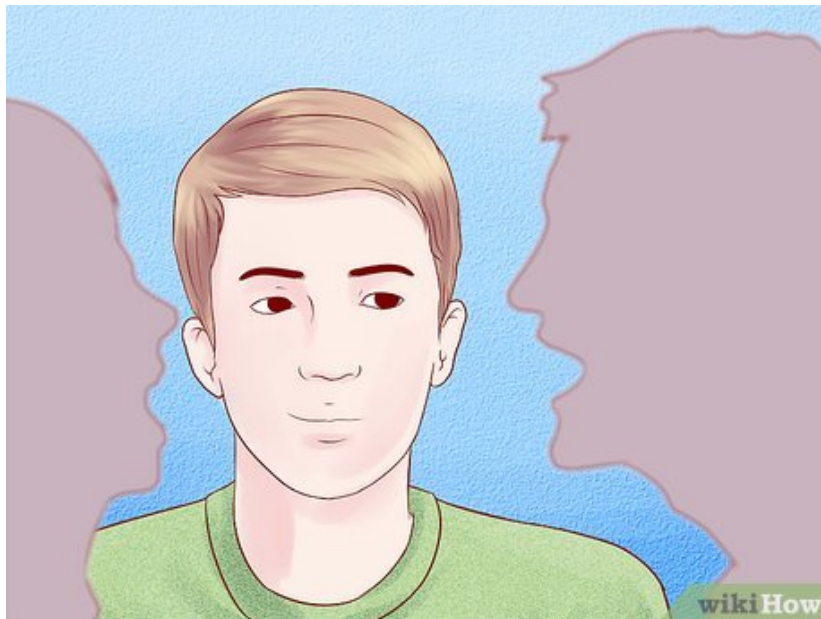
**Control the environment.** You want to tell your story and a good place and time if you can. Even the best story can be ruined if you have to stop constantly because of distractions. Make sure the environment isn't too distracting or noisy. If someone tries to steal the focus of attention, direct it right back to you.

5.



**Allow for interaction.** A listener's experience of a story gets even better if they are able to interact and join in the experience. You can ask your audience questions or find other ways for them to interact with the story, if you really want to step up your storytelling.

6.



**Respond to your audience.** The most important skill to work on is being able to respond to your audience. If they start to get bored, wrap or step it up. If they're really enjoying a particular part, build on that. If they're laughing, give them room to laugh. It's tricky, but telling your story around the experience of your audience will make you a storyteller that no one will soon forget.

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