

THE ART OF THE TALE



Engage Your Audience, Elevate Your Organization,
and Share Your Message Through Storytelling



STEVEN JAMES
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Two Secrets to Improving Your Storytelling Delivery

Secret #1 – Recite less, respond more.

My high school basketball coach had a saying: “Practice doesn’t make perfect, it makes permanent.” The same is true for storytelling. Practicing stories is important—no doubt about that. But practicing a story doesn’t necessarily improve the way you’ll tell it.

It may improve how well you remember that story. It’ll probably impress upon your mind and body one way of moving or acting or speaking. But if you practice your story over and over the same way in front of a mirror, it doesn’t mean it’ll become “perfect.” It’s just much more likely that you’ll learn to tell it that way. Every time. Forever.

So, use practice time to develop proficiency at storytelling skills. Tell the story in a variety of settings to a variety of audiences in a variety of ways. Become so familiar with the story that when it’s time to deliver it you’ll be able to tell the most natural, appropriate, genuine version of your story on that day. You’ll know the story, not one version of it.

Effective storytellers strive to respond to the audience rather than recite their story. To shape their stories, they react to the ongoing feedback of the listeners. They tell a story differently in front of a bathroom mirror than in front of a live audience. If a storyteller practices in front of a mirror, it shouldn’t be to perfect the story, but simply to become aware of what the listeners see during the story.

The best communicators combine diligent preparation with a warm sense of spontaneity. Think of the most effective speakers you’ve ever heard. Maybe they were comedians. Maybe authors or actors or pastors or professors. What made them so good? I’ll bet one of the reasons was the connection they established. You didn’t feel like the whole speech was canned, but was being told personally to you.

The delivery of your story is based on four factors: the story, the listeners, the context, and the storyteller. As with any message that needs to be shared, each factor affects the communication process: story (content, truth, emotion) + listeners (readiness, familiarity, response) + context (setting, venue, expectations) + storyteller (goals, gifts, personality) = delivery. That’s why *The Art of the Tale* is divided into four parts, each probing into one aspect of story delivery:

Story + Listeners + Context + Storyteller = Delivery



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Many speakers fail to take all four aspects into consideration in their preparation and delivery.

If you leave out the story, you're doing improv.

If you don't consider the listeners, you'll have a tougher time reaching them.

If you fail to give thought to the context, you'll end up undermining your message.

And finally, if you don't add your own take on the story, you'll sound like you're imitating someone else.

Bring it all together in your delivery: Think about the story itself, the readiness of your listeners to accept what you have to say, the venue, and your own style and communication skills. And remember, as a storyteller, you're not only responding to the listeners, but also to the story itself as you tell it.

Secret #2 – Pretend less, believe more.

Unnatural gestures will look unnatural, but if you believe the story as you tell it, your body will respond naturally and realistically. An effective storyteller is observant, both toward the story she's telling and toward the audience she's telling it to.

When you're in the middle of a story, stop acting *like* the person you're portraying, and start acting as *if you were* that person. Perhaps you've seen a movie or a play in which one of the characters seemed real. For example, the actor stopped looking like someone imitating Mark Twain, and suddenly you *saw* Mark Twain. But how can you get to that point? How can you attain that? Stop acting and start responding.

Enter the story and act *as if*.

Let your belief inform your response.

During an acting class that I attended years ago in a barn that had been transformed into a theater, the instructor placed a sneaker halfway across the barn, then handed out blindfolds to us. He pointed across the room. "I want you to pick up the shoe," he said, "while wearing that blindfold."

The shoe had to be fifty feet away.

We just wanted to do improv games, but we sighed and, one by one, my classmates shuffled forward blindfolded, bent over, and reached down. No one was even close to picking up the shoe.



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Then it was my turn. I told myself, *I'm going to get that shoe!* I started calculating how many steps it would take me to get there, taking into account the length of my stride, the speed of the earth's rotation, the Coriolis effect, the force of gravity—heck, anything and everything I could think of. At last, figuring that I had this for sure, I put on the blindfold and strode confidently across the room toward the center of the barn.

Counting off my steps, I walked forward until I came to the spot where I was certain the shoe would be right beside my right foot. I bent over and smiled as I closed my hand ... on thin air. I was shocked. I felt again. No shoe.

I took off the blindfold and saw the shoe waiting eight feet in front of me. Embarrassed at how confident I'd been, I returned, somewhat humbled, to join the rest of the group.

After the activity, the instructor lined everyone up, and then walked directly up to me. "Steven, you were the only one who closed your hand. Why did you close your hand when you reached for the shoe?"

"Um ... I'm a little embarrassed to say this, but I really thought it was there. I mean really. I could hardly believe it when it wasn't."

"That's right!" He jabbed his finger against the air just inches from my face. "And that's how much you need to believe your stories when you tell them."

He went on to explain what he meant. "You were certain that something was there, even though you couldn't see it. Your mind knew what the shoe would feel like and how much it would weigh. You couldn't fake your hand's reaction. I could tell you thought the shoe was there. That's how real your story has to be when you tell it. Then you won't be pretending when you tell the story, you'll be responding to it as it happens around you."

I hadn't practiced closing my hand, hadn't even planned on doing so, but I believed so much in what I couldn't see that my body simply responded as if the shoe were there.

That experience at the barn opened my eyes to the importance of belief and stepping into the stories I tell.



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Tony Montanaro, a well-known mime who trained numerous professional storytellers, emphasized this point in his book *Mime Spoken Here*: "When I lean on a wall, I honestly *believe* that the wall is there. When I fly through the air as the legendary Icarus, I *see* the Aegean waves surging beneath me. My ability to believe these things, these images, determines the clarity of my gestures and the integrity of my sketch. My belief ignites my audience's belief, and they join me in my adventures."

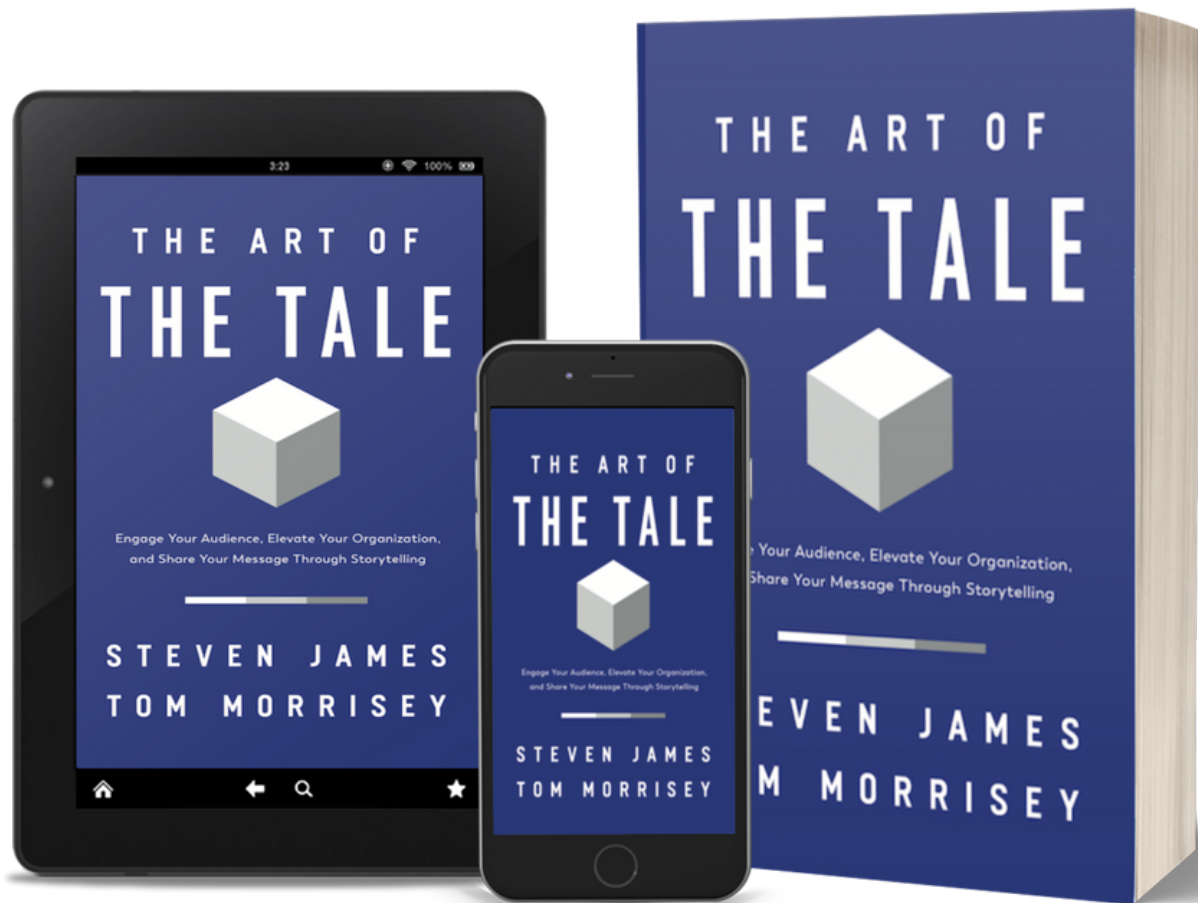
- Tell your story in your own words.
- Believe in the story.
- Imagine what's happening as you tell it.
- Respond to your audience.

The best storytellers don't pretend. They actually imagine the story happening, and then respond to it as it unfolds. Strive to see the story around you and disappear into it.

And then reach for the shoe.



AVAILABLE NOW



For more ways to improve your speaking and storytelling, see Chapter 14 in [The Art of the Tale](#).



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