

THE ART OF THE TALE



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



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Key Thoughts on Avoiding Three of the Most Common Mistakes Speakers Make

Mistake #1 – Stealing Other People’s Illustrations

If you hear a good story, can you retell it? Can you claim it as your own? It’s possible to plagiarize written work—what about orally told stories? Is it possible to plagiarize those?

A pastor once told me that taking a sermon you heard someone else preach and then preaching it yourself was like eating someone else’s food and then throwing it up on your congregation. Good intentions don’t excuse dishonesty. Whenever you personalize someone else’s illustration and claim the event happened to you, you’re undermining your own authority. Most public speakers today view this as unethical.

As author and speaker Mike Yaconelli noted, “Life is lived with interruptions, boring trivia, details that don’t fit together. It’s not unethical to remove all these factors when you tell a story. That’s the art and heart of storytelling. What is unethical is when I make somebody else’s story mine, when I speak as through an event happened to me—when it actually didn’t. Or when I knowingly take a story that ends this way and I deliberately distort it to end that way because it makes a better story.”

Here are five principles to remember:

- People’s personal stories belong to them. You shouldn’t take someone else’s experience and claim it as your own.
- If you want to tell a story that’s not your own, get permission. Even if you’re not being paid to tell it, it’s still your responsibility to clear your telling of the story with the person who wrote it.
- It’s not your job or your right to expose someone’s personal life without their permission. Don’t tell stories that would offend or embarrass others—or obtain their permission first, before telling those stories.
- If you hear a folktale or an urban legend, those are in the public domain. However, a storyteller’s unique take on it or specific approach to retelling it remains their property. Don’t copy that.
- If you hear a story told as part of a sacred or religious ceremony from a culture not your own, it’s wise to ask the teller for permission to tell it—and be respectful and understanding if the answer is no. (For more on telling multicultural stories, see Chapter 8.)

Key thought: Your own life is bizarre enough. Use it. Be honest.



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Mistake #2 – Failing to Properly Prepare

The best storytellers prepare with their listeners in mind and also remain flexible to respond to the audience's nonverbal feedback as they tell. Storytelling combines both preparation and alertness. Read the room. For instance: *This isn't making sense to them. I need to slow down, regroup and help them picture what's going on.*

Listen to the way the story sounds as you practice it. Some storytellers string every sentence together with the word "and." This is common when a story is in early development, but can be annoying in live delivery. Listen for words that you repeat over and over such as "um," "uh," or "well," and repeated phrases such as "This is interesting." Weed those out.

Listen—really listen—to inspirational speakers, actors, comedians, storytellers, and other gifted communicators. Listen to the way they use sounds to shape mental images. Notice the good habits they have—the delicate pause, the rapport with the audience, the natural flow of movement and gestures. Also, take note of the bad habits—the distracting mannerisms, the way they sway when they speak, the annoying verbal tics, the awkward transitions. Learn from those as well.

Avoid letting your narrative wander all over the place. Typically, it'll be clear to listeners when you haven't put in the time in your preparation.

Focus your story, think it through, and practice it aloud.

A lack of spontaneity and response to the listeners will also come across as evidence of poor preparation. The audience can usually tell when a presenter is just going through their schtick, the exact same way they did at the last conference or event. Sure, the speaker has organized and clearly rehearsed his material, but he isn't being responsive to how it's going today. That will turn listeners off.

Responsiveness is just as important as preparation. Listening is as important as speaking. Take the time to really learn your material, and then appropriately respond to your audience as you tell.

Key thought: Practice your story. Prepare, but also be ready to go improvise if the circumstances dictate doing so.



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Mistake #3 – Being Too Predictable

My college speech professor taught us that in our speeches we should “tell people what you’re going to say, say it, then tell them what you said.” The idea was that, through repetition, our listeners would remember the main point.

When I started public speaking, I didn’t know any better, so I went ahead and followed my professor’s advice.

While my audiences were patient with me and put up with it, I had the sense that they were tuning out rather than tuning in after I told them where my talk was going. I was losing them right when I wanted them to pay closer attention.

Then one day when I was taking a break from work and catching an afternoon matinee, I realized why his approach wasn’t working.

The film was a spy movie, one of my favorite genres. I love the action, surprises, twists, fight scenes, and glamorous locations.

Well, can you imagine a spy thriller that starts with this voice-over: “Against all odds, Secret Agent Carver will use the blowtorch in his wristwatch to cut through the handcuffs and escape at the climax!” Then, as the climax arrives, the voice-over interrupts again: “See? Here at the climax, Agent Carver is using the blowtorch in his wristwatch to cut through the handcuffs and escape!” And then, as the movie comes to a close and the credits roll, the voice-over interjects one last time to remind us of what we saw: “As you noticed, against all odds, Agent Carver used the blowtorch in his wristwatch to cut through the handcuffs and escape at the climax!”

It doesn’t work that way with movies. Instead, the filmmakers trust the audience’s natural curiosity to keep them interested. Using the tools of a storyteller, they skillfully create a climax that both surprises and satisfies viewers—and is memorable. If they started by telling us the solution to the mystery or how the clever twist plays out at the end, we would lose interest. We might even become angry at them for ruining the movie.



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My speech teacher's "tried and true" advice was like a spoiler for a movie—it gave too much away. His technique was a deductive approach rather than an inductive one. In other words, it was a way of telling people what you have concluded rather than inviting them to draw the conclusion for themselves.

I've found more success in approaching speeches like a movie director than like my speech professor. Audiences like to feel trusted, so give them the puzzle pieces and allow them to lock them together.

As people listen to your presentation, they're both processing what's being said and predicting what will happen next. The best speeches, jokes, and stories end in a way that is satisfying but isn't predictable. Just like with a great novel or movie, people want to guess how the story or speech will end, but they want to be wrong—yet still satisfied. The revelation that the conclusion brings should always be worth the time spent on the pathway toward it.

But how do you keep people's attention when you're telling them a story that they already know the ending to or teaching them a lesson they already know? Ask yourself, "What doesn't seem to fit?" "What surprises me?" "What have I never noticed in this story before?"

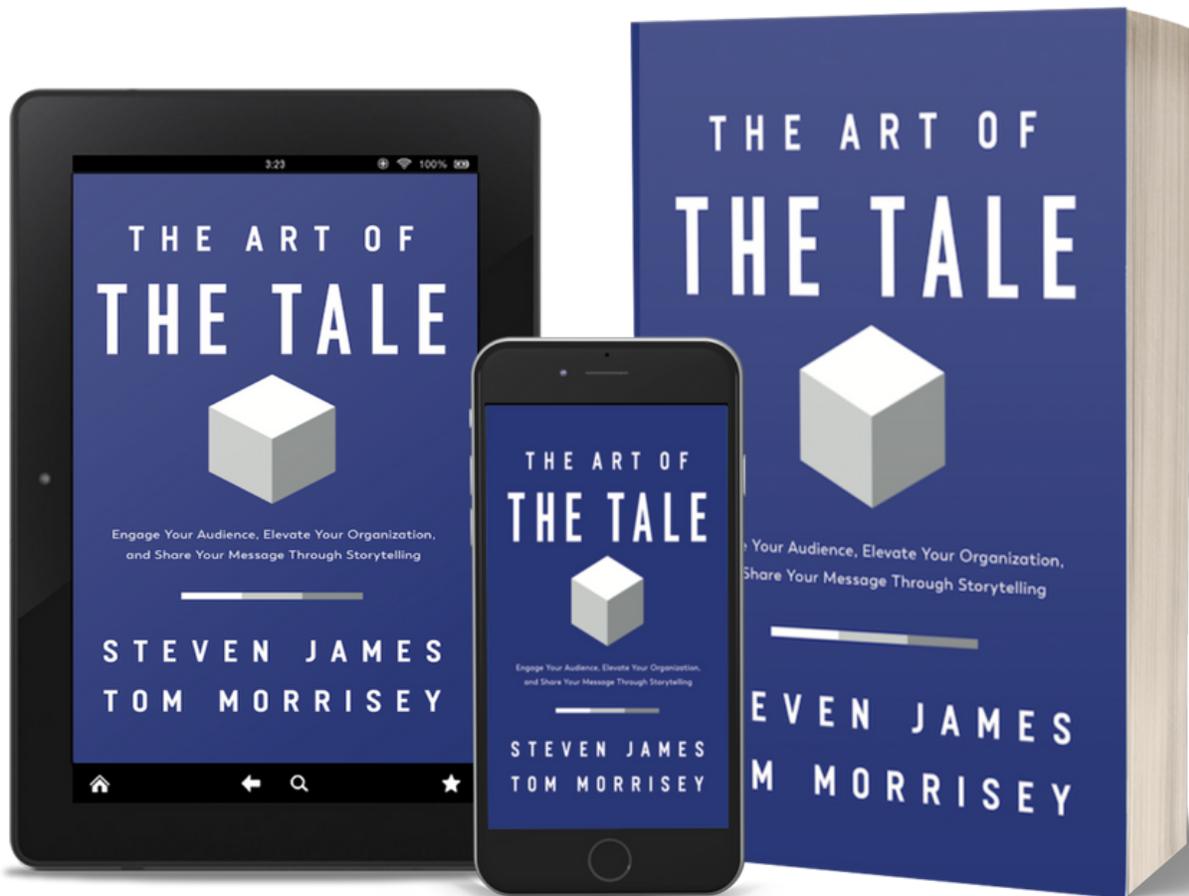
Even though it sounds paradoxical, you can use people's familiarity with a story to your advantage and leverage their assumptions to undermine their defenses.

When your listeners are familiar with a story or think they know where you are going with the lesson, pull the rug out. Add a twist. Add a surprise. Strive to give your listeners what they didn't know they wanted. Let the ending resonate with them in a way they weren't prepared for.

Key thought: Foster curiosity in your stories. Don't give too much away too early.



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For more ways to improve your speaking and storytelling, see Chapter 7 in [The Art of the Tale](#).



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