

THE ART OF THE TALE



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



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Two Tips for Adding Humor to the Stories You Tell

Capitalize on Miscommunication

Over the years, I've taken note of odd and memorable signs from around the country. I was in California teaching storytelling at a conference held at a large Presbyterian church. I found this sign: "During the worship service, if you bring your infants, please sit near the rear." Someone had not given the wording on that sign quite enough thought.

On the door of a grocery store here in Tennessee I once saw a sign that said, "Push. Do Not Enter." A friend of mine told me he saw a sign in West Virginia that read, "Free kittens for sale." I once saw a bookstore advertise that they carried, "Rare and nonexistent books." Intriguing! At the Charlotte Douglas International Airport in North Carolina, on the people-mover conveyor belt-thing there was a sign: "Please. Walk on Left. Stand on Right." I tried my best. Didn't turn out so well.

In Virginia I saw a sign with lights around it near a construction site. The sign read, "Construction workers present when flashing." I drove by thinking, *That's the last thing I wanna see.*

Miscommunication is a staple for romantic comedies, and tapping into it can add a light touch to the stories you tell. Keep your eyes open for incongruity in life. Humor lies in those areas waiting to be tapped into.

Create Memorable Descriptions

If listeners don't see your story, it'll be difficult for them to get emotionally involved in it. As world-renowned storyteller Donald Davis once told me, "When someone laughs or nods, it doesn't mean, 'That's funny.' It means, 'I see that.'"

Before listeners will engage in a story, they have to picture it and care about the characters within it. Seeing precedes feeling.

So, spend a little time at the beginning of the story helping listeners build the setting in their minds. Help them to picture the scenery and the characters. Strive to do this not by flowery descriptions, but by succinct, evocative ones. Be aware that the more literary and formal your language, the more canned and the less authentic it'll sound. For example: "My somewhat overweight high school biology teacher strode languidly into the room, adjusted the collar of his dun-colored virgin wool sweater, and then pronounced, 'It is time for class to begin.'"



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See how that doesn't come off as very natural sounding?

Instead, you might say, "My high school biology teacher was shaped like a Weber grill. Tiny legs. Big belly. Wore ties from the 1970s. He had this vein on his head that would pulsate whenever he got angry. It looked like a big red worm slithering down his forehead. Worm Man terrified us."

Or, rather than saying, "There were a lot of cracks in the wall in the old farmhouse we used to live in," you might say, "There were so many cracks in the walls that you could have flown a flag in the living room."

What will make people smile:

- Telling the truth
- Offering fresh insights
- Being responsive
- Using exaggeration for effect
- Sharing self-effacing anecdotes

Instead of, "He had a high, squeaky voice," try, "He sounded like Barbie on helium." Instead of, "She yawned really big," try, "She yawned so wide you could've driven a forklift into her mouth."

Be on the lookout for ways to evoke an emotion or create a certain mood rather than simply telling listeners what something is like.

Truth will bring more laughter than jokes will. When people laugh, they're identifying with the truth of what was said, so spend enough time setting up the story to allow them to see it for themselves.

There's an old adage that "tragedy + time = comedy." Think about things that have seemed tragic to you, but that you later realized were humorous incidents. Tap into those for your talks. As storyteller and author Margot Leitman quoted in her book *Long Story Short*, "Most events in life can be categorized in one of two ways: a good time, or a good story."

As you tell your story, lock listeners in to a specific time and place. Use natural yet evocative language. Often, humor is simply truth extended, or pointing out the truths that people haven't noticed yet. So ask yourself, "What does this audience think is true?" rather than, "What would this audience think is funny?" And know when to stop. Don't drag things out too long or overdo it. Whatever the humorous story is, kill it while it's still kicking.



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Key Points to Remember

- Stop trying to be funny—there's nothing less funny than someone trying to be funny. Be honest instead.
- When appropriate, exaggerate for effect. Hyperbole is a tried and true pathway to humor—especially in descriptions of characters (as long as you're not precipitating stereotypes about a certain group of people).
- Learn to laugh at yourself. Self-effacing humor can be a great addition to your story.
- Strive to understand your listeners. Get to know them. Connect with them where they're at rather than where you wish they were at.
- Resist the urge to explain your humor. Trust your listeners to make connections themselves—and pause long enough for them to do so.

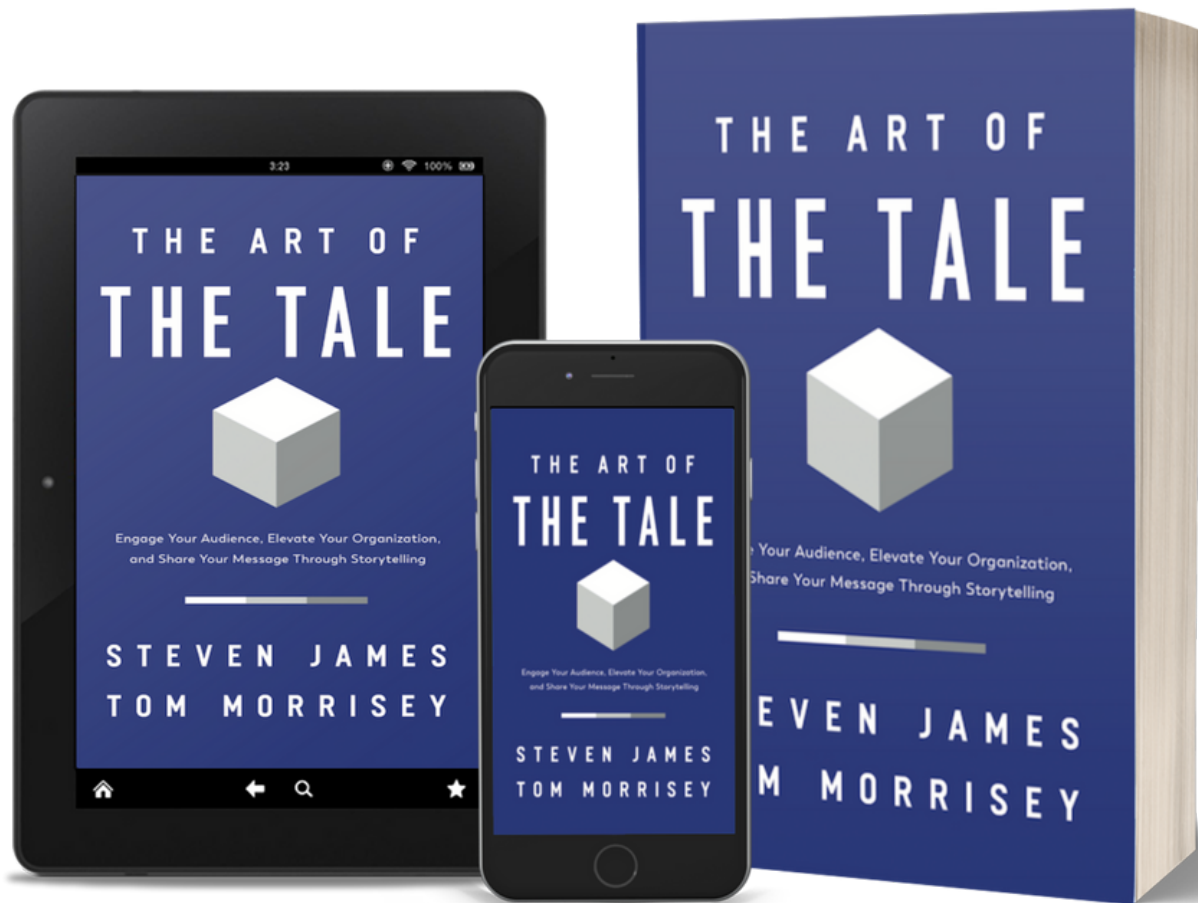


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For more ways to add humor to your speaking and storytelling, see Chapter 10 in [The Art of the Tale](#).



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