

- » Sharpening your axe
- » Avoiding PowerPoint autopilot
- » Beginnings, middles, and endings
- » Storyopia to create audience heroes

Chapter **1**

Sizzle Your Presentations with Stories

If history were told in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten.

—RUDYARD KIPLING (ENGLISH WRITER, POET, AND STORYTELLER)

Good storytelling can make your presentations sizzle in ways that slides can't.

Whether you realize it or not, you're already a storyteller. When you meet a friend, have dinner with family, or spend time with a colleague, you share small amusements and calamities of your day or week. It's in our nature to tell stories and share our life's events. And you probably use hyperboles (exaggerations) to make your stories more engaging — peppering them with statements such as, "I nearly died of embarrassment" or "My feet were killing me." While this casual sharing is different from being in front of an audience, you do know how to tell stories. You have lots of them. After all, you started telling stories when you made babbling sounds as a baby.

Storytelling Isn't Just a Buzzword

Storytelling has existed for eons, and it's more than a business buzzword. It's the way you get your point across memorably. Think of your presentation as a story. *It has a beginning. It has a middle. It has an end.* That's a story! Aristotle is credited with having introduced this basic storytelling structure with his three-act plays.

- » The opening is the setup, laying out the plot.
- » The middle, which is typically the longest, introduces complications, twists, and turns.
- » The third act brings the production to a close.



Throughout your lifetime, you'll likely give many types of formal and informal presentations: sales, educational, training, lectures, problem-solving, or simply a talk to a group for pleasure. Even giving toasts at weddings or delivering eulogies at funerals are types of presentations. They can all benefit from storytelling.

Storytelling Is Your Axe; Sharpen It

Abraham Lincoln is perhaps one of the best-known orators and storytellers of all time. He said, "Give me six hours to chop down a tree, and I will spend the first few sharpening the axe." Relating that to presentations, when you spend the time to prepare compelling stories, your presentation will be relevant and memorable, and you'll be able to chop through the clutter.

When you spend time planning properly, you'll become a confident and influential presenter, and you'll get the results and recognition you deserve — perhaps even get standing Os.



Whether presentations are live, virtual, or hybrid, they're one of most effective business communication tools of our time. Strong presentation skills are a hallmark of strong leaders and people who aspire to become leaders. When you want to be seen as a subject matter expert (SME) or knowledge source, a presentation can showcase your skills and potential. Each time you pitch an idea, discuss solutions with a client, or interact with colleagues, you're presenting your skills. This can lead to

- » Higher visibility
- » Improved confidence

- » Better communication skills
- » Career growth
- » Extended networks

Setting the Stage

At the outset of my signature workshop, “Storytelling and Storyboarding: Building Blocks to Influential Presentations,” I divide the group into teams of two or three people and present the following scenario. (Although this may seem a little hokey, there’s a method to my madness, so please bear with me and give it a try.)

It’s the year 2050 and a group of Martians is scheduled to visit your facility. You plan to be at the space pad to greet them, but an important meeting has called you away. You know the Martians will be hungry after their long and arduous journey, and you’ll be out of the office when they arrive. So, you hire a driver to bring them to your location. You need to prepare a presentation teaching them to make something easy — a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. They do speak English.

Grab a pen or pencil and a sheet of paper and briefly show how you’d approach this.

Welcome back . . . Did you start with a slide presentation? If so, you’re in the majority. Most participants spend 5–10 minutes outlining what would become a slide presentation. They begin by instructing the Martians to put down two slices of bread. Open the jar of peanut butter. Smear some on one of the bread slices, etc. On occasion, I’d overhear someone say, “I don’t think slides will work. Perhaps a video would work better.” While that’s insightful, few have thought through the details they take for granted when giving instructions. Here are just a few of the things you may take for granted:

- » Although the Martians speak English, would they necessarily know what peanut butter and jelly are? (We only understand the words we’ve been exposed to.)
- » Would they understand how to remove the lids from the jars? (Hmm. . . hit them with a sledgehammer?) If you said twist the lid, would that be clockwise or counterclockwise?
- » How should they spread the peanut butter? (With their fingers?) If you told them to smear the peanut butter with a knife, would they know how to use the knife safely without spewing blood?

Then . . . once you've identified the level of detail you need to share, the next step is to identify the best means of communicating it. A live, interactive presentation would work best. If that's not possible, a video could be a viable substitute.



REMEMBER

When you're faced with a presentation you need to prepare, sharpen your axe. Consider your audience and the best way to present. Think of relevant stories they'll relate to. Chapter 3 offers a full discussion of knowing your audience and how to focus on their needs.

STORYOPIA ARCHIVES: PAIRING PEANUT BUTTER AND JELLY

The history of how peanut butter met jelly is a little uncertain, but one thing is for sure – they're a match made in heaven and are meant to be together. In the early 1900s peanut butter was a delicacy, bought and eaten only by the wealthy. At the time, peanut butter was frequently paired with pimento cheese, celery, cucumbers, and crackers.

Today's beloved pairing of peanut butter and jelly (PB&J) were first mentioned in the *Boston Cooking School Magazine of Culinary Science and Domestic Economics* written by Julia Davis Chandler in 1901. But the impetus that took the PB&J sandwich over the top came after World War II and the Great Depression. Here's the backstory:

PB&J were on the U.S. military ration menus in World War II. Peanut butter is high-protein, rich in vitamins, minerals, and fiber. Peanut butter also contains healthy fat, but the sweetness comes from the jelly's sugar. These sandwiches were easy to pack for long marches and were yummy to eat due to the bread that holds this dynamic duo together. Thus, after the war, soldiers craved PB&J sandwiches, and they became an American standard.

This sandwich is so ubiquitous that in the U.S. the average schoolchild eats about 15,000 PB&J sandwiches before the end of high school. (The growing number of kids with peanut allergies, however, is now threatening the popularity of this lunchbox staple.)

Lesson learned: Getting back to Kipling's quote, your story (or stories) can become part of your presentation's history — making it unforgettable.

Avoid Defaulting to Slides



SHERYL
SAYS

Throughout this book I use the term *slides* to represent any presentation software.

Old habits die hard. When people hear the word “presentation,” most of them automatically plummet into the slide abyss. When you ask these same slide-abyss people to describe the last presentations they attended, they use words like *boring*, *humdrum*, *uninteresting*, *waste of time*, *too many slides*, *too much text*, *no interaction*, and other negative phrases.

Poll everywhere, real-time audience response software, estimates that . . .

- » 30 million PowerPoint presentations are shown each day.
- » 500 million people view PowerPoint presentations every day.
- » The average presentation lasts 4 hours.
- » The average slide has 40 words.

If you think slides don’t get in the way of good conversation, try showing a few at your next dinner party and see how well it goes over.

Eliminating slidezillas

Slidezillas are the presentation equivalents of Godzilla. Just as Godzilla is the towering, reptilian monster that plagued Japan, slidezillas are the data-laden technology monsters that plague audiences.

It’s the twenty-first century. Don’t continue inflicting boring, linear, static, text-laden slides on your audiences. Every presentation should be a conversation — a sharing of information — with active participants (the audience) and a facilitator (you).

As mentioned in the introduction, industry giants such as Amazon, Google, Apple, Starbucks, Airbnb, Netflix, Zappos, Facebook, LinkedIn, GlaxoSmithKline, and others have banned slidezilla-type slides from their meetings. Their presenters must use a narrative (or conversational) format, which means talking *WITH* the audience, not *AT* them. Too many presenters use slides as teleprompters. They have their backs to the audience much of the time as they read from their slides. They may as well have sent the slides to the audience and stayed home.

Whether your presentation is for training, fact finding, problem solving, brainstorming, selling, building consensus, or takes the form of instructor-led, online, mobile, gamification, or microlearning — tell stories. Sharing stories allows you to establish a good flow of communication so your main message reaches the audience in a way that engages and drives the call to action.



WARNING

Here are a few reasons why slide presentations are *not* effective:

- » Slides are a crutch for the presenter, not a learning tool for the audience.
- » They steal the limelight from the stars and heroes of the presentation — the audience.
- » Displaying words and graphics on a screen while speaking decreases engagement, comprehension, and retention.
- » There's always the risk of a technical glitch.
- » The audience may be reluctant to ask questions or provide their own valuable insights because they know the presentation must end in the allotted time.

Visual storytelling can be exceedingly powerful

Visual stories are *not* slidezillas. They're stories communicated through visual content in the form of photographs, illustrations, slides, clip art, memes, jpgs, gifs, videos, charts, tables, graphs, infographics, word clouds, live demos, or more. The main goal of visual storytelling is to convey complex thoughts and emotions to hook the audience and drive storylines, emotions, and the call to action (CTA).

Why is visual storytelling so powerful? As humans, we're visual creatures. Ninety percent of the information transmitted to our brains is visual, so it's no surprise that visual storytelling catches our attention in a way words can't.



TIP

Add visual storytelling to your repertoire of stories. You can find out more about visual storytelling in Chapters 8 and 9.

STORYOPIA ARCHIVES: STORYTELLING FROM THE CRYPT

While writing this book, I had the remarkable experience of making a long-awaited visit to Egypt where stories of Ancient Egyptians come alive through wall art. Like descriptive novels from one of the world's oldest and greatest civilizations thousands of years ago, the visual art shares narratives about the people and the times.

Egyptian tombs were intended to be secret art galleries. Stories on the walls were to help the pharaohs and the people buried with them on their journeys to the afterlife. Scribes wrote the tales on the walls, and then craftsmen carved and painted them. The tombs were never meant to be opened or viewed. However, with today's technology, tombs are being unearthed in Luxor's Valley of the Queens and Valley of the Kings. Thus, these venerable stories live on today and will continue sharing this rich history thousands of years from now. This photo is from the tomb of Rameses in the Valley of the Kings. This is visual storytelling at its finest!



Sailingstone Travel / Adobe Stock

Lesson Learned: Tell your stories. They'll live on, and you never know what will resonate with someone and have lasting impact.

Firing Up Your Audience's Imagination with Storyopia

This book is all about the game-changing storyopia. *Storyopia*, like utopia, represents the ideal. It's the ideal story that takes the audience on a journey from what is to what *could be*. A journey to where they see themselves as heroes along that same path.

Try to recall presentations you've attended. What drove the presentation? Bullet points? Charts? Tables? The monotonous drone of a facilitator plodding through a dry rendition of data? My guess is all of them. (A pretty tedious experience.)

Since people began to communicate, storytelling has been the lifeblood to getting points or ideas across and making them memorable. Stories make ideas and words come alive. They explain examples or points of view in a way that resonates. People naturally connect emotionally with stories, associating their feelings with their learning.



REMEMBER

Stories aren't meant to be objective. They're meant to sway emotions, generate suspense, add surprise, create wonder, facilitate the call to action, and take your audience on a journey to success.



TIP

If you're intrigued by this concept of storyopia, head to Chapter 2 for more details.

Using the Story Arc

Figure 1-1 shows the typical story arc (also known as dramatic arc or narrative arc). It represents storyopia. When creating a story using the arc as a guide, your story will have a natural, connected flow.

1. **Cite the incident (the plot) telling what is.**
2. **Build rising tension toward the climax.**
3. **Work towards the resolution, which is what could be.**



REMEMBER

Always create tension in your story. It's critical but often overlooked. If the tension isn't obvious, this is a good opportunity to embellish with a story. After you've filled out the Start-Up Brief, which you find in Chapter 3, you'll have a good idea of your audience's pain and what matters to them. Focus on storyopia — the gap between what is and what can be. Take them on that journey so they see themselves as heroes on the same path.

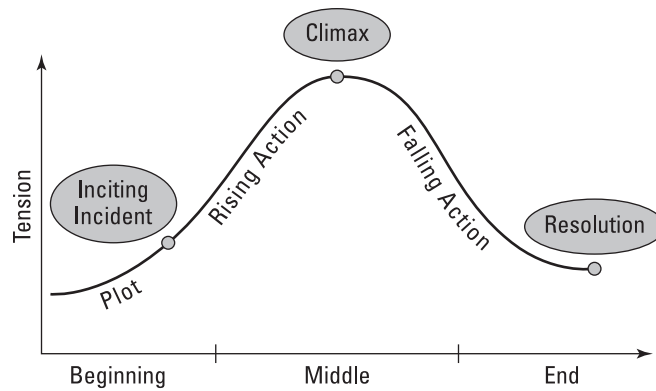


FIGURE 1-1:
The story arc.

Your story will have characters: people, companies, or things, such as processes or equipment. There will be goals, struggles, challenges, and a positive or negative outcome. Either outcome serves as a valuable lesson. Let's see how beginnings, middles, and ends can become a story:

- » **Beginning:** Introduce characters with the same challenge, problem, complication, or issue your audience is facing — the reason they're attending. You'll hook them because they'll feel like they're in the same situation. Edit the details to keep the story simple and relatable. You may start with, "One of my customers was dealing with your exact issue(s)."
- » **Middle:** You've already sparked their curiosity. Now focus on the characters' problems and how your solution brought the change they needed. Don't merely go from Point A to Point B. The long cuts and shortcuts are what make the journey interesting, worthwhile, and relatable.
- » **End:** This is where you tie it together, targeted to the CTA. Deliver the main takeaways and lessons your audience should remember based on the success of your characters. Let your audience see the happy ending where they imagine themselves as heroes achieving these same positive outcomes.



REMEMBER

Always give your characters names to make them more relatable, but change the names for the purpose of anonymity. People don't identify with words such as *attendee*, *coworker*, *colleague*, or *manager*. Also, provide a vivid description of your main character and the setting so your audience can envision the scenario and place themselves in the situation.

For example, if you're presenting to a group about sales strategies because sales have been slumping, you may share a story of [name] who worked for [company for x years] and how he was able to bring his sales and commissions up to a much higher level by [strategy].

Pitting the Heroes Against the Villains

From bedtime stories when we were kids to great novels and movies as we became older, a good story draws us. We love heroes. They display qualities we admire. They show us how to overcome challenges. We can recall superhero caped crusaders: Batman, Batgirl, Superman, Zorro, Shazam, Wonder Woman, Scarlet Witch, Thor, and others. We all want to be superheroes and live happily ever after in our worlds of family, friends, and business.

Are there heroes in business presentations? Absolutely — the audience! This is how heroes and villains play a role in happy endings:

» **Heroes:** Think of the character Yoda from the *Star Wars* series. Yoda was the legendary Jedi Master who trained Jedi Knights for 800 years. Yoda was cool. He was a hero in addition to being a mentor and instructor. He unlocked the path to immortality in characters such as Han Solo, Luke Skywalker, Obi-Wan Kenobi, and others who became heroes in their own rights. You can be the Yoda in your presentation, unlocking the path to slaying the villain and guiding your audience toward success.

Heroes can even be antiheroes — people who display true human nature. People who make poor decisions that may harm those around them, intentionally or not. Some are even well intentioned, such as Robin Hood, the classical literary antihero. He stole from the rich (bad) and gave to the poor (good). Even Donald Duck has been labeled antihero for his short and often explosive temper.

» **Villains:** Without villains (often the most interesting characters) there would be no stories and no heroes. For example, if not for Cruella De Vil, *101 Dalmatians* would merely feature lots of spotted canines running around. Without Scar in *The Lion King* scheming to be next in line to seize the throne, there would be no story, and Simba wouldn't have become a hero.

In business, the villain is the problem or challenge. That can be unscrupulous people, anti-technology diehards, a combative person, the competition, and so on. A villain may also be a non-person: a specific event, befuddled communication, meager lead generation, declining customer base, poor cash flow, inability to retain valuable employees, failure to balance quality and growth, software that isn't producing as expected, and so much more.

» **Happy endings:** You don't want the victory to be too easy or too predictable — it kills the interest and suspense. At the beginning of every story the villain must be strong, the victim's problems must seem insurmountable, and the hero's task must seem challenging. Your story needs an imagined future where the audience puts themselves in the place of slaying their villain and making themselves heroes.

Perhaps your audience will use the knowledge they learned from you to

- Add \$\$\$ to their bottom line.
- Become more innovative.
- Discover the right tools or technology.
- Take a leadership position.
- Communicate with impact.
- Get the big contract signed.
- Procure a grant.

In Chapter 4 you find a process for mining your own stories from people, places, and things in your life — past and present.

STORYOPIA ARCHIVES: DITCHING SLIDES AND TELLING THE STORY

Carter came into one of the Storytelling and Storyboarding workshops I was facilitating at a major Boston hospital. He was very excited. He walked right up to me and said, “Hi, Sheryl, I’m Carter. The timing for this workshop couldn’t be more perfect. I’m one of five finalist seeking a very large grant. We were each asked to prepare a PowerPoint presentation to strengthen our cases. And I present a week from now . . . I printed out the 25 slides I prepared and hope you’ll have time to critique them. I really need this grant to continue the research I’ve been doing.”

After a quick scan of 25 data-laden slides of charts, tables, and graphs, my response to him was *Yikes!* So I challenged him with the following idea:

“Imagine this: It’s the day of your presentation. You walk into this large conference room with three stern-looking grantors sitting in black leather swivel chairs around a long, mahogany conference table. The room is modern, almost sterile looking. White walls. The only thing hanging is a white board that spans one entire wall. There are no windows, just bright lights. The five finalists are seated facing the projector and large screen in front of the room. (Pause) Let’s assume that you’re the fifth and final presenter. Do you think the grantors will still be listening attentively by the time you present? Or will they have been so bored by the data-laden presentations of your competitors, they’re mentally packing for a trip to Hawaii? Then I asked him, “Have you ever seen the popular TV show *Shark Tank* where a group of investors hears pitches from people who are seeking funding from them? Think of your presentation as your shark tank.”

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He was quite taken aback by my comments because he was planning to blend in with the pack using slides, as he was directed. I encouraged him to see that the villains in this story were his competitors. I encouraged him to do three heroic things:

1. Ditch all his slides.
2. Prepare stories and deliver a narrative in conversational format.
3. Generate a dynamic handbook for each of the grantors.

At the outset Carter was reluctant. But after going through the workshop, he agreed to deliver a narrative telling stories of the successes of many recipients of his former grants. He left each grantor with a handbook of the stories and other information that made his research worthy of additional funding.

Rather than being the last to present, Carter was the first. The grantors were so impressed with the high bar Carter had set, that all the other presenters (who showed data-laden slides) paled in comparison. Carter was memorable. He was awarded the grant! He brought home the gold. Carter was the hospital's hero!

Lesson Learned: When you use a narrative approach to presenting, your audience pays attention. Don't burden them with slides, unless they're necessary to drive home a point. Tell your story, and they will listen.

On to Storyboarding. . .

In Chapter 7 you find out everything you need to know about storyboarding, which is basically a visual outline that incorporates your spoken and visual stories. When you use a storyboard to incorporate stories into your overall narrative, you'll engage your audiences. Storyboarding helps you in the following ways:

- » See the continuity of your message.
- » Identify any gaps.
- » Discover if you told too much or too little.
- » Turn your ideas into a narrative.
- » Incorporate visuals when and where needed.
- » Get your audience actively involved and keep them involved.
- » Use your time efficiently.