

Story Skills for Speakers - Affecting Change With Our Voices

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Good stories satisfy both sides of the brain and the heart. Stories add sparkle and substance to our training and speeches, they illustrate points while they engage and entertain the listener. There are a few simple voice skills that make a big difference in the power of our stories, especially when they are used at the opening, the closing and at key dramatic points along the way:

- Listen carefully to the rhythm and beat of your speech as you speak and then play with the rhythm and melody made by your voice. Think about phrasing, pausing, the punch and pull you place on key words to add emphasis, clarity and to convey emotion. Try to make your voice sound like a melody that is beautiful to hear.
- Think and speak in terms of polished phrases separated by brief pauses to breathe. These brief pauses give listeners time to picture what you are saying in their mind's eye and they provide you with plenty of breath to power your projection.
- Great storytellers seem to average no more than eight to ten beats or syllables between breaths and rarely more than twelve. Listen carefully to George W's prepared public pronouncements and you will find he generally speaks in polished phrases of six to eight beats, sometimes far fewer.
- Run on sentences are not powerful, compelling, comfortable to hear or clear to listeners. The only sensation they convey is rush and tension. Variation in rhythm, beat, tempo, tone and imagery is the key to capturing and holding audience attention.
- Pay special attention to vowel sounds in key words that can be pulled or extended to add emphasis, power and emotion. Extending words and sounds is a compelling way to add emphasis.
- Think of the feelings you want to convey as you extend vowel sounds. Vowels are the primary carriers of emotion in speech. Try saying the word *Oh!* to convey these different feelings: surprise, suspicion, sadness, questioning and delight. Each of these emotions is communicated clearly and completely just by the sound of the vowel *O*.
- Punching each sound and syllable slightly, speaking with a beat or with a slight staccato adds power and definition to vocal delivery. It also helps you to consciously command the rhythm, beat and flow of your story telling words.
- Annotate your script to show your phrasing, breathing points, the words you want to emphasize and tone down. Note the emotions you want to feel and express in each section on your script.

As you tell the story, simply feel the feelings appropriate for each part of the story and communicate them with your voice. Don't *try* to sound scared. Instead, honestly feel fright and let fear dominate your voice. Consciously feeling the emotions that come from the dramatic flow of stories helps us to step into *the reality of the story's fantasy*.

Remember where you are in the story and communicate that your voice. Stories usually appear in three parts. They often open with *Once upon a time* type line that signals a departure from the here and now, and invites the listener into a visual, fantasy world existing in another place and time. Let that be reflected in your voice. Extend vowel sounds, plan the rhythm and beat of your first words carefully. Signal that something special is coming with the sound of your voice.

The opening also sets the time, place and introduces major characters. Describe them in distinctive, visually vivid but sparse detail. You want listeners to see images clearly in their mind's eye without distracting them from the flow of the story. Interestingly, each person will see different mental pictures of a place like my grandmother's kitchen because their visualizations reflect their own unique experiences and reality.

Then suddenly a problem arises, something unusual happens, a challenge or crises occurs. Let your voice reflect growing excitement or concern, a change in pace and tone. Make sure the emotions you feel and express are appropriate to the flow of the story. Remember that a crises rising to a crescendo must begin with a low tone to provide meaningful contrast. Feel the feelings of the story and communicate them with your voice.

Finally, the story resolves to a conclusion, which may include an unusual twist and hints of lessons learned. The ending anchors and resolves the story. Let that be reflected in your voice.

In traditional storytelling, the meaning of stories is usually left to the listener to determine. Stating meaning outright is deemed trite and demeaning. But in professional speaking and training we use stories to illustrate key points and to share definite words of wisdom.

So at the story's ending, we often want listeners to switch away from fantasy and back to the here and now so we can talk to the rational, analytical parts of their minds. Our voices must reflect and cue a switch back to the present as well. Otherwise listeners are entertained by an engaging flow of stories but never really grasp or absorb key points.

Know when you want to send the audience on flights of fun and fantasy and when you want them in the here and now thinking critically and analytically. Script your stories so the audience sees and feels your meaning and then communicate it directly in real time to their rational mind as well.

Good speeches satisfy both sides of the brain and the heart. They feed us with images vividly illustrating key points the rational mind is eager to accept and apply.



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