

STORYTELLING
THE PRESENTER'S SECRET WEAPON

JOHN CLARE

By the same author:

Communicating Clearly about Science and Medicine

The 7 Deadly Sins of Scientific Presentations (and how to avoid them)

John Clare's Guide to Media Handling

Patents, Patients and Profits - Media Reporting of the Pharmaceutical Industry

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It has been said that an author never really finishes a book, but eventually someone takes it from them and says 'That's enough now. It's done.' That's how I have felt writing this one. It's culled from all the experience and expertise I have gathered over the past 25 years as a communication and presentation coach.

I've acquired that information from so many people. They include friends, colleagues, clients and some of the thousands of presenters I've worked with or seen at conferences all over the world. It's been a privilege to work with so many creative people who, although very different personalities, have one thing in common - they're all great communicators.

Many of them have been colleagues at LionsDen Communications with whom I've shared stages, conference rooms and airport lounges. They know who they are and it would be impossible to list them all here.

However, I owe a special debt of gratitude to my wife, Maxine Mawhinney, who inspires me in everything I do, and my children Dan, Ollie and India, all of whom have grown into hugely supportive influences and constructive critics.

INTRODUCTION

Think about the presentations you've seen that are truly memorable. Those with a clear message delivered in an engaging way. Presented by someone who's made the subject interesting, knows why you're there and understands what you need to know. Someone who, while clearly an expert, talks in language you understand and illustrates their key points with clear examples. The kind of person who's so good at presenting, and so engaging, they seem to have a secret weapon. They do. It's called *storytelling*.

Hold on a minute. *Storytelling? Isn't that just for kindergartens, campfires and kids' bedtime?* That's a common response when I tell people I teach storytelling to business people for a living. It's understandable - after all, the word 'story' has a soft, off-duty feel to it. Fairy stories, ghost stories, bible stories, Aesop's Fables...all fine and a bit of fun for kids and young people, but we're adults, doing serious jobs. We need to make serious points, with hard facts delivered in a serious manner...and that's how it's always been. So we'll just stay with our PowerPoint slides, bullet points, org charts, flow diagrams and laser pointers, thank you. If it takes effort for people to digest the key points, that's fine. Nobody said it was going to be easy. We're in the business of information, and the facts are what matter. Right?

Not entirely. Of course the facts, data or information are the point of most business presentations, and only a fool would argue otherwise. However, the way you *deliver* that information has a big impact on how much of it people retain. Think again about the types of stories I mentioned earlier. What do you remember from The Bible? The story of the Good Samaritan? The Prodigal

Son? The Sower? These are all parables, or stories with a moral point. Think of Aesop's Fables...what do you remember? The boy who cried wolf? The goose that laid golden eggs? The tortoise and the hare? Aesop was a slave and storyteller in ancient Greece. His stories are still being told 2,500 years later, which I imagine is unlikely to be true of most PowerPoint presentations we see or deliver.

It's the same with the Indian epics, the Ramayana and Mahabharata. They are great stories which enthral and have a point. The Arab world has its own storytelling traditions going back centuries, the Hakawati. The stories contained in '1,001 Arabian Nights' are part of this tradition. In Ancient Greece, rhetoric (storytelling by another name) was a key skill for anyone aiming to hold a position of influence. All these stories were passed on orally - often for centuries - before they were written down. This was only possible because they were impactful and memorable. Isn't that the aim of your presentations, too?

There is no doubt that storytelling has been to inform, teach, engage people and spur them into action for centuries. When you embrace the techniques in this book, and stand up to tell a story, rather than 'talking through slides,' you are following the honourable traditions of Aristotle, Cicero, Aesop and in more modern times, Kennedy, King and Churchill. Or Steve Jobs in the modern business world.

Storytelling needs to be a thread that runs all the way through modern companies. The Chief Executive and other senior leaders need to be able to tell the company's story to investors, analysts, journalists and staff. Many companies organise regular Town Hall-style meetings to facilitate this. Further down the chain, managers and site heads need to be able to tell their version of the story to enthuse, motivate and inform their teams. Sales reps and other customer-facing staff rely on stories to sell their products or services. Ironically, front-line staff are often the best at telling these stories. They learn to summarise, get to the point and make it relevant to the customer because they know they have a limited amount of time. Not the only instance where the people at the top could take lessons from those ranked underneath them!

Peter Guber, Chairman and CEO of Mandalay Entertainment, says stories are like Trojan Horses. The audience accepts the story because people are wired that way. It seems like a gift. However, in reality the story is actually just a delivery system for the teller's agenda.

**A story is like a Trojan Horse -
a trick for sneaking a message into
the fortified citadel of the human mind**

Stories tap into our psyche in a way that pure data does not. In recent years, the power of the story has been backed up by science. Neuroscientists now know that our brains react differently to facts and stories. Through the use of MRI scans, they have monitored the brain activity of volunteers exposed to different types of information. When the volunteers heard facts, two parts of the brain, known as Broca's area and Wernicke's area, lit up. These parts deal with *processing information*. But when the same volunteers were told stories, up to seven parts of the brain lit up. These include the sensory cortex when they heard descriptive phrases and the motor cortex when actions were being described. These extra sections of the brain deal with *experiencing* things.

It appears that you can turn on the part of the brain that experiences something, such as a taste or a song, by describing it. A story is like a neon sign lighting up in your brain saying, 'Remember this!'

*Tell me the facts and I'll learn.
Tell me the truth and I'll believe.
But tell me a story and it will live in my heart forever.*

Native American Proverb

Neuroscientists have a phrase, ‘Neurons that fire together, wire together.’ This matters in storytelling because if you get it right, more regions of the brain fire in your audience, and the greater the likelihood their brains will remember what they are told. That’s why, for example, medical charities tell personal stories to get you to engage and donate. They are more powerful than facts alone, and affect your brain in a different way.

The biology of the response to stories is fascinating, and the subject of an impressive body of research. It was described in the Harvard Business Review as follows::

‘Oxytocin is produced when we are trusted or shown a kindness, and it motivates cooperation with others. It does this by enhancing the sense of empathy, our ability to experience others’ emotions.’

These findings on the neurobiology of storytelling are relevant to business settings. For example, my experiments show that character-driven stories with emotional content result in a better understanding of the key points a speaker wishes to make and enable better recall of these points weeks later. In terms of making impact, this blows the standard PowerPoint presentation to bits.

The author of that HBR piece is Paul J. Zak, Founding Director of the Center for Neuroeconomics Studies and a Professor of economics, psychology, and management at Claremont Graduate University. You can read the article here:

<https://hbr.org/2014/10/why-your-brain-loves-good-storytelling>

You can do this!

One question I’m asked in my seminars is ‘Can anybody learn storytelling?’ The answer is yes. In fact, you’re probably already doing it, but not using it in a business setting. Most of us are natural storytellers. When we are out with friends, on holiday, at work, at a big sporting event or a family party, we tell stories. Stories that make people laugh, cry, empathise, agree or sometimes disagree. Stories that engage people, and on occasion, inspire them to action. When we get home from a night out, we often retell the stories we’ve heard, continuing the oral storytelling tradition I outlined earlier.

Storytelling in this way is one thing that sets us apart from other animals. For thousands of years, before reading and writing skills were practised, there were only oral stories, passed down through generations. Some stories were illustrated by cave paintings; the world’s first visual aids. Their precise meaning is unclear, but they included stories of hunting and other events involving animals. Once wars started, rulers and soldiers wanted something more mobile and finer than a cave wall to tell their stories, so they used elaborately illustrated tapestries. These were hung on walls, and started a process of illustration eventually leading to PowerPoint.

Storytelling is actually the subject of one of the most famous old stories - the tale of Scheherazade, a beautiful girl who saved herself from execution by the Sultan Schahriah by telling him stories for 1,001 nights. Each night she ended her story with what we would now call a cliffhanger, to be continued the following day. The Sultan couldn’t bear not knowing the end of the story, so each night he spared her life until the following day, at which point she told him another story, ending with another cliffhanger. Eventually he fell in love with her, so she was spared. It’s comforting to think that however much is riding on our storytelling today, our lives don’t depend on it!

In Ancient Greece and Rome, storytellers were revered. The skill of capturing and retaining attention was a key attribute of

educated, important men. (In those days women didn't engage in public life). Ambitious men spent many years studying rhetoric to become better storytellers and arguers.

Today, stories are an integral part of modern life. Millions of people go to the movies every year. Netflix and Amazon spend billions producing and broadcasting stories. TV series have never been so popular, and social Media is full of stories. So when we tell stories, we are doing the same thing as people have done for thousands of years. Great authors tell stories. So do documentary makers and journalists. Politicians rely on them to move people to action. Why? Because stories are special. They make points that cannot be made by facts alone.

So there's no doubt that:

- Stories are powerful, and
- We are all natural storytellers

Given this long, honourable tradition, and the fact that it works, why then do we rely on data and information-rich presentations illustrated by bulleted lists and unreadable text on a succession of dull slides?

Where is that natural storyteller when you're making a business presentation, or presenting your research findings? Where is that person when you stand behind the podium? Why is it that the moment you open a PowerPoint file you lose the power to tell stories, and resemble a corporate bot? Why is ***Podium You*** a monochrome imitation of ***Real You?***

The answer is because too often, we stop telling stories. The next time you're near a school for little children at lunchtime, listen to the noise. It's a cacophony of kids telling stories. Shouting, screaming, but telling stories. My own daughter, now in her 20s, would burst into the house every afternoon when she came home from school shouting, 'Check this out...!! You'll never guess what's happened!!' All children are natural storytellers. Many of them become very good at it.

Something happens to our storytelling skills between the 'Check this out!' stage and the 'Next slide, please' period.

One element of the problem is that somewhere down the line, we discover PowerPoint. But I use PowerPoint, and I'm regarded as a great storyteller. It's not the fault of the PowerPoint! That's like blaming cars for road accidents. It's the driver, stupid!

In our presentations, all too often we stop telling stories that engage people and start reading slides and dumping data. We rely on slides we've used previously, or take them from a colleague. We become lazy. We present by rote, with a distinct lack of enthusiasm, or we regard the presentation as an interruption to our 'real' job. We don't dedicate enough time to preparing our talk. We just put a few slides together, and wing it. Is it any wonder that the audience are not enthused? We think it's enough to inform our audience, when in reality we also need to engage and inspire them. Informing them is necessary, but not sufficient. When people go to a restaurant they don't just want 1500 calories. They want an enjoyable, maybe even memorable experience that will add to their enjoyment. Too many presentations just deliver the calories.

All these habits are 100% understandable...and 100% wrong. By indulging them, you're killing your own chances of being a great presenter. Making presentations is a key part of your job. It's the way people spot you...so you need to be a great communicator as well as a very good doctor, IT specialist, engineer, HR person or whatever.

One of the great presenters of the 21st century was the late Steve Jobs. You may have seen clips from some of his presentations. I find them inspiring. They're models of excellence - but they didn't happen by accident. He practised, wrote, rewrote, changed the order, dropped elements when they didn't work, and practised again. He was a perfectionist, and a genius at presenting. And like all geniuses, his success was based more on perspiration than inspiration.