



Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H04ES3
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG
JUNE 21, 2018

ARTICLE **PRESENTATIONS**

How to Identify and Tell Your Most Powerful Stories

by Nancy Duarte

PRESENTATIONS

How to Identify and Tell Your Most Powerful Stories

by Nancy Duarte

JUNE 21, 2018



JEONG WOO KIM/EYEEM/GETTY IMAGES

When I ask executives what their favorite speech is, Steve Jobs's [Stanford commencement address](#) is always at the top of the list. Many think of Jobs's talk as their favorite because it is incredibly moving — thanks to the stories it contains.

Execs love to hear talks like this, but few are comfortable delivering them. Why? Because great stories expose our flaws and our struggles. This is what makes them inspiring, and not sharing them is such a missed opportunity to connect with your audience.

When my firm helps executives craft talks that will persuade and forge bonds with listeners, we often have to help them recall or dig up latent stories that come from a deep place of personal conviction. Over the years, we've used effective techniques for unearthing these personal stories — which can then be cataloged, added into communications, and [effectively delivered](#). Here are some of the techniques we rely on again and again:

Trigger Stories Through Memory Recall

Most people try to recall memories chronologically when they're developing a story for a talk, but there's another way to conjure up deeper, dormant stories.

Sit down with a notepad and think through the nouns that are important to you — the people, places, and things that have shaped your life. (Yes, I really mean sit down with a notepad and paper — [studies show](#) that you're more likely to be creative when you're writing than when you're typing.)

- **People.** Write your name in the center of the paper, and start drawing out types of relationships: family, friends, coworkers, and so on. Each time you draw a connective line between you and someone else, think through the relational dynamics and emotions. There's a story in there!
- **Places.** Get as specific as you can in recalling places that matter to you: the middle school hallways, the cabin at camp, the soccer field, that mountain, the ophthalmologist's office, the red hatchback — whatever. Use spatial recollection to move through each location, neighborhood, and room. Retracing your movements will trigger scenes, sounds, and scents. It will dislodge memories that will reveal to you long forgotten events and interactions.
- **Things.** Take note of objects or items that have symbolic meaning in your life: gifts, awards, books — any items you've loved. Sketch pictures of these symbols and recall what makes them emotionally charged. These items don't hold meaning for others, but they do for you. Why?

When you're done with the above exercises, look at the story kernels you've come up with and write one-line summaries of them. Some of the tales you've accessed may be too personal to share, but you may uncover some anecdotes that will become the basis of an important story you can return to again and again.

Create a Story Catalog

Once you've curated a host of stories that you can use in various types of situations, take your list and create a personal story catalog that you can turn to.

Create and manage this list in the way you work. It could be a journal or a spreadsheet with summaries. You can use categories to sort by situation, theme, mood, or moral. Use whatever categorization makes the most sense for you.

Many people pull from the most poignant part of their story catalog when they're staring down mortality (like Jobs was). Instead of waiting until your hand is forced, take stock of the important stories in your life *right now*, and catalog them. Having these stories easily accessible to you without an accompanying crisis can help you to live life more fully and have a greater impact on others.

Choose Stories with Your Audience in Mind

To choose a story for your talk, remember who will be receiving it. Some of the stories are going to be hilarious and crack people up. Others are going to bring tears to their eyes or give them deep-seated hope. The same stories will evoke a different response from different people. One story that brings awe to one person could incite rage in another.

When you're looking through your bank of stories to find one that is right for your talk, consider who's in your audience and what they care about. Carefully consider their values, goals, and interests, and then decide which of your stories fits them best.

For example, when I speak to female audiences, I get more personal and raw by telling childhood stories where the odds were stacked against me, which encourages the ladies to have resilience in overcoming hardships. I don't tell those same stories when I speak to a buttoned-up group of men. The men, instead, get stories about my quest for empathy.

When traveling to Asia, I tell stories of failure. The structure of Eastern stories is different from that of Western stories. In Western stories the protagonist almost always overcomes their hardships; Eastern stories are mostly cautionary tales where the protagonist fails and you learn from their mistakes.

Learn what market pressure may be on the minds of your audience. Research what's going on in their industry, find their blogs, and recent news stories about their organization. Find out what they need to overcome.

The next time you need to communicate, ask yourself why you are uniquely qualified to be the audience's guide. Identify stories from when you were on a similar journey, encountered comparable roadblocks, and emerged transformed — and muster the courage to share them.

Telling a personal story from a place of conviction is the most powerful communication device you have. That's what the greatest and most beloved communicators do. They risk transparently revealing their vulnerabilities so that they can be mentors and guides who relate to people from places of universal needs and hardships. They connect to the audience and remind us that we are all human.

Nancy Duarte is a best-selling author with thirty years of CEO-ing under her belt. She's driven her firm, [Duarte, Inc.](#), to be the global leader behind some of the most influential messages and visuals in business and culture. Duarte, Inc., is the largest design firm in Silicon Valley, as well as one of the top woman-owned businesses in the area. Nancy has written six best-selling books, four have won awards, and her new book, [DataStory: Explain Data and Inspire Action Through Story](#), is available now. Follow Duarte on Twitter: [@nancyduarte](#) or [LinkedIn](#).
