

Telling a Good Story

There are some basic strategies for constructing a good story that carries your message effectively, whether in a presentation, brochure, or in a conversation with the media.

1. Consider the venue and the audience.

Who will you be speaking to and when? What are their expectations? What are their values? Are they predisposed to your message or not? Can the story set up, frame or affirm not only your presentation, but the larger meeting as a whole?

2. Start with the “moral” in mind.

Before constructing your story, make sure you are clear what your message is. Then, when you are trying to find the right story to use, you can judge it based not just on whether it is a good story per se (see below), but also whether it fits your purpose.

3. Take advantage of good story-telling structure. (From Andy Goodman’s *free-range thinking*TM, February 2002)

- a. ***Start with a common assumption.*** (e.g., “We all want the best care possible for our loved ones.”)
- b. ***Introduce your characters and the point of conflict.*** (e.g., the older person has what seems to be chronic arthritis, which continues to worsen and flare. Her family was concerned, but didn’t know what to do.). From here, the main character will attempt to resolve the conflict a number of times, but will be unsuccessful, until he or she finally finds a way through or around the problem. As Andy Goodman put it in a training for Hartford grantees, put your character up a tree in Act 1, throw rocks at him in Act 2, and get him down in Act 3.
- c. ***Describe clear heroes and villains.*** (e.g., the family goes to an internist (implied “villain” 1), and she says it’s about the medication, but changing the meds doesn’t work. They then try an alternative care source (implied “villain” 2), but chiropractic doesn’t help. They go to an orthopedist (implied villain 3), and he suggests invasive surgery, but the promise doesn’t seem to outweigh the risk. Nothing seems to be working, but then a family member remembers something a nurse said in the waiting room of the orthopedist. “You should take your Mom to a geriatrician” (the hero).)
- d. ***Introduce one memorable fact or statistic.*** (e.g., “The care we got was great, but geriatricians are in extremely short supply. According to the Institute on Medicine, today there are only 9,000 geriatricians nationwide, though we X to serve our current population.
- e. ***Point to the happy ending.*** “That’s where the Hartford Foundation comes in. We are committed champions of improving health care for older adults. We are dedicated to ensuring that the “best practice” care that we received is common practice in the future.

4. **Understand the qualities of a good story.**

Good stories are:

Simple and lean. They utilize only the most telling details.

Unpredictable. Good narrative demands reversal. If your main character just simply eases to victory, there is no dramatic tension.

Emotionally engaging. They reach for people's hearts and connect with our hopes and fears.

Recognizably true. We listen to them and can relate to the storyteller's characterization of the world, as well as the story's intent.

Infused with meaning. There is a clear sense at the end what the story is about and why we in the audience should care.

Adapted from work by communications and story-telling expert, Andy Goodman of Los Angeles, CA, and his presentation to Hartford grantees in April 2003.