

# nce Upon a Time...

BY JASON HENSEL

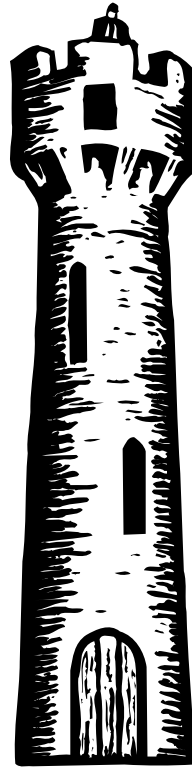


## Need I go further?

You know you've entered a story. Perhaps you prefer something a little more straightforward: "Call me Ishmael," "I am an invisible man" or "Mother died today." The simple act of telling a story demands attention whether it starts with the fantastical or the concrete. It's the difference between academic and business-speak and barroom banter.

Proving the value of meetings and events to business stakeholders is one of your objectives as a meeting professional. But all too often, we rely on metrics in the boardroom, populating the air and handouts with numbers and graphs—anything that's so abstract it kills a presentation's soul. You're not getting through to your bosses—and they rely on you for insomnia relief. There is another way: tell a story.





et's not confuse storytelling with branding. We're not talking about how a company or person sells itself or herself. Storytelling is the time-honored practice of using fictional techniques to engage. You do it naturally already. Think of Mondays, for example, when you're telling co-workers about your weekend or meeting with them on a Friday afternoon at a local pub to talk about the previous week. That's no different than an ancient Sumerian telling his clan how the gods gave him a divine drink made from fermented bread.

"The need for story runs in our blood. In fact, scholars postulate that storytelling has been with us for half a million years," said Nancy Lamb, writer and author of *The Art and Craft of Storytelling*. "Whether you're talking about how you repelled an attack from a cave bear or how the goals of your mission will improve your life and/or the life of the group, storytelling is paramount to your presentation."

Stories also help us make sense of the world. "There's a fair amount of science supporting the theory that the human mind from an early age is wired for stories," said Lou Hoffman, president and CEO of The Hoffman Agency, a PR firm. "It's a more interesting and compelling way of communicating, which in turn increases the listening quotient of the audience and ultimately makes what you say more memorable. Somewhere along the line, people got the idea that business communications needed to be different—vanilla, stiff, jargon filled, etc.—than [communications] in personal

life. As a result, the vast majority of business communications is deadly dull. If a person simply uses a conversational style, often that alone can cause the communications to stand out."

Finding ways to craft a conversational narrative is easy—focus your story on such basic elements as conflict, character and plot, and you'll inevitably engage your listeners and readers in an attempt to meet your business objectives.

"From the most plot-driven spy novel to the most introspective, meditative piece of literature, a story is necessarily about something—even a person sitting alone in a room quietly is doing something. I think 'conflict' is less essential than some kind of 'lack' is—stories are very often about want, desire or some kind of quest for acquisition, even if all that is being quested after is an understanding of oneself," said Justin Taylor, an author and Rutgers University writing instructor.

"Very often, lack manifests as conflict, because if I want something, and seek it, I have to get it from somewhere, and that will probably mean getting it from somebody or something else. I have to get them to give it to me—would-be lover must convince the subject of his love that he is worthy of her; hero performs a little broadsword-surgery on a dragon; car company tries to convince consumer that what consumer really needs is a car, and this car rather than any other."

In the wildly successful book *Made to Stick*,

## Appealing to the Senses

Great storytelling, writer Nancy Lamb says, not only appeals to the intellect, it appeals to the emotions.

“A sure-fire way to make an emotional connection with the reader/listener is to engage as many of the five senses— hearing, taste, smell, touch, sight—as you can,” she said. “In this way, you paint a more complete, and more memorable, picture for the reader. When you’re presenting a situation, make that idea memorable by describing what a room/person/world smells and looks and feels like. This is the way you anchor your prose in the mind of the reader.”

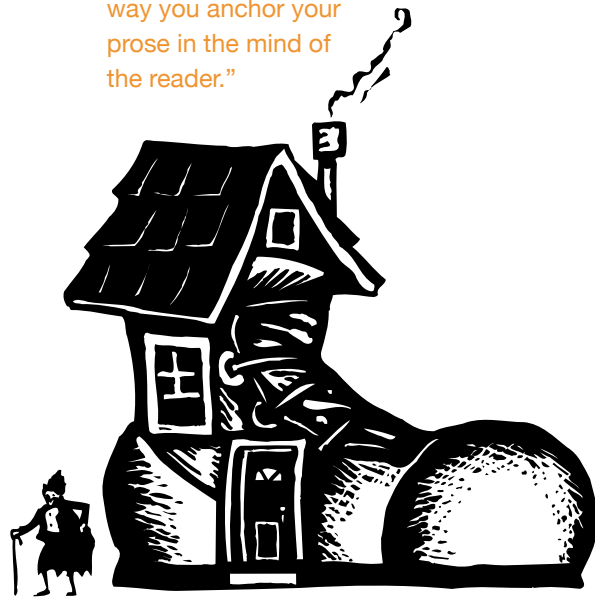
authors Chip and Dan Heath offer an easy outline to remember when trying to make ideas memorable and convincing: SUCCES (simple, unexpected, concrete, credibility, emotion and stories). And there’s a reason they put stories in the acronym’s last spot.

“[Stories] naturally embody most of the SUCCES framework,” the two wrote, citing that stories are typically concrete and with emotional and unexpected components. “The hardest part of using stories effectively is making sure they’re simple—that they reflect your core message. It’s not enough to tell a great story; the story has to reflect your agenda.”

**T**he best way to help meet your agenda is to keep stories simple.

“Think of it as a three-step process that constitutes the most fundamental elements of storytelling,” Lamb said. “Beginning: Define your goal and ask yourself why reaching this goal is important. Middle: What are the obstacles that stand in the way of success? End: What must be accomplished/achieved/overcome to reach the desired goal? Whether you’re talking about fiction or non-fiction, business or pleasure, these three steps constitute the essence of story. Once you’ve addressed these three issues, you can go about filling in the details essential to making your story memorable.”

Of course, stories in the business sphere don’t always fit into this tidy framework. Regardless, they



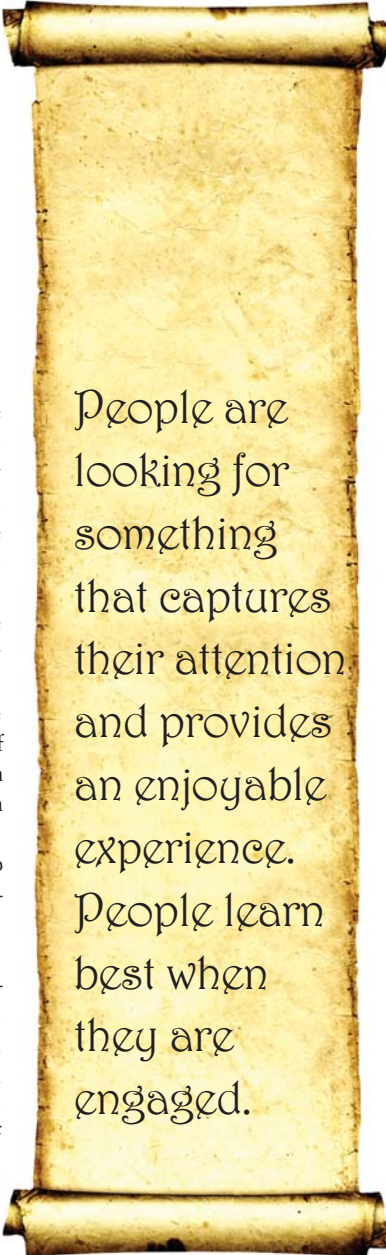
must have sufficient detail to make the story authentic and vivid. Physical detail will help give your story vividness and pull someone in, because it creates a dream state in the mind. When crafting stories, be as specific as possible.

“A scene will not be vivid if the writer gives too few details to stir and guide the reader’s imaginations; neither will it be vivid if the language the writer uses is abstract instead of concrete,” wrote John Gardner in *The Art of Fiction*, a classic book on writing.

The most important thing is to have an authentic voice or risk losing the trust of the audience.

**O**ne writer who understands the importance of emotional connection between stories and readers is Pat Lencioni, bestselling author of several business books presented as fables, such as *Death by Meeting* and *The Three Signs of a Miserable Job*.

“I think that people today are more distracted than ever,” Lencioni said. “People are looking for something that captures their attention and provides an enjoyable experience. I decided to write fables rather than more traditional books for one primary reason: I believe that people learn best when they are engaged. So many of my readers tell me that they relate to the characters and get absorbed in the story, and before they know what’s happening, they’re learning something big. Beyond that, I wanted people to actually enjoy reading my books.”



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And no fiction, Gardner writes, can have real interest if the central character is not an agent struggling for his or her own goals, but a victim subject to the will of others.

“Failure to recognize that the central character must act, not simply be acted upon, is the single most common mistake of beginners,” he wrote.

The hero’s journey—your central character—is tantamount to great stories, and there should be a feel-good element to them, Hoffman says.

“[Heroes] overcome obstacles on their way to a positive outcome,” Hoffman wrote on his blog, *Ishmael’s Corner*. “And if the hero starts out as an underdog a la ‘David versus Goliath,’ there’s even more of a reason to have a rooting interest. The same concept holds true in business storytelling. While we tend to think of a hero as bigger than life, the hero in the context of a business story can bridge theory to reality.”

**A**writer has no story until the plot is sufficiently planned.

“Though character is the emotional core of great fiction, and though action with no meaning beyond its own brute existence can have lasting appeal, plot is—or must sooner or later become—the focus of every good writer’s plan,” Gardner wrote.

Part of plot development is setting up context for your story.

## For further reading

*The Art and Craft of Storytelling* by Nancy Lamb

*The Art of Fiction* by John Gardner

*Death by Meeting* by Patrick Lencioni



“Take the movie *Rudy*. If you jump to the end of the movie and see Rudy finally going into the game to play for Notre Dame, this has zero meaning,” Hoffman said. “Instead, one needs to understand he originally got rejected, parlayed a [junior college] stint into admissions, walked on to the team as an undersized player, etc.”

Within context, we are able to fully appreciate the character’s achievement.

“In business, one doesn’t have the benefit of two hours and a Hollywood director to tell the story,” he said. “But the principles of storytelling can still be applied. There’s a difference between ‘flowery’ and ‘details.’ I define flowery as spending a chunk of time explaining why something is beautiful or on yourself. On the other hand, details—particularly in the form of anecdotes—bring a story to life.”

Great stories not only entertain or distract us from our troubles, they broaden our knowledge of the world and humans, helping us know what we believe and reaffirming our noblest aspects.

“Whether a given work is boisterous, like a circus, or quietly elegant, like a sailboat, or disorienting, like an unpleasant dream come alive, or something else, all good [writing] has moment-by-moment fascination,” Gardner wrote. “It has authority and at least a touch of strangeness. It draws us in.”

The stories may all begin and end differently, but they all have the same core—we are one. The human story is the only story there is, and when you understand that, you’ll be able to move freely in any world, from barroom to boardroom. **one+**

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