

THE STORY SELLING METHOD

**MASTER THE ART OF STORYTELLING
TO BUILD TRUST, STAND OUT,
AND BOOST SALES**



PHILIPP HUMM

THE STORYSELLING METHOD

*Master the art of storytelling
to build trust, stand out,
and boost sales*

Philipp Humm

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The StorySelling Method, Philipp Humm

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PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

“In The StorySelling Method you’ll learn exactly what you need to know to tell great stories in sales. It’s a book you won’t read once, but it’s a book you’ll keep by your side and be continually referencing!”

– Mark Hunter, author of *High-Profit Prospecting*

“The ability to share salient stories is what separates great salespeople from the rest. The StorySelling Method finally gives us a how-to guide to formulate impactful stories to improve human connections, communicate value, and ultimately increase sales. Regardless of which stage you are at in your career, you will find value in this uniquely insightful book.”

– Branden Coté, Vice President (VP) of Sales and Product,
Aston Martin

“What I love about Philipp’s addition to ‘story’ and ‘selling’ is that he is very tactical and hands-on. This book doesn’t just tell you why stories are great... it gets you ready to use your most powerful tool of influence.”

– Craig Wortmann, founder, Kellogg Sales Institute

“This book is an absolute gem that will elevate your sales game and entrepreneurial success. With its easy-to-follow structure, relatable examples, and practical tips, this book will help you harness the power of storytelling to connect with customers and close more deals.”

– Leon Mishkis, Chief Operating Officer (COO), NewtonX

“The StorySelling Method is a must-read for any sales professional. It captures the essence of storytelling, showing you how to use stories to improve your relationships and set yourself apart from the competition. If you apply the learnings, it’s guaranteed to affect your sales success.”

– Gina Telford, Sales Director, Novartis

“Starting meetings with a powerful story is a great way to build strong relationships. The StorySelling Method is an excellent resource for mastering the art of storytelling in both business and life. An easy step-by-step guide, full of practical examples and tips. A book every manager should read and get their team to read!”

– Lucie Maillet St-Pierre, VP Customer Success, Salesforce

“Tired of the same old sales pitches? Get ready for a fresh approach to sales storytelling! This book is packed with practical tips, real-life examples, and powerful exercises to craft stories that sell.”

– Lee B. Salz, Author of Sell Different!

*To my sister Chantal, for always having my back;
to my friend Damian, for inspiring me to be a better
person; and to meditation, for helping me overcome
the perceived limitations of my mind.*

INTRODUCTION

“Inside each of us is a natural-born storyteller, waiting to be released.”

– Robin Moore,
author of *The Green Berets*

December 2021.

I was sitting in my office in Amsterdam when I got a call from an unknown number. Normally, I ignore these calls, but for some reason, I answered this one.

“Hello?”

“Hi Philipp,” a voice on the other end said, “This is Laura. I was in your StorySelling program a few months ago. I’m sorry to disturb you, but I was just so excited.”

She went on, “You won’t believe what just happened! My manager came up to me and asked if I was bribing our clients.”

Not really sure what to say, I replied, “Ahh... I hope you didn’t come here for legal advice?”

“No, no! Don’t worry. I’m obviously not bribing anyone. My boss just didn’t get it. Last year, I had one of the worst closing rates on the entire floor. I actually thought I’d lose my job. This year, I exceeded my quota by 73%. My boss even put me up for promotion.”

“That’s awesome, Laura! I’m curious... what changed?”

“Well, after the program, I made the commitment to use one tiny story in every sales meeting. Nothing crazy. But it worked incredibly well. I can literally see my client’s guard dropping the moment I share a story. I kind of knew that stories were powerful... but not to that extent. So thanks, Philipp.”

These are the moments that I live for. These are the moments that get me out of bed every single day.

Laura is just one of hundreds of people who I’ve seen unlock massive results through storytelling.

And **you** can do the same.

By the end of this book, you’ll know how to use stories to:

- Leave magical first impressions
- Become your clients’ #1 trusted advisor
- Communicate the value you’re bringing to the table
- Overcome any sales resistance
- Inspire, motivate, and positively influence anyone around you

In *The StorySelling Method*, you’ll discover the techniques I’ve used in my programs with leading organizations such as Google, Visa, E.ON, Oracle, ECCO, Noom, and Bain & Company. To develop these techniques, I interviewed 71 sales leaders and frontline sellers on how they use stories, what types of stories they tell, and what makes a good sales story. I’ve been fortunate to speak to sales experts including Mike Weinberg, author of *New Sales. Simplified.*, Anthony Iannarino, author of *Elite Sales Strategies*, and Branden Coté, VP of Sales and Product at Aston Martin.

The techniques you're about to learn have changed my life and my work, and they have turned literally thousands of my clients into charismatic StorySellers. Do you want to become a StorySeller and change your life?

The StorySelling Method



My signature system, the *StorySelling Method*, helps you move from beginner to expert storyteller. It focuses on five core areas to transform your storytelling skills:

1. **Craft stories:** Learn how to turn any moment (even the most boring one) into a captivating story.
2. **Find stories:** Develop the five types of stories that are most effective in sales conversations.
3. **Build confidence:** Understand how to confidently share stories in any conversation.
4. **Deliver stories:** Know how to weave the right stories into your conversations naturally and authentically.
5. **Take action:** Make a clear plan to transform your storytelling skills.

I suggest that you read this book from start to finish and do the exercises at the end of each chapter. However, if you're familiar with a certain topic, feel free to skip ahead.

This book focuses on *oral* storytelling, which means face-to-face, virtual, or over the phone. Even though the storytelling principles are similar for written stories, we won't be focusing on written storytelling. Why? I've never seen anyone close a deal or transform a buyer relationship by sharing a story via an email or a report. In sales, stories are the most effective when delivered verbally.

This book is for anyone who'd like to become more effective at selling a product, service, or idea. This includes:

- Sales and post-sales professionals
- Entrepreneurs
- Consultants
- Anyone seeking support from internal customers

Even if you don't directly work in sales, we all have to sell ourselves or our ideas in some way or another as part of our jobs. For example, we might need to get approval from another department, ask a colleague for data, or motivate our team. Storytelling is a powerful tool to pitch your ideas more effectively to gain buy-in. Your buyer may not be an external customer that buys your offering, but rather an internal customer that invests time and resources to collaborate with you.

When you master the art of storytelling, you will be able to build more trusting relationships, stand out, and boost sales.

It's a wonderful skill to have.

Storytelling is a skill that anyone can learn.

Having coached thousands of people, I can say with certainty that *everybody* has the potential to become great at storytelling. *You* have the ability to tell amazing stories. With the right techniques, a growth mindset, and practice, you'll become a phenomenal storyteller.

Ready? Let's go!

PART 1



CRAFT STORIES

Beginner storytellers believe that their stories have to be about extreme experiences to be considered interesting. For instance, how they climbed Mount Everest, ran five Ironmen, or built a multi-million-dollar company.

Expert storytellers don't limit themselves to these types of stories. Instead, they can take any experience, even the seemingly most insignificant one, and turn it into a compelling story. For instance, they could turn the moment they spilled coffee over their shirt into a truly inspiring story.

In Part 1, you'll build the skills to turn any moment into a captivating story. You'll learn how to structure, enhance, and simplify your stories. By the end of this section, you'll have one polished story that you can start using immediately.

Chapter 1

WHAT IS STORYTELLING?

“Storytelling is the most powerful way to put ideas into the world.”

– Robert McKee,
author, screenwriter, and professor

If you’ve ever worked in a customer-facing job, you’ve probably heard some iteration of these phrases: “You’ve gotta tell more stories to connect with your customer,” or “You need to tell your company’s story to stand out.”

I’m the first to admit that storytelling is a buzzword. So, let’s start by clarifying what a story isn’t and what it is.

A story is *not* a...

- **Case study:** Case studies are often ultra-impersonal, rather boring accounts of how your company helped another company. Ask yourself: how many case studies have you read in your life and how many do you remember? Not that many, right? Why do you not

remember them? Because they're not personal enough. Humans care about humans, not about companies.

- **Testimonial:** Testimonials are short, bite-sized reviews of a customer's experience working with you. For instance, "I loved working with Philipp. He's got a German accent that's hotter than a pretzel straight out of the oven." I love testimonials, and they are a great way to give social proof, but they are just snippets of a story.
- **Product pitch:** Product pitches are presentations that go into great length to explain the features and why you're the *coolest company* to partner with. Just because your pitch follows a structure doesn't mean it's a story.

So, what is a story?

In its simplest form, a story is something interesting that happens to a specific person (not a company).

It's a narrative, or a series of events, that are connected and told in a particular order to entertain, inform, or inspire others.

More specifically in sales, stories are used to influence a sales event by highlighting the benefits of working with a product, service, or company.

Let's look at a sample sales story to make it clear.

This example comes from Luke Floyd, Senior Account Executive at Deel, a payroll solution provider. He has used this story with his buyers (accounting managers) to show how Deel's technology can help them save time.

In April 2021, I got on a call with an accounting manager for a US-based online study platform.

A few minutes in, she said, “I’m gonna be bold. I’m literally pulling out my hair right now.”

I asked, “Why? What’s going on?”

She said, “Do you know how painful it is to pay and manage 400 contractors via PayPal and Wise, like manually sending funds?”

She explained that it took her a full week every month to sort the payments out. On top of that, they were going through a huge acquisition that would increase the number of contractors from 400 to 900 *overnight*.

The same day, we sat down to work on a plan to sort this out—mostly to prevent any further hair loss. Within 10 days, we onboarded the 400 existing contractors on our payroll platform. By not having to deal with the admin of these contractors, the company had time to onboard the 500 new employees, and got the acquisition done.

The accounting manager called me a few weeks later and said, “Luke, before, it took me a week to get through the contractor payroll. Now, it takes me less than an hour. It’s been game-changing. Thank you!”

Now you’ve got a feeling for what a sales story is, let’s look at why it matters.

What is so important about storytelling that means successful sellers have made it a priority?

Why does storytelling matter in sales?

1. Storytelling makes your buyer remember you

Chip Heath,¹ co-author of *Made to Stick*, conducted an experiment at Stanford University to demonstrate the impact of storytelling on memory and persuasion. He asked some of his students to deliver to their classmates a 1-minute speech on the issue of non-violent crime in the US. He then asked the listeners to rate the speakers based on their delivery and persuasiveness.

After the exercise, Heath distracted the listeners for a few minutes with a random video, then abruptly asked them to write down every single idea from each speaker they had listened to.

When asked to remember the ideas, the listeners were shocked to find out how little they remembered about the speeches they'd listened to only a few minutes before.

Only 5% of them recalled any numbers or statistics. And that was in a class full of some of the smartest people on the planet.

On the other hand, 63% of the class remembered a story they had heard during the speeches.

Often, when we talk about our company, we say something like “We are the market leader for XYZ. We have 190 branches and sell our products to 22 different countries. We also invest 10% of our revenue in R&D [research and development].”

Well, that's great. These are important facts, and you should say them. But think: how memorable will that be for your customers? As Heath's experiment shows, people find it challenging to remember facts without a narrative.

If you want your potential buyer to remember you, tell them a story that touches them emotionally.

2. Storytelling increases the value of your offering

In July 2009, *New York Times* journalists Rob Walker and Josh Glenn ran an experiment.² They spent \$129 on 100 ordinary objects from random thrift stores and garage sales. Their purchases included a bottle opener, a pink toy horse, a wooden mallet, a meat thermometer, a jar of marbles, and a Santa Claus nutcracker. Insignificant objects. Junk. Objects that all of us have in the deepest corners of our houses.

Then, they invited a group of volunteers to write short stories about each item. They listed the items for sale on eBay, but instead of including a plain, simple description of the product, they added the fictional stories.

The 100 items were originally purchased for \$129 in total. How much do you think they sold for?

They sold for \$3,613.

That's roughly a 2,700% increase in value, all from including a short fictional story.

This experiment illustrates that stories can increase the perceived value of any product or service.

3. Storytelling builds trust

In a series of experiments,³ neuroeconomics pioneer Paul Zak explored the impact of stories on the brain. In an experiment, Zak and his team asked volunteers to watch one of two versions of a video about a dying boy. The first version had a clear narrative arc (aka a story), while the second had a "flat"

narrative arc (i.e. no story). The team took blood samples from the volunteers before and after viewing the videos.

What do you think they found?

They found that those who watched the video with the story experienced an increase in oxytocin. Oxytocin is also known as the love hormone. When the brain synthesizes oxytocin, people become more trustworthy, generous, charitable, and compassionate.

When you tell a well-crafted story, your listener's brain releases oxytocin, making them more likely to trust you and your ideas.

Or as author and sales trainer Mark Hunter explains, "Stories put the other person in storytelling mode. It's no longer like, 'I gotta be careful. You're just trying to take my money.' By sharing a story you bring down any resistance and start having a conversation on the same level."

Now that you understand the importance of stories in sales, let's see how to structure any sales story.

Chapter 2

STRUCTURE STORIES

“In the first act you get your hero up a tree. The second act, you throw rocks at him. For the third act you let him down.”

– George Abbott,
American theater producer and director

Depending on how experienced you are as a storyteller, you may have heard about different story structures or narrative arcs, as briefly mentioned in the previous chapter.

When I embarked on my storytelling journey, I started off with a 9-step story structure. But as I interviewed more sales executives, I realized that the most impactful stories cover just 4 essential steps: 1. Context, 2. Challenge, 3. Response, 4. Result.



In this chapter, you'll learn how to craft any sales story following the 4-step story structure.

Step 1: Context

In the first step, you want to give your listeners some rough context for the story. Describe when and where the events took place, who the main character was, and what they were up to.

The when, where, and who

Most of your stories can start with one sentence that clarifies when, where, and who.

For example:

- “Two years back, I got a call from the Head of Purchasing at one of the largest retailers in the UK.”
- “Back in December 2016, right before Christmas, I was in the office in New York, doing some paperwork.”
- “It was August 2022 when Spencer came back home to Minneapolis after a long trip across the country.”

You can be more specific if you want to, but only if it serves a clear purpose. For instance, if your story is about how you get anxious in front of large groups, it could be helpful to provide context: “It was Monday at 6pm, during rush hour, and I was at Grand Central subway station, where the commuters were streaming past me.”

The key is to keep it simple. This is StorySelling. Unless you're writing a novel, we don't need to know the color of your toothbrush holder.

Why does it matter to state the time, location, and main character? Because these three points give your story instant credibility. People will immediately believe that it's a true story. If you leave any of these points out, your listeners may spend more time questioning your story than listening to it.

The story becomes even more credible if you include the real name of the main character, their job role, and the company they work for (e.g., "Robin, who's the Head of Purchasing at Adidas"). However, before including anyone's real name, please check with the person whether they're happy for you to use their name.

The what

Next, tell us a little more about the main character and what is on their mind. What do they want in this specific situation, what are they afraid of, or what are they excited about?

For example:

- "I was a little surprised to have him on the phone, but then I thought 'This is great. I can now share the newest innovation from our R&D department. He'll be super impressed.'"
- "I was tired of life. It had been a very hectic year and I was ready for a break."
- "He felt good about the week. If he kept that performance up, he'd be promoted to partner in no time."

By sharing what's on the character's mind, your listeners will start caring. They'll become invested and want to know what is going to happen to the person next.

Two or three specific sentences are usually enough to achieve this.

There's one question that I get asked in every single workshop: "Does the story have to be about a person or can it be about a company?"

Well, you can talk about a company or product, but as Steve Clayton, VP at Microsoft, puts it, "To capture people's attention, you need to tell a story about people, not products." Your story will be much more impactful if you talk about a specific person, for example, a founder or Head of Product.

Step 2: Challenge

After you've given some quick context, it's time to introduce the challenge(s) that the main character is facing. It can be any type of challenge—a difficult decision, a problem in a relationship, or something physical—as long as it's substantial to the main character.

For example:

- "Then the Head of Purchasing said, 'Nora, we gotta terminate our contract with you. The quality of your footwear products doesn't meet our quality standards.' Immediately, my face turned red. 'That can't be right. He must be kidding me.'"
- "At that moment, I got an email from my manager with the 2023 target. My jaw dropped when I looked at the targets. What the hell? To get any bonus, I'd have to triple my sales. How could they share that information before Christmas?"
- "His daughter looked at him and said, 'Daddy, I don't want you to work on my birthday. I want you to be here with me.'"

When we start telling stories, we often think that these challenges have to be life-changing events like the time you almost died in a car accident. But telling these big stories is not necessary and can even be counterproductive in a sales context.

Why? Think about it: how many people do you know who've had a near-death experience? Not that many, right? So... it's not relatable.

Pick a challenge that is relatable—one that your listener has experienced or can imagine experiencing.

The challenge is the longest and most crucial part of the story. Describe the struggle, show what is at stake, and let the listener know how the character feels.

If the story is about yourself, introduce some degree of vulnerability. As Mark Manson, author of *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck* puts it, "Vulnerability is consciously choosing to *not* hide your emotions or desires from others."¹⁰ It's about being open about your imperfections.

Your buyer is not looking for a cape-wearing superhuman to save the day. They're looking for someone qualified, but more so someone who they trust and relate to. Admitting you're not good at something or sharing mistakes you've made will immediately make you more trustworthy.

Step 3: Response

In the third step, let your listeners know how the main character responds to the challenge. What reactions do they have, and what actions or decisions do they take to overcome the challenge? Does anyone lend a hand?

For example:

- “Over the following 3 months, we worked with 12 engineers, 3 designers, and 2 marketers to design the new shoe. We shipped each prototype to roughly 250 customers to understand exactly what they liked about it and what could be improved...”
- “Each morning, I got up 30 minutes earlier than usual. I used those 30 minutes to research, classify, and contact leads. As a night owl, I hated everything about it, but it was worth it...”
- “To spend more time with his daughter, Spencer decided to cut non-essential travel by 50%. Before accepting any physical meeting request, he’d ask himself, ‘Is my physical presence essential to the success of the meeting?’”

In real life, we usually try a bunch of things to resolve a challenge. In a story, if you share every one of them, it will become very long and complex. So, it’s best to choose one or two crucial things that you or your subject does to turn the situation around. What are the *biggest* actions taken in response to the issue?

Why is it important to include the response?

Imagine interviewing someone for a role in your company. At the interview, they tell you, “When I started my current role, my team was in a very bad state. Morale was low, output wasn’t satisfactory, and attrition was the highest in the entire company. Not anymore. I turned it around. Now, morale is 20% higher, output has increased by 30%, and attrition is in the lowest quartile of the company.”

How would you feel about that? You’d feel cheated, right? Why? Because they didn’t tell you what they did to resolve

the issue—they only told you the result. Without knowing what they did to overcome the challenge, you might think that they got lucky.

Step 4: Result

In the last step, let your listeners know how the story turns out. Where do the actions in response to the challenge lead? What is the result?

For example:

- “A month ago, we launched the sale of our new shoe. In one month, we’ve made more sales than in the previous 5 months. People love the new shoe.”
- “12 months later, my manager called and said, ‘Mark, I’ve been extremely impressed with your results. So much so that I’ve decided to double your bonus for this year.’”
- “His daughter gave him a hug and whispered in his ear, ‘Daddy, you’re the best.’”

The result is your chance to show the transformation—to show how things changed throughout the story.

If the character felt overwhelmed in the middle of the story, they now feel in control.

If the character was sad, now they are happy.

If the character was as nervous as hell, now they’re as cool as a cucumber.

Focus on one or two meaningful sentences that show the transformation. For most stories, that is enough, and it will reduce the impression of bragging or pushy selling.

The result doesn't always have to be a happy ending as long as the story serves a purpose. Every experience (good or bad) can teach us something. Share what you've learned from that experience. Otherwise, there's no point telling the story.

The last step is ideal to include any numbers or facts to give your story additional credibility. Your message lands stronger if you say, for instance, "With our help, the client managed to close 39% more deals" or "they reduced operating costs by 74%." By including numbers or facts, you provide evidence that you care about the actual business impact.

Bringing it together

Now that we've covered each step individually, let's look at the steps together:



Here's a sample story to show how the structure plays out in real life. The example comes from Colleen Stanley, author of *Emotional Intelligence for Sales Success*. She's used this story in her sales conversations to show her approach to improving companies' referral rates.

1. Context: In 2018, I was hired by a small pharma company in Los Angeles to run a referral training program for their sales teams. In one of my first meetings, I sat down with one of the account managers, Derek, to understand what was going on.

2. Challenge: In a not-very-empathetic way, I asked Derek, “Why are you not asking for referrals?”

Clearly embarrassed, he looked down, cleared his throat, and said, “Ahh, look. In my family, you don’t ask for help. It’s a sign of weakness.”

3. Response: At that moment, I knew it wasn’t the time to teach Derek any fancy referral tactics. Before anything, we needed to work on his belief system around asking for help. In my years of training and coaching, I learned that beliefs drive actions, both positive and negative. Over the next sessions, I collaborated with his team to first get them into the right mindset and then get them excited about asking for referrals.

4. Result: When it came to Derek, after a 2-hour session with me, he felt more comfortable. The same day, he sat down with his first client and asked for a referral. Guess what? He got it. In fact, that client gave him three qualified introductions, and one led to a \$250k deal.

There are many different story structures. It’s fine if you prefer another one, but make sure it’s not too complex. My advice is to pick an easy structure and stick with it for a while until you’re comfortable with it. The goal is to be so comfortable that you can use the structure anytime to improvise a story on the spot.

Exercise

Now it's time to start working on one of *your* stories.

Pick a challenge that you or a customer faced at work—ideally one that you've overcome. Don't overthink it. It doesn't have to be the "perfect" challenge. If your biggest challenge has been figuring out how to get a stubborn ketchup bottle open, that's OK. Use that challenge. At this point, I want you to get familiar with the story structure.

Got one?

Great. Go ahead and write down the story using the four steps of the story structure (context, challenge, response, and result). It should be enough to write down the main bullets of the story instead of writing down every single sentence, but I'll let you decide what works best for you. In the next chapter, you'll learn how to enhance that story.

Story structure template

Looking for prompts and guidance to help you craft your story? I've created a template to help you capture your stories using the four steps. Go to power-of-storytelling.com/kit and download the template.

Summary

- ◇ A simple but powerful structure for any sales story is the 4-step approach consisting of context, challenge, response, and result
 - ◇ To have your story land, pick a character, challenge, or emotion that your listeners can relate to
 - ◇ Practice the 4-step story structure until it becomes second nature before you work with other story structures
-

Chapter 3

ENHANCE STORIES

“A good story is one that takes you on an emotional rollercoaster. The decline is fast and terrifying, the twists are sharp and unexpected, and the end is happy and beautiful. If you have a story that does that to me, I don’t care what you’re selling. I’m going for another ride. I’m buying.”

– Andrew Sykes,
Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Habits at Work
and professor at Kellogg Sales Institute

Let’s now move on to the fun stuff. In this chapter, you’ll learn how to turn any moment (even the most mundane one) into an unforgettable story.

We’ll first talk about the three elements that make a great story (surprise, emotions, and visual moments), then five specific techniques you can use to add these elements to your story.

Three elements of great storytelling



Element #1: Surprise

The moment you share a story or give a presentation, you're fighting for your listener's attention. Every second you're talking, they'll be tempted to check their smartphone, think about their next meeting, or daydream about their upcoming holiday.

How can you get people to hang on to every word you say?

... By bringing in elements of surprise.

Surprise refers to moments in the story that are unexpected. This can be anything that breaks the typical patterns of what your listeners expect.

Element #2: Emotions

Most people think of themselves as fairly rational. They think they're in control of their decisions and their decision-making is driven by logic. I've heard hundreds of times "I'm

a numbers guy or gal” or “I’m very rational.” Sure, that can be the case, but it’s still not the numbers that make the decisions.

Harvard Business School professor Gerald Zaltman⁴ found that 95% of purchasing decisions are subconscious. What’s the biggest stimulus for subconscious decisions?

Emotions.

These purchasing decisions can be driven by pleasant emotions such as joy, pride, or excitement—or unpleasant emotions such as sadness, fear, or anger.

If you want to influence your buyer’s purchasing decisions, your stories have to touch them emotionally.

Emotions help your listener connect with your story and make it more memorable.

Element #3: Visual moments

When we listen, read, or watch great stories, we don’t just consume them on an intellectual level. We see the images in our head, feel the emotions, and actually experience the story as if it’s happening to us. Our brain can’t tell the difference between the reality we’re experiencing live and the story we’re listening to.

An effective story “transports” us into the character’s world.

Let’s say you tell your buyer a story about how you helped another customer overcome a problem. If you manage to make your buyer *see* the scene, they’ll feel like it’s happening to them. It becomes their reality. Without ever working with you, they feel connected and grateful to you for solving “their” problem.

Now you understand the elements that make a great story, let's look at five specific techniques you can use to include these elements in your stories.

Five techniques to enhance your story

Technique #1: Anticipation hook

One simple way to start your story with an element of surprise is to use an *anticipation hook*.

An anticipation hook is a sentence you say before your story to get your listeners excited about the story.

For example:

- “A couple of months ago, one of our customers found a very creative solution for exactly your problem...”
- “I learned a major lesson just a few months back...”
- “Working with that agency was mind-blowing...”

Note: I recommend using anticipation hooks sparingly. If you use them too often, you'll undermine your credibility because every story is framed as the “craziest” or “most interesting” experience.

Technique #2: Pattern interrupt

Another technique that adds surprise to your story is the *pattern interrupt*.

We humans have very clear ideas about what's normal. This includes how people should behave, what actions they should take, and what results they should expect. While you tell your story, your listeners will anticipate how the story is going to evolve.

You can add surprise to your story by breaking the typical patterns of what your listeners expect.

A pattern interrupt leads your listener in one direction (aka the setup), then it breaks that expectation (aka unusual activity).

For example:

Setup	Unusual activity
"My boss is the most chilled boss on earth. I thought he wanted to talk about soccer when he called me..."	"... but instead, he said, 'You, sir. You can pack your bags.'"
"My client told me to call five people..."	"... so just to be sure I got it right, I called 78."
"Every day, I go online to check our numbers. It's always a waste of my time as nothing has changed..."	"... but one day, I saw a massive drop on one of the graphs. Within one day, production volumes had declined by 75%."

The setup doesn't have to be right before the unusual activity. It can happen earlier in the story. For example, you may depict the character as peaceful and spiritual in context, then talk about something else, but then reveal their explosive outburst in the challenge.

No doubt, there are more techniques to add surprise. But keep in mind that you're telling a quick sales story, not writing a novel. For instance, "Something in that room didn't feel right. Moving quietly like a mouse, I put one foot in front of the other..." would be too much for a sales story.

What about humor? Humor comes alive from surprise moments. If you can include a few jokes in your story, that's awesome. Go for it. But keep in mind that your task as a storyteller is to tell a story that moves your listeners emotionally. Don't think that your story has to be hilarious. As Matthew Dicks, author of *Storyworthy*, puts it, "Humor is optional. Heart is non-negotiable."¹¹

Technique #3: Inner dialogue

The third technique is a simple way to make your story more emotional: *inner dialogue*.

Inner dialogue refers to the thoughts the character has; in our case, in crucial moments of the story.

The average human has 6,200 thoughts a day.⁵ A lot of these thoughts are anxious, obsessive, or impulsive. You can bring your listeners into the emotional moment by sharing some of these thoughts. What does your character fear, worry, dream, hope, or plan in key moments of the story?

For example:

- "I hope my boss reads this. He'll be so impressed."
- "That deal will change my life. The first thing I'll do with the money is buy my mum a new car."
- "Ah, I can't believe I did this. Everyone will think I'm a failure..."

By sharing what the character thinks, you make your listeners care. The more they know about the character, the more they'll be rooting for them.

After hearing the inner dialogue, your listeners will want to find out what happens.

While you should always be as truthful as possible, you have some creative freedom to make the inner dialogue more emotional. As presentation skills expert Patricia Fripp explains, “Stories need to be true, not 100% accurate.” Feel free to exaggerate the thoughts to make it more dramatic.

Imagine you told a story about a mistake you made. Some genuine inner dialogue could have included, “Oh shoot; this is bad!” If you wanted to take it up a notch and make it more emotional, you could say, “Oh shoot. That sucks! No doubt he’ll call my boss and complain about getting the worst service in his life. Goodbye bonus. Goodbye promotion.”

A good rule of thumb when bending the truth is to ask yourself: if someone was with you when the actual event happened, would they recognize the story as truthful? If they’d look at you with a “WTF are you talking about?” expression, this would indicate that you’ve gone too far.

Technique #4: Outer dialogue

The fourth technique is my favorite way to make any story instantly more visual: *outer dialogue*.

Outer dialogue refers to the words or conversation between two or more characters; in our case, in key moments of the story.

While you could include a full-blown conversation between characters, it’s often enough to have 1–3 sentences that reveal an important piece of information.

For example:

<i>Without</i> outer dialogue	<i>With</i> outer dialogue
"My boss told me that my pitch wasn't good enough."	"My boss said, 'Nora, you gotta work on your pitch. You won't close any deals if you stick to that pitch.'"
"In the end, we helped our client secure \$3M in funding."	"My client called me and said, 'Mark, we just got the \$3M in funding. It's crazy. Without you, we would've never gotten it!'"
"My coworker complimented me in front of the entire team."	"At that moment, my coworker stood up and said, 'I wanted to give a shout out to Nithya. She's the reason we've made it this far.'"

You see? It's a small modification, but it makes a massive difference to your story. By sharing the words that were used in the moment, you bring your story to life.

An ideal place to use outer dialogue is during the *challenge* (e.g., "My boss came up to me and said, 'Mario, what the hell? Your presentation was full of typos!'") or the *result* (e.g., "My client yelled down the phone, 'We did it. We've just been featured in *Time* magazine. I can't believe this is happening!'")

What if you can't remember the exact words that were used in specific situations? Similar to what we discussed with inner dialogue, you have some creative freedom here. Think what *could* have been said in the moment. What are the words that you, your boss, or your client could have used in this crucial

moment? Try to use words that are sharp and trigger an emotional response.

Technique #5: Show emotions

The last technique helps to make the story more visual and emotional: show, don't tell.

When they want to share an emotion, most people *tell* listeners how the character felt. They use words like happy, sad, disappointed, nervous, etc.

While this is a great starting point as any emotion is better than no emotion, we can do better than that. Words like these aren't very visual. We can't picture what it looks like to be "disappointed" or "proud." It's kind of abstract.









Instead of telling the emotion, show the emotion. How does the body or face change when experiencing the emotion of the story?

Let's look at a few comparisons between *tell* and *show*.

<i>Tell the emotion</i>	<i>Show the emotion</i>
"My boss was extremely pleased."	"My boss came up to me and patted me on my back with a big smile on his face."
"Robin was very surprised with the results."	"Robin stood there with eyebrows raised and mouth wide open."
"Right before the presentation, I got very nervous."	"I started trembling and my entire face turned red."

It's a small tweak that makes the story instantly more visual.

To help you find the right words, here are the physical reactions to some of the most common emotions:

AFRAID	SAD	NERVOUS	EMBARRASSED
 HANDS SHAKING BREATHING FAST KNEES WOBBLING BITING NAILS	 TEARS IN EYES TREMBLING LIPS HEAD HANGING DOWN HUNCHED SHOULDERS	 TREMBLING BITING BOTTOM LIP STUTTERING FIDGETING	 BLUSHING ROLLING EYES HIDING FACE HOLDING IN TEARS
ANGRY	SHOCKED	HAPPY	EXCITED
 FACE TURNING RED HANDS IN FISTS JAW CLENCHED SLAMMING DOORS	 JAW DROPPING HEART BEATING FAST STEPPING BACK GASPING	 SMILING GIGGLING SPARKLING EYES HIGH FIVING	 HEART POUNDING CLAPPING HANDS BREATHING QUICKLY JUMPING UP & DOWN

Looking for more words to show the emotions?

Just ask yourself: how do I react physically when I experience a certain emotion? What happens to my body or face when I'm sad, happy, etc.? Or, alternatively, think how one of your friends or family members physically reacts when experiencing a certain emotion. For example, when some people get angry, they yell whereas others become silent and clench their teeth.

You might be thinking, "I don't dare tell an emotional story to a business audience." Many people feel that way, and I carried that thought for a few years as well. But after trying out different formats, I realized that people at work are just

the same as everywhere else. They want to feel a connection, laugh, and be inspired. They appreciate you bringing some emotion and excitement into their average days.

But what if you have a super-left-brain crowd (e.g., scientists or engineers)? In this case, go a little less deep into the emotions. Instead of talking for a full minute about how badly the challenge affected you emotionally, use one or two emotional sentences. Give them more insights into the actual problem, numbers, and actions.

On the contrary, if you have a super-right-brain audience (e.g., marketeers or sellers), you can go deeper into your emotions.

Bringing it together

Now that we've covered the three most important elements (surprise, emotions, and visual moments) and specific techniques to enhance your story, let's see how they play out in real life.

This example comes from Niraj Kapur, LinkedIn coach and author of *Everybody Works in Sales*. He uses this story occasionally to show his clients what really matters in sales. When you read it, try to spot how Niraj brings in different techniques to enhance his story. After the story, we'll recap some of his techniques.

Four years ago, a friend called and told me that Karren Brady was giving a talk. If you don't know her, Karren Brady is a major celebrity here in the UK. She's a co-host on the TV show *The Apprentice*.

So, I went to see her speech that night.

Very eloquently, she spoke for 15–20 minutes. After that, she said, “Does anybody have any questions?”

Complete silence.

After what felt like an eternity, I cautiously raised my hand and said, “Karren, I have a question... I wanted to spend more time with my family. I wanted less stress in my life.

... So, I set up my own business.”

Immediately, the entire room burst out laughing.

I went on, “I’ve had this great career. I’ve got a bestselling book. But I have no business. I have no leads. I don’t know what I’m doing wrong. What advice do you have for people like me struggling to set up their businesses?”

She replied, “I love that question. Asking questions is so important.”

Then she gave me her answer.

At the end of her talk, she came over to me and said, “I really like the question you asked. Actually, we’re looking for a sales trainer at my company. Do you have a business card?”

I was thinking, “Really? Of course, I have a business card for Karren Brady.”

And I gave her my business card.

To which she said, “Thanks. I’ll be in touch with you next week.”

Well...

It's been **four and a half years now**.

Karren still *hasn't* called me.

I'm sure someone stole her phone. Or maybe she's out of data. Or maybe she feels too embarrassed to ask someone for help.

But jokes aside, what I learned from that experience is to ask great questions. When you ask great questions, you're going to help the people around you and you're earning respect in the room.

Did you notice which techniques Niraj used?

For instance:

- **Surprise:** A few unexpected twists (e.g., "I wanted to spend more time with my family. I wanted less stress in my life... So, I set up my own business.")
- **Emotions:** Some inner dialogue (e.g., "I'm sure someone stole her phone. Or maybe she's out of data. Or maybe she feels too embarrassed to ask someone for help.")
- **Visual moments:** Lots of outer dialogue (e.g., "I really like the question you asked. Actually, we're looking for a sales trainer at my company. Do you have a business card?")

But don't worry about including all of the techniques in each of your stories. Often, using only one or two of the techniques is enough. For instance, I've seen some very average stories land incredibly well only because of the surprise elements.

As you read the rest of the stories in this book, ask yourself: what techniques is the storyteller using to enhance the story? This way, you train your mind to think in these elements.

Exercise

Take the story you structured in the exercise in chapter 2 and think about how you can enhance it. See whether there are any moments where you can bring in:

1. Surprise (e.g., unusual activity)
2. Emotions (e.g., inner dialogue)
3. Visual moments (e.g., outer dialogue)

Summary

- ◇ You can tell any story in an engaging way by including the elements of surprise, emotions, and visual moments.
 - ◇ Specific techniques to spice up your story include:
 - Anticipation hook (a short hook to anticipate the story)
 - Pattern interrupt (an unexpected event or activity)
 - Inner dialogue (the character's thoughts)
 - Outer dialogue (the specific words that were used)
 - Show emotions (how the emotion physically looks)
-

Chapter 4

SIMPLIFY STORIES

“Tell me that story in half the number of words... now do it again... now do it again.”

– Evan Kelsay,
Senior Director of Global Accounts at Seismic Software

While the stories I hear in each workshop and coaching session are very different, there's one thing that 99% of the stories have in common...

They tend to be too complex.

They go into too many unnecessary details or use language that is difficult to understand. Well, that's 99% of the stories. Obviously not your stories. But just for the unlikely scenario that this is a problem, here are a few techniques to simplify your stories.

Length

After analyzing the most impactful sales stories from my interviews, I found that the average story is 1 minute and 27 seconds. Rarely did anyone tell an impactful story that was longer than 3 minutes.

Sure, if your story is mind-blowing and your buyer adores you, you can take a little longer to share your story. If that's not the case, keep your stories between 1 and 2 minutes.

By going on for much longer, you risk losing your buyer's attention.

So, how can you shorten your story and eliminate any unnecessary details (aka "killing your darlings")?

Here are three ways you can eliminate unnecessary details:

1. Give less context

A lot of people give way too much context. They get lost in the details of how the product works, what their company does, or what responsibilities they have. I've seen cases where people have spent 5 minutes giving context. When you give too much context, your listeners will likely think, "What's going on here? What's the point of all this? Why do I need to know this?"

You're telling a business story. Eliminate any context that isn't helping the buyer understand or sympathize with the main character. You can do this by starting your story as close to the challenge as possible, without a long preamble.

Ask yourself: is this context needed for the story to make sense? If not, cut it.

2. Eliminate side characters

Often, our stories involve additional people, such as your boss, a friend, or the taxi driver. Unless these characters have a crucial role in the story, cut them out. I know... it's harsh, and you want to be inclusive. But any extra character brings

in additional friction and makes it tougher for the audience to follow. You don't want anyone to think, "Wait. Who's Mary now?"

Ask yourself: is this character essential to the story? If not, cut them.

3. Focus on crucial moments

Life is complex. We often have more than one problem and we often try a million things to overcome these problems.

For instance, when I was in my 20s, I struggled with low levels of confidence. I tried a lot of different techniques to become more confident (therapy, visualization, affirmations, etc.). I have dozens of moments that I could include. But when I tell a story about my journey to become more confident, I focus on 1–3 crucial moments to keep it simple.

Ask yourself: what are the 1–3 most crucial moments in the story? Eliminate any moments that are not essential.

Language

After analyzing the length of the great sales stories, I also wanted to understand the language used in these stories. Plugging each story from my interviews into software that assesses readability,⁶ I got some pretty interesting results:

The average sales story can be understood by a 5th grader (age 11 to 12).

The building blocks for the grade level are word length and sentence length. The shorter the word length and sentence length, the easier it is to understand. The easier it is to understand, the more you'll connect with your listener.

Here are two things you can do to make your story easy to understand:

1. Break down long sentences

One way to simplify a story is to break long sentences down into shorter sentences. Aim for sentences that are up to 15 words long, and avoid run-on sentences.

For example:

Long sentences	Shorter sentences
"When I took the leap and started my sales and coaching business four years ago, the beginning was tough because being a good salesperson and being a good business owner are two completely different things."	"Four years ago, I took the leap and started my own sales coaching business. But the beginning was tough. Being a good salesperson and being a good business owner are two completely different things."
"I knew it wasn't the time to teach Derek any fancy referral tactics because before anything, we needed to work on his belief system around asking for help."	"I knew it wasn't the time to teach Derek any fancy referral tactics. Before anything, we needed to work on his belief system around asking for help."

Ask yourself: can I break up any long sentences into shorter ones?

2. Use everyday language

If you say something like “I was responsible for optimizing mission-critical manufacturing processes,” you’re killing any story. Even if you’re dealing with a technical topic, it’s important to sound as natural as possible. Try to avoid technical terms, foreign words, or business jargon as much as possible.

For example:

Business language	Everyday language
“20% of the workforce was impacted by the company-wide layoffs.”	“20% of the employees lost their jobs.”
“I was worried that this could have a negative impact on my career.”	“I thought, ‘F*ck, I’ll lose my job because of this.’”
“He was adamant not to leverage our new product.”	“He said, ‘Under no circumstances will I display your products on my shelves.’”

Ask yourself: can I replace any technical terms or business jargon with simpler words?

Exercise

Take the story you enhanced in the previous chapter and think about how you can simplify it. Consider whether there any moments where you can:

1. Cut unnecessary details (e.g., give less context, eliminate side characters)
2. Simplify your language (e.g., break up long sentences, use everyday language)

Summary

- ◇ Effective sales stories tend to be shorter, usually between 1 and 2 minutes long
 - ◇ To simplify your story, cut any unnecessary details and use language that a 5th grader would understand
-



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“

Great stories happen to those
who can tell them.

— Ira Glas

”