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# Winning the Pitch

**If history were taught in the form of stories,  
it would never be forgotten.**

*Rudyard Kipling*

**T**wo true stories.

One. Several years ago, my partner and I brought home an eight-week-old Miniature Schnauzer puppy and named him Byron. With his oversized paws, floppy ears and doleful eyes peeking out from under little grey eyebrows, he was the definition of cute.



We took him to the vet for his first set of vaccinations and she warned us not to let him out of the house until he had built up his

immunity. So we dutifully kept him inside for his first few weeks with us.

We noticed straightaway that our darling puppy urinated 20 times and did eight poos *in a single day*. Sometimes he would manage to relieve himself on some newspaper that we'd laid out. More often than not, though, we would find a little pool of urine or a couple of brown nuggets on our beautiful natural wooden floorboards. So yes, we were constantly mopping up behind him – pretty much every 20 minutes or so from the moment Byron woke up till he fell asleep at night.

Don't get me wrong: it's so rewarding to have him around now that he's fully house-trained. But he was so much work to begin with.

Two. Shortly after graduating from university – so I was in my mid-20s – I went for my first ever job interview. I wanted to work as a management consultant so I approached a recruitment firm that specialized in placing candidates into the management consultancy industry. Luckily, I had a strong academic track record and a little work experience so was offered a job interview with a small firm of consultants almost immediately.

I bought a suit, polished my shoes and went along for the interview. I felt confident that, with my scholastic success, I would easily impress the interviewer and land the job.

When I arrived for the interview, I was ushered into a small meeting room. A woman wearing a blood-red suit jacket with enormous shoulder pads introduced herself as Jeanette, one of the directors of the business. After exchanging pleasantries, she flashed me a shark-like grin and asked her first interview question: “So, I'm sure you know that we're a smaller consultancy with only a dozen consultants. Why would you wish to work for a small firm like us

rather than one of the large, established consultancies like McKinsey or KPMG?”

Hmm. I thought about it for a moment but couldn't come up with an answer. I sheepishly told Jeanette that I didn't know. I simply hadn't done *any* preparation for the interview – it had never occurred to me that I would need to. Going into that interview, I had assumed that having a first-class honours degree and a doctorate in psychology would have any employer practically begging to hire me.

I was wrong, of course. Unsurprisingly, I didn't get offered the job.

So why am I telling you about a puppy and my bungled job interview?

## Allowing people to come to their own conclusions

Imagine that I had started this chapter differently. Suppose that instead of the little anecdotes above, I had simply stated:

*Don't get a dog unless you're ready to put in a lot of hard work.*

*Don't go to a job interview unless you've done plenty of preparation about the company that's interviewing you.*

Would you have taken on board the messages? Probably not. They sound too trite – patronizingly obvious.

At a recent party, I mentioned to a glamorous 20-something woman that I had a dog. She ooh-ed and ahh-ed, waved her manicured hands around excitedly and said that she was desperate to get a



dog. Chatting a little more, I discovered that she was a singleton with a full-time job and a flourishing social life; as such, she wasn't going to be able to look after a dog properly. Dogs are pack animals who crave human company; without it, they get anxious and destroy furniture, and sometimes end up getting given away because their owners can't cope.

I couldn't tell her outright: "You shouldn't get a dog. I don't think you'd be able to look after one properly." That would have come across as preachy and insulting and, worse still, she may not have listened to me anyway. But telling her a story – our experience, and the sheer messiness, of bringing our dog into our home – persuaded her not to get a dog.

I've shared the story of my botched job interview many times. I often get invited by university careers services to talk about how to land the perfect job. And I use my misadventure to highlight the importance of proper interview preparation. I use it to make the point that it doesn't matter how smart you are or how good your academic grades may be; you won't get the job if you don't know enough about the employer that is thinking about offering you a job.

There's a saying that facts tell, but stories sell. Telling my own story of bringing our dog Byron home changed that party-goer's mind. Telling roomfuls of university students about my silly blunder illustrates the need for adequate preparation so much more effectively than if I were simply to spell out the same message.

## Stories are timeless and everywhere

Evolutionary psychologists believe that humans have been telling stories for tens of thousands of years. When our ancestors sought

to amuse or entertain, they swapped anecdotes. They bragged about their achievements by turning them into epic poems. When they wanted to warn people against bad behaviour, they shared fables and parables. Take just about any culture anywhere in the world and you'll find examples of legends, myths and fairy tales that have been passed from generation to generation.<sup>1</sup>

It's no coincidence that most of the world's major religions convey their ideals not through dry lists of dos and don'ts but through stories. The Old Testament of the Christian bible, for example, consists of story after story. Hundreds of millions of folks world-wide – irrespective of their actual religious beliefs – know the stories of Adam and Eve, Noah's Ark, David and Goliath, Samson and Delilah and many others. In Buddhist scripture, the path to enlightenment is taught not through bullet points but by following the trials of Siddhartha Gautama, otherwise known as the Buddha.

It's a relatively recent phenomenon that modern-day people use facts and statistics to justify their arguments. Most adults from even a century ago probably didn't understand what percentages or ratios were, let alone how to use them to formulate a logical line of reasoning. Instead, if they wanted to warn others off from doing something bad or encourage them to behave in a certain way, they told stories.

But even today, people tell stories to sell their ideas, concepts and even themselves. Top salespeople, for example, know that the best way to tempt a customer is to tell graphic stories to illustrate how their products saved the day – or how someone who *didn't* use one of their offerings crashed and burned.

**Top salespeople tell graphic stories to illustrate how their products saved the day.**

Marketing brochures often contain case studies describing how individuals, families or whole organizations benefitted or succeeded

as a result of using a product or service. And, when you strip it down to its core, what is a case study? Merely a more formal name for a story.

Now you may be thinking that *you* don't need to sell in your life. Maybe you don't sell products or services to customers or clients for a living. But I'd argue that every one of us needs to pitch ideas and sell daily.

Want a promotion? You need to sell your ideas and persuade people that your projects are the ones to back. Need to raise money for an animal shelter or for starving children? You have to sell your cause. Want to lobby the government or convert your neighbours into going green? Sell.

Even persuading someone to go on a date with you involves selling yourself as interesting, charming and sexy. Or if you want to entice your friends into going on a beach holiday rather than camping in the woods, of course you need to pitch the idea to them.

Think about the most engaging, entertaining individuals you know – both amongst your friends as well as your work circles. If you analyze what they say or do that makes them such compelling people to be around, I'm willing to bet that most of them tell funny or passionate or terrifying or self-deprecating stories.

Speeches and presentations almost always work better when they include personal anecdotes. An hour-long presentation of bullet points can feel like hell for an audience. But the moment audiences hear the beginning of a story, they perk up. They look up from their emails and text messages and want to hear what transpired. Sometimes, they get the gratification of predicting the outcome. Other times, they get surprised. Either way, the person telling the tale wins by keeping people switched on and attentive.

Away from work, the best wedding speeches I've ever heard always involve romantic, amusing or salacious stories about the bride or groom. At funerals, the most heartfelt eulogies have centred on recollections about the trials and triumphs of the dearly departed.

**Stories are memorable. Stories are persuasive.**

Stories are memorable. Stories are persuasive. Whether used in writing, videos, face-to-face conversations or conference presentations, stories can both change minds and influence behaviour. But don't just take my word for it that stories are penetrating ways to influence people. What does the scientific evidence tell us?

## The science of storytelling

Here's a thought experiment for you. Imagine that a dangerous virus is affecting people all over the world. Let's call it the feline flu pandemic. The virus causes a range of unpleasant symptoms and can be fatal in some cases but, thankfully, scientists have already concocted a vaccine which is 96 per cent effective.

Doctors want to encourage people of all ages to get vaccinated but they're not sure exactly how to persuade people to do so. They only have a limited advertising budget. Should they put out a fact-based press release or tell the story of a single sufferer?

This is precisely the question that Dutch researchers led by John de Wit at Utrecht University tried to answer. Let's continue our imaginary journey and suppose that you come across two newspaper cuttings talking about the importance of getting vaccinated. Which one of the following do you think is the more powerful and persuasive?

*Every winter, tens of thousands of people around the country get the flu. However, a new, stronger so-called feline flu strain has reached the United Kingdom. Feline flu is estimated to have affected between 20,000 and 40,000 individuals in the UK since the beginning of the year. The age range of those who have contracted the virus range from very young children to the elderly. Both men and women are equally likely to be affected.*

*Typical symptoms include: a high temperature and sweating, a feeling of generalized feebleness, severe aches and pains in both muscles (particularly in the abdomen) and joints around the body, a headache and a sore throat. There may also be a loss of appetite and the sensation of “chills”. In many cases, symptoms may also include diarrhoea and/or vomiting. In rare cases, individuals have also reported intense dizziness and seeing flashes of light in their eyes.*

*The acute symptoms tend to pass within 5 to 8 days. However, symptoms of infirmity may persist for several weeks thereafter. Approximately 13 in 100 patients may require treatment in hospital, for example for dehydration from diarrhoea. People with emphysema or other respiratory conditions may be at greater risk. The virus has also proved fatal in some cases. While the common winter flu tends to generate fatalities in people with existing medical conditions or those with compromised immune systems (e.g. the elderly), it seems that the feline flu is associated with an acute risk of death across all ages.*

*The vaccine is 96 per cent effective and is administered for free by your doctor. It is recommended that everyone should visit their doctor as soon as possible to receive the vaccination against feline flu.*

Or here's a second version:

*My name is Ashley and I'm a healthy 39-year-old. I go to the gym maybe twice a week (as much as my work as a financial analyst allows) and eat healthily, apart from having too many cakes. I get the occasional cold but don't often get ill.*

*In January, I remember feeling particularly tired one Sunday afternoon. By the evening, I was feeling extremely cold. I was shivering despite having brought a blanket into the lounge from upstairs. Suddenly, I felt my stomach turning and I was sick. I couldn't get to the bathroom in time and I vomited onto my blanket and clothes.*

*I threw up again a couple more times that evening and I didn't sleep much that night. I was shivering because I felt so cold but at the same time my duvet was soaked with sweat. I couldn't go to work for the entire week. Even by Friday I was still feeling shaky and tired and a little out of breath even walking up the stairs to the bathroom.*

*I went back to work the following week but I got tired out quite quickly during the day and was exhausted by the evenings. It took me another two weeks before I had the energy to go back to the gym.*

*The vaccine is 96 per cent effective and is free from your doctor. If someone had told me that I could have avoided all of that vomiting, sweating, shaking and feeling awful for a whole week, I would gladly have paid a doctor £500 not to suffer any of that. So I recommend that you visit your doctor as soon as possible to receive the vaccination against the feline flu.*

Both paragraphs are 284 words in length. But which one did you think was the more hard-hitting and convincing?

If you're like most people, you probably found the second account more graphic, evocative and persuasive. And that's precisely what de Wit and his team found too. People who read first-person testimonials about their experience of living with disease were significantly more likely to get vaccinated than those who read impersonal facts and statistics about the disease.<sup>2</sup>

Stories didn't just persuade people. They saved lives.

If we're keeping score, that makes it: Stories 1, Statistics 0.

## Understanding the irrational appeal of stories

Perhaps you're thinking that you or the crowd in your life are much more rational and prefer hard facts over unproven anecdotes. And yes, most people *think* that they're pretty rational and aren't influenced by trivial stories, but research tells us otherwise.

**Most people *think* that they're pretty rational and aren't influenced by trivial stories, but research tells us otherwise.**

Time for another piece of research. To illustrate this next study, let's contemplate a hypothetical scenario. An elderly aunt of yours – one of your favourite relatives – lives alone in the city and she's worried about her safety. She doesn't have a computer so asks you to go online to research a home security system for her.

You discover from a speedy Google search that there are two main manufacturers of alarm systems, Diamond Protection and Bulldog Guardian. Even though there are other retailers, they actually sell products made by one of these two big companies.

You also come across an article written in a highly respected consumer magazine saying that Diamond Protection's alarms are far superior to those of Bulldog Guardian. In laboratory tests, Diamond Protection outperformed Bulldog Guardian on just about every criterion. The scientists also surveyed several thousand homeowners with security systems made by either company and found that Bulldog Guardian's alarms broke down three times more frequently and were more costly to maintain. So the article is eminently clear: Diamond Protection's alarm systems are much, much better than those of Bulldog Guardian.

However, your Google search throws up a couple of surprising online complaints about Diamond Protection too. One is a blog

post written by a young pair of newlyweds with the rather twee names Avery and Alice who installed Diamond Protection's system in their new home. When they went on holiday only three months later, their home was ransacked by intruders, who broke in through a rear window and stole pretty much everything they owned. The Diamond Protection alarm didn't go off until the couple returned home from holiday and put their key in the door!

Another online article reports that a man – a construction foreman called Connor – installed a Diamond Protection system, but the alarm kept going off in the night without good reason. He asked an engineer to come fix it but even after two visits the system still kept registering false alarms. Eventually, Connor decided to buy a Bulldog Guardian system. He threw the Diamond Protection system in the bin. OK, so you found the article on a tawdry gossip website known more for its semi-slandrous reportage of C-List celebrities. But the article wouldn't be a lie, would it?

So you have two sources of information to help you make a decision. One is the article focusing on lab tests and a survey saying that Diamond Protection beats Bulldog Guardian in nearly every way. The other is a couple of online articles written by people whose credentials you have no idea about. Given the choice, which of the two systems would you recommend for your beloved elderly aunt?

When I pose this question to groups of delegates during training sessions and workshops, probably around 80 to 90 per cent of people say that they would recommend Diamond Protection. After all, that's the logical, rational choice. That's what the scientists recommend, right?

Surely very few individuals would recommend something based only on a couple of unproven stories. Indeed, when research psychologists posed a similar choice to experimental participants, they



found that 97 per cent of people said that they would recommend for another person the product endorsed by the independent consumer article rather than the flimsier anecdotal reports.

Rather sneakily, though, the researchers then gave participants the opportunity to take home one of the two products to try for themselves. And when it came to choosing something to use *for themselves*, 31 per cent of people changed their minds.<sup>3</sup>

That's like 97 per cent of folks saying that they would recommend the Diamond Protection system for their aunt – because they know it's the rational, sensible thing to do. They realize that they *should* recommend things predicated on evidence and facts. But then 31 per cent of people decide that what's good enough for that dear old aunt may not be good enough for them. The unproven stories ultimately won over one in three people – they couldn't help but be swayed, against their better judgement, by stories over facts.

Now, that scenario asks you to throw your support behind either a set of facts *or* a story. And the story won out for one in three people. So just imagine if you were trying to persuade people and had not only facts *but also* a story. Consider how powerful and persuasive that combination could be.

## What is a story?

A well-told story somehow bypasses our defences to strike deep within our brains. But try to pin down exactly what a story is and you may find it harder than it may at first seem. After all, stories can be moving or merely instructive, tragic or uplifting, brutal or hilarious. They can surprise us or affirm what we believed all along.

**A well-told story somehow bypasses our defences to strike deep within our brains.**

Stories can be fictional exploits or retellings of real events. They can be set in the distant past, just a day ago or in a hypothetical future. They can be shared with one person in an intimate setting or with many people at the same time.

Cut to the core of a story, though, and what we discover is that all such adventures have characters or protagonists that either do something or to whom something happens. There may only be one protagonist or there may be a cast of many.

In J. K. Rowling's bestselling series of books, for example, we get introduced to Harry Potter. We learn that he's an orphan and that he lives in a cupboard under the stairs with a family who tell him he's no good.

Or take the original *Star Wars* movie, which has more of an ensemble of characters. We first meet Princess Leia, a resistance fighter seeking to defeat a tyrannical galactic empire. Seemingly by chance, we then become acquainted with a young farmer called Luke Skywalker, who recruits the roguish Han Solo to help rescue the princess.

In the New Testament, we learn that Jesus Christ was born to humble beginnings in the town of Bethlehem to Joseph and his betrothed Mary. But then he hears a voice from Heaven addressing him and telling him that he is the Son of God.

The protagonists usually encounter an event or series of events. Each may present an obstacle, conflict or crisis. Depending on what happens, we may learn that the protagonists are plucky heroes who struggle on through or are perhaps ill-fated victims who fail in spite of their best efforts.

Harry Potter discovers that he's a wizard and gets taken to the magical school of Hogwarts. He has to fend off some bullying kids

while also fighting all manner of creatures and evil witches and wizards.

Luke Skywalker conquers his own fears and learns a new skill – becoming a Jedi – in order to rescue the princess and overthrow Darth Vader. Han Solo overcomes his personal greed and, in doing so, discovers that he wants to fight the forces of evil too.

Jesus feels compelled to preach the word of God, which he does by giving sermons and by telling parables. However, his actions stir up ill-feeling among the Romans, who govern the lands, as well as the existing religious rulers, who doubt that he is the Son of God.

And finally we reach the end, in which we find out how the situation resolved itself. Maybe the protagonists overcame the obstacles and resolved the crisis. Or they may be beaten down by it.

So Harry Potter vanquishes the evil wizard Voldemort. Luke Skywalker, Han Solo and Princess Leia destroy the Death Star and send Darth Vader spinning into space. Jesus is crucified but rises from the dead, proving to his doubters that he really was the Son of God.

Actually, the protagonists of a story don't even need to be people. I was at a fund-raising event recently for the renovation of a celebrated old theatre in London, and the speaker told the tale of how the building had survived two world wars but had fallen into disrepair in recent years. Listening to the travails and ordeals that the grand old building had suffered made for as absorbing a story as any good book. So there's no reason why the protagonist of a story couldn't be a product, an animal, a location – pretty much anything, perhaps?

But the point is this: whether fiction or fact, most stories follow a similar pattern. And here's the good news. You don't have to be a master troubadour or a modern-day bard, because we can *all* exploit this simple pattern to tell effective stories.

## Studying stories

This chapter is all about effective storytelling. And we shall shortly cover a simple framework for telling effective stories. But a good start is to become more analytical as you read, listen to and watch other stories.

How are your favourite novels or biographies structured? What makes a story in the news compelling? What in particular makes the plot of a film or TV show engaging?

Becoming more critical as you come across stories will help you to identify the elements that will help you to inject greater interest into your stories.

## “SOAR vividly”

Over the years I’ve trained many people in the art of telling effective stories. I’ve worked with groups of job hunters ranging from seasoned executives to lowly graduates who needed to sell themselves more effectively during job interviews. I’ve worked with management consultants, engineers, lawyers, accountants and salespeople across all sorts of industries who wanted to pitch their services to their clients and customers.

I contend that all you need to do is “SOAR vividly”. I’ll discuss the four letters of the SOAR acronym first and come back to the “vividly” part in the next section.

SOAR stands for:

- **Situation.** So what’s the background to the story that you wish to tell? Who are the protagonists or characters in your case study or anecdote? And what do you need to tell your audience in order to grab their attention and make them want to listen to the rest?
- **Obstacles.** The most effective stories involve protagonist(s) who battle to overcome obstacles. These could be physical problems, such as a lack of resources, or actual opponents; these could also be personal challenges, such as having to overcome one’s fears, doubts or base human nature. But obstacles are essential. Researchers at Harvard University have documented something called the “Underdog Effect”: audiences like and warm to protagonists who overcome arduous difficulties as opposed to protagonists who have every advantage to begin with.<sup>4</sup> Audiences want to know what the protagonist(s) had to contend with. So what are the setbacks or barriers your protagonists faced?
- **Actions.** Once you’ve introduced the obstacles, your audience wants to know what the protagonists did to deal with each hurdle. If you’re telling an epic about yourself, what steps did “I” or “we” take to tackle each obstacle? Or if you’re recounting an anecdote about someone else, what did “he” or “she” or “they” do? If something didn’t work, what did the protagonist(s) do next?
- **Resolution (and Revelation).** Finally, there’s the end to the story. Audiences don’t like to be left hanging. Did the protagonist(s) achieve success or failure? Was there any bizarre twist in the tale that the audience may not have expected? What did the protagonist(s) learn? And, by extension, what’s the lesson, message or emotion-laden warning that you’re trying to sneak past your audience’s defences?

## Beginning to SOAR

Your turn. Have a go. What stories could you tell to spread your ideas or lessons?

Perhaps you run a charity and want to promote a philanthropic cause. Maybe you're an entrepreneur who needs investors to dip into their pockets to fund your latest venture. Or you may be a manager, a supplier, even a parent who wants to change the attitudes or behaviour of your employees, your customers or your kids.

Write the words Situation, Obstacles, Actions and Resolution/Revelation down the side of a sheet of paper. Even better, open up your computer and create a table in a document.

Then under each heading have a go at scripting what the background was, the obstacles the protagonist(s) faced, the actions the protagonist(s) took and what was ultimately achieved.

You could tell a story drawn from real life featuring you as the protagonist. Or you could tell a tale about colleagues, family or friends that you've witnessed. To convince customers to buy from you, share stories – effectively testimonials – about the challenges that other customers faced and how you, your products or services helped them.

Or your story could be fictitious. Asking audiences to pretend that they are experiencing an imaginary but realistic situation can sometimes be just as effective.

As we progress through this chapter, I'll give you more advice on how to turn the skeleton of your story into a stronger one.

Your aim is to supply just enough detail to paint a picture for your audience so that they can see it in their imaginations. Help your audience to feel as if it's a movie playing out right in front of them.

Say you're trying to explain to customers how they could benefit from what you did for another customer. Perhaps your story could play to their hopes or ambitions of what they could reap too.

Or suppose you're seeking to warn a group of youths about the dangers of drugs or drink driving. Maybe you could try shocking or disgusting them to warn them off forever.

Think in particular about the emotions you wish to spark in your audience. Do you want them to fear the consequences of not taking action? Do you need them to pity the plight of the protagonist in your story and reach for their wallets? Or do you want to enthuse and excite people about the benefits of behaving differently? Whatever your goal, the key to galvanizing your audience into action is to make them *feel* something.

**The key to galvanizing your audience into action is to make them *feel* something.**

I'm not saying that the SOAR acronym can transform anyone into a miraculous storyteller – the kind of person who can stride on stage and enrapture vast, thronging audiences for hours at a time. But it can help us to pull together effective narratives to tell people about our concepts, ideas, products or even our own achievements.

I once coached a religious, abstemious but financially savvy man in his mid-30s who worked at an investment bank. I'll call him Leo. He felt that he was being held back from promotion despite the fact that he had brokered as many deals as some of his colleagues who had been promoted above him. His bosses told him that he wasn't enough of a team player – which he took to mean that he

didn't hang around enough with his colleagues drinking in bars and that he was too quiet. He didn't engage in enough banter and talk up his own achievements in the brash, self-congratulatory fashion that his more bullish counterparts did.

But after I shared with him the SOAR acronym, he made a concerted effort to tell his colleagues what he had been up to. Rather than having to think up artificial ways to boast about his successes, Leo found it easier to tell carefully crafted – but seemingly spontaneous – stories about the lessons he hit upon in his work.

He started by setting out the challenges he faced, for example clients saying “no” because they didn't have the budget or because they already had relationships with other investment banks. Then he told his colleagues how he took every obstacle, every objection and problem and acted to deal with them. And, of course, the resolution usually finished with the happy ending of how he landed a new client or, less frequently, the crucial lesson he learnt from a less joyful conclusion.

I only worked with Leo for a few months and we worked on other skills too, but it seemed that planned storytelling helped him considerably by allowing him to talk about his achievements in a non-boastful manner. A little over a year later I received a card and a bottle of champagne from him telling me that he had been promoted.

## Using vivid language

When I'm running leadership development programmes for client organizations and covering the topic of emotional intelligence, I often recount the true story of how the chief executive of a marketing consultancy, whom I'll call Martin, effectively destroyed his own business.



A bit of background. Martin was an intellectually brilliant academic who had founded his own business in the late 1990s. He had degrees from both Oxford and Harvard universities. And his intellectual prowess made him dazzling to work with.

Now in his late 50s, he had thick eyebrows and a shock of overly black hair, which many amongst his team believed to be dyed. With a tall but moderately overweight build, Martin had a booming voice and a perpetually sweaty forehead. He talked loudly. He laughed loudly. And when he was in a good mood, he was inspiring and fun to be around.

But when he was in a bad mood, his team of consultants really suffered. He banged his fist on the table during meetings when his team reported bad news. He made threats about people's jobs when they fell short of their targets. He mocked his employees in a joking-but-not-joking manner, rolled his eyes, and sometimes walked out of meetings in visible despair.

When the economy tanked and the company's problems piled up, he finally lost his temper one time too many. He made threats during a team meeting which weren't just mildly troubling but outright offensive.

The result? Three of his most senior executives decided that they had had enough. They were experienced people but Martin treated them more like inadequate children. They managed to skirt around the usual non-compete clauses and legal protections that Martin had put in place to set up their own businesses: one left to set up on her own while the other two banded together to set up another rival business. Over the course of less than nine months, the three departing executives took more than half of Martin's clients with them.

Poor Martin. He was a hard-working and talented executive in many ways. But regrettably his inability to control his rage – his

lack of emotional intelligence about his impact on others – was his undoing.

The end.

In reading that story, did you notice anything unnecessary in its retelling?

Read it again and you'll see that I took a few sentences to describe Martin. I told you his approximate age and what he looked like. I told you about his physical size and how he had a propensity to perspire. Maybe you imagined him as someone with a paunch or just someone with a larger-than-average build. Also, you learnt that he was loud.

Strictly speaking, none of those details should matter. I could have saved several sentences by jumping to the fact that he often experienced dark moods.

But, actually, studies tell us that those apparently unimportant details *do* matter.

## The science of the small stuff

Research conducted by psychologists Melanie Green and Timothy Brock at Ohio State University tells us that people are more likely to be persuaded by a story when they feel “transported” by it. When individuals feel “transported”, they feel immersed in the characters, detail and narrative; they become so intent on following the narrative and finding out what happened that they may even become less aware of the real world around them.<sup>4</sup>

The research reminded me of a time recently when I met a friend of mine outside a train station. I was running late and saw that she

was already there, standing outside the entrance reading a book – *The Hunger Games*, in fact. When I went up to her and said hello, I made her jump! She literally jolted upright and cried, “Oh!” She was so engrossed in the story – she had been so transported – that she had lost track of what was going on around her.

The more we can paint an immersive mental picture for an audience, the more likely we will be to transport them and therefore win them over. Whether we are dreaming up a hypothetical scenario or telling a story about a real situation, we would be wise to depict a graphic and involving scene for people – something so intense that they almost feel it’s happening to them.

That’s why lawyers in court cases often go to fantastic lengths to paint vivid mental images. They know that, when seeking to establish the guilt (or innocence) of a defendant in the eyes of a judge and jury, the details matter.

For example, a lawyer in a grisly shooting incident could say: “On the night of January 11th, Edgar Broughton was shot by an intruder in his home.” Very straightforward and factual.

But it would be more advantageous to begin with something like: “It’s January 11th, just after midnight. It’s a cold clear night and the moon is almost full. Picture a quiet suburban street and the home of one Edgar Broughton. The house has a white wooden porch with a neat, emerald-green lawn and a row of pale-pink roses out front. And it was here, in his very own home, that Edgar Broughton was tragically gunned down by an intruder.”

Success at persuading people through purely factual argument hinges on convincing audiences that you are both a credible source and have good intentions. In contrast, the research duo Green and Brock suggest that stories “might be used to advantage by low-credible sources or by speakers who lack cogent arguments”.

In other words, audiences that feel transported by an absorbing story may not pay attention to whether the source is credible or not. They get swept away by the narrative.

So, the more we can transport people away into our stories and help them to visualize what happened, the more persuasive our narratives become. That's why I use the phrase "SOAR vividly" as an aide-memoire for individuals who want to tell more effective stories. The "vividly" bit turns out to be rather essential when it comes to giving birth to stories that truly come alive in the minds of an audience.

**The more we can paint an immersive mental picture for an audience, the more likely we will be to win them over.**

So add in those finer points. Sometimes more words can lead to greater persuasion. Even if your audience doesn't quite know why you've added those vivid details into your story, *you* will know that you are transporting them to exactly where you want them to be.

### Introducing vividness

Over to you again. Hopefully you have started to assemble the components of a story – the situation, obstacles, actions and resolution – as you'll get the most out of this chapter if you have the bare bones of one. Now have a go at adding in a vivid detail or two now.

You could include a colourful phrase or two about the protagonist(s) in your tale. What outstanding physical characteristics did they have? Were they wearing anything unusual? Did they have any particular mannerisms – speech, posture, movement?

Perhaps you could set the scene by describing the locale of your meeting, such as a particularly messy office, a lavish restaurant, a bumpy taxi, whatever. Maybe mention the time of year – for example that the incident took place in the heat of June when the air conditioning was broken and tempers were fraying.

What one or two phrases of vivid detail will you use to pull your listeners or readers deeper into your adventure?

## Making money through stories

Storytelling is like a Trojan Horse that allows us to sneak our pitches through audiences' defences. Whether real or imaginary, stories seem to swerve around people's natural scepticism to find their target at some intensely profound level.

It should hardly surprise you then that more and more organizations are realizing the power of storytelling as a tool for winning hearts and changing minds. In a recent fund-raising campaign, for example, the American Red Cross sent video cameras to 300 individuals and asked them to capture their tales of how they had each been helped by the charity. The YouTube trailer for the campaign is only 1 minute and 58 seconds long, but I dare you to watch it without feeling a real tug on your emotions – I felt my eyes welling up with tears less than 30 seconds into the video! (I'll put a link to their campaign in the notes at the back of the book.<sup>5</sup>)

Linda Honan, the creative executive at advertising agency BBDO New York, who headed up the campaign, explained: "Every time we started to talk about an ad campaign, we worried that it felt a little contrived or boastful."

Instead, she and her team took the route of asking individuals to share their own, very personal experiences of how the American Red Cross had either saved their lives or helped them to save the life of someone else: “We found the purest way to push the story [of the American Red Cross] out was to have the people whose lives have been touched tell their story.”

Regardless of the purity of the approach, science informs us that stories are far more effective at getting people to part with cash. In one notable study, researchers recruited people to read either some factual information about starvation in Africa or the story of a single, starving African girl. Those who read the descriptive passage

donated on average \$1.21. Those who read about the starving girl named Rokia donated \$2.12 – an increase of a whopping 76 per cent more money.<sup>6</sup>

**Imagine if you could boost the success of *your* sales pitches by 76 per cent. You’d be more than a little pleased, right?**

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## Focusing on the O and A

I’m not saying that all stories follow the SOAR pattern. Some authors start with the situation or resolution first and then go back to cover the obstacles or actions. The four elements are still there, but perhaps tumbled into a different order, such as SROA or RSOA.

For example, when we read the biographies of famous people, we often already know what they achieved. Whether we’re reading about a business leader or a celebrated actor, we know where they’ve got to – what the resolution to the tale is. What intrigues us is *how* they got there – the obstacles they encountered and the actions they took to get to the top.

Pick up the biography of Virgin entrepreneur Richard Branson or GE chief executive Jack Welch and you'll read how they succeeded in spite of a lack resources and how they outmanoeuvred sluggish competitors. Read about actors or entertainers and you'll uncover how they overcame poverty, tragic family circumstances, unsupportive teachers or even abuse.

What makes stories gripping are the descriptions of the obstacles people encountered and the plucky actions they took along the way. And that's why in this next box I recommend distinguishing between the distinct obstacles you faced. So when you're pitching your wares or yourself, be sure to make the obstacles you faced – along with the actions you took – stand out. Here's a further set of pointers for honing the stories you tell.

**What makes stories gripping are the descriptions of the obstacles people encountered and the plucky actions they took along the way.**

### Taking "SOAR vividly" to the next level

Storytelling is as much art as science. And I would be lying if I said that I could give you an ironclad set of rules that would enable you to craft powerful, persuasive stories without fail. Often, the best way to get better at telling stories is to test drive some stories, see how they work and hone them over time. However, here are some further pointers that may help you out:

- **Situation:** spend only a little time laying out the background or set-up to your story. If you read classic fiction – for example a *Sherlock Holmes* story or anything by Charles Dickens or Emily Brontë – you'll notice there's a lot of

*(Continued)*

background description and relatively little action. But modern 21st-century fiction concentrates much more on the action because folks in the pacey digital age get bored so easily. So be careful not to supply too much background information. How will you capture your audience's attention or arouse their curiosity as quickly as possible?

- **Obstacle 1 + Actions:** don't just list all of the obstacles that you or the protagonist(s) faced straightaway. Begin by talking about the first hitch or dilemma and the actions that the protagonist(s) took to overcome it. Was it successful?
- **Obstacle 2 + Actions:** next, move on to the next difficulty or challenge. What was it? And what did the protagonist(s) do to deal with this one?
- **Obstacle 3 + Actions:** and then repeat as often as you like until you reach the end of your story. Bear in mind that if you're giving an hour-long presentation, you may be able to talk at length about multiple obstacles in your saga. But if you want a quick anecdote, then fewer or even just one obstacle may be enough to make the point.
- **Resolution:** finally, talk about the result, what transpired, the impact on the protagonist(s). Did good things happen, suggesting that our audience should emulate the protagonist(s)? Or did things turn out badly, meaning that we should steer clear of what the perpetrator(s) did? If you're trying to hit your audience with an emotion – if you're trying to make them laugh, cry, gasp or groan – this is when you do it.
- **Vividly:** remember to add in those vivid details so that you're not just describing what happened but also where it happened, what the characters looked like and how it felt. Remember that it can be the seemingly irrelevant titbits of detail that allow a listener to visualize a story and feel truly immersed in it.



## Adding in a little TLC

TLC customarily stands for tender loving care. But in the context of pitching stories that change minds and behaviour, TLC stands for time, location and characters.

It's not always a must-have to add in time and location, and you can leave them out if you're very short of time. But even a single sentence or two may be enough to provide a clearer image for your audience that helps them to picture the scene more vividly.

Think about how we start stories for children. The quintessential start for a fairy tale is to say something like: "A long time ago in a magical kingdom far, far away. . ." In other words, we include a time and location before introducing the characters: TLC.

If you're struggling to set the scene for your story, here are some further pointers:

- **Time.** You can be as vague or precise as you like about when your story took place. For example, something like "When Elena was a girl growing up" implies that the story is set in the past or that we may encounter Elena as an adult. But it doesn't specifically mention a date or even a decade. Contrast that to openers such as "Back in the 1980s, I remember when . . ." or "You won't believe what happened to me last week. It was lunchtime – just past 1 o'clock on a Thursday – and I was . . ." Usually, just a sentence is enough about the timing of the story as audiences want to get to what actually happened.
- **Location.** As with time, you can be fairly general or ultra-specific about where your action took place. Contrast "When Elena was a girl growing up in Russia" (which specifies a country) versus "I was walking down Station Street and had

crossed the road opposite the Burger King” (which is much more specific). Again, a single sentence may be enough to describe where the story took place.

- **Characters.** You may not have to provide much (or even any) background if you’re telling a story about yourself – especially if you’re standing in front of an audience! But if you’re talking about multiple protagonists, it may be worth thinking about how you will introduce each hero or victim. For example, if I’m sharing an anecdote about one of my clients, Ingrid, and how she eventually got promoted above her boss, Chris, I may need to offer a little description of both Ingrid and Chris.

Suppose you’re writing a case study that has to be fewer than 300 words long. Or you’re preparing some anecdotes to use briefly during a 30-minute sales meeting with a potential customer. In these cases, you may not have the luxury of mentioning the time, location and characters. But even so, it’s worth having them in mind. Knowing *when* and *where* a story took place and *who* was involved will help you to paint a more vivid picture of what happened.

## Matching backgrounds

One reason I’m so keen on wading through research studies is that it helps to take the guesswork out of life. And one pioneering study in particular allows us to turn storytelling from an art form into more of a science.

Shortly before a US presidential election, researchers Geoff Kaufman and Lisa Libby invited a class of undergraduate students at Ohio State University to take part in a rather elegant experiment.

They asked the participants to read a fictitious student’s first-person narrative (i.e. a story told from the student’s own perspective:

“I did this, I did that . . .”). The student wanted to vote in an election and overcame several obstacles – car problems, rain and long lines at the polling booth – in order to do so.

But here’s the twist. The researchers secretly split the participants into two groups and gave each group a slightly altered version of the story to read. One version of the account mentioned that the protagonist was a student at Ohio State University. The other version revealed that the protagonist was a student at Denison University, another university in the same state. Otherwise, though, the two narratives were identical.

A week later, the researchers emailed the participants to find out whether they had actually voted or not in the real-world presidential election.

The result? Twenty-nine per cent of those who had read about a student at rival Denison University said they had voted. But a staggering 65 per cent of those who read about the student at Ohio State University ended up voting.<sup>7</sup>

Psychologists use the terms “ingroup” and “outgroup” to refer to people we identify with versus people we don’t identify with. Participants who believed that the story was about someone from the same university – the same ingroup – were more than twice as likely to vote as those who read about someone from the different university, or outgroup.

Hopefully the implication of the study is clear enough. Were we trying to alter people’s behaviour through a story, we would be wise to speak about someone who had a similar background to the audience – someone from the ingroup rather than an outgroup.

**We would be wise to speak about someone who had a similar background to the audience.**

## Matching stories to audiences

We all have favourite anecdotes or stories that we like to tell. But how useful are yours for actually influencing and persuading your target audiences?

If you are preparing a speech for an audience of mainly Asian women, then picking an Asian woman protagonist for any stories you tell makes sense. Or at least pick a protagonist who is either Asian or a woman. Or if you're shooting a video primarily for finance directors of medium-sized businesses – well, I'm sure you can guess who your stories should ideally feature!

Think for a moment about the stories you'd like to tell. Will the protagonist(s) within them *genuinely resonate* with your audience?

## Turning molehills back into mountains

There's an old English adage that goes, "Don't make a mountain out of a molehill." It means that we shouldn't blow things out of proportion. And as far as advice for life goes, it's a splendid idea. We mostly shouldn't treat relatively small incidents as if they were crises. We should let the minor missteps and transgressions go rather than allowing them to assume too great a role in our lives.

But when it comes to telling persuasive stories, it may often help us to do the precise opposite: to turn molehills back into mountains.

The principle reminds me of a time I coached an executive in the pharmaceuticals industry, called Karolina, who was struggling to

land a new job. An effervescent Hungarian woman in her mid-40s who spoke with the urgency of the over-caffeinated, she had a superb track record and had been invited to numerous interviews but wasn't getting any offers. So I met her and put her through a mock interview to see what she was doing wrong.

She spoke with confidence and the élan of the well-travelled. However, I spotted that she was downplaying her accomplishments despite the fact that she was far from shy. She wasn't making light of her skills out of bashfulness or modesty but seemingly because her thoughts were bubbling out of her without enough structure.

Whenever I asked her to give me examples of her achievements – for instance with questions like “Tell me about a time you coached a struggling member of your team” – she skipped over the details. She spent far too much time setting up the scenario and rambling on about the background to the situation. She talked only briefly about the obstacles she faced and actions she took. Case in point: she said that she had coached one of her team members who experienced some “personal upheaval” in his life. Then she jumped to the conclusion, the resolution of the story.

At first, her story didn't sound that impressive. But when I questioned her in depth, I discovered that the member of her team had suffered a bereavement – the death of his brother – which had precipitated childcare issues at home, a period of understandably terrible personal unhappiness and a drop in productivity at work.

It was only when we explored what those problems were – by getting into enough detail to turn those molehills back into mountains – that I discovered the lengths to which she had gone in order to support her team member. A less interested interviewer might not have asked for the same amount of detail and so Karolina would have lost the opportunity to showcase her skills.

So have a think when you're trying to pitch something to your audience. Say you're pitching your company's services to a potential client by telling the story of how you helped a previous client, ABC Technology. You could start by describing ABC Technology's situation and need. You could describe the actions your company took and the result that ABC Technology got. But it would be a fairly humdrum, uninspiring story. It wouldn't present your audience with anything to make them sit up and want to listen to the story.

But imagine talking about ABC Technology's problems. Perhaps you quoted that the project would take three months and signed a contract to that effect. But then you uncovered further problems which led you to the horrific conclusion that it would actually take you six months . . .

In telling this new version of the story, pause for a moment. Stop. Let the statement hang in the air. And imagine what could be going through your potential client's mind. Clearly, your audience would want to know: how did you solve the problem? How did you cram six months' worth of work into a mere three months?

By pointing out the obstacles that you or the protagonist(s) in your story encountered, you create a sense of jeopardy, a feeling of suspense. You automatically raise questions in the minds of your audience. You make them wonder: "What happened next?"

People are curious by nature. Present them with a mystery and they can't help but want to understand *what happened next*.

And that's the perfect moment to strike. To explain how you or the protagonist(s) saved the day, the actions that were taken and the resolution that was achieved.

When I'm running training sessions on storytelling and making effective pitches in business, some clients struggle to take it all in.

Other clients think that all of it sounds really straightforward and obvious. So the theory can appear confusing for some but too simplistic for others. Irrespective of their concerns, I say the same thing to both of these groups: it's only when you try to *apply* the framework to your own experiences that it will start to make sense and truly come alive.

To construct their own “SOAR vividly” stories, many clients find it useful to draw up and then fill in a table as follows:

<b>Time</b>	
<b>Location</b>	
<b>(Ingroup) Character(s)</b>	
<b>Situation</b>	
<b>(Mountainous) Obstacle 1</b>	
<b>Actions</b>	
<b>(Mountainous) Obstacle 2</b>	
<b>Actions</b>	
<b>(Mountainous) Obstacle 3</b>	
<b>Actions</b>	
<b>Resolution (and Revelation)</b>	
<b>Vivid details</b>	

Let's have a go at filling in the table.

We begin with the TLC of your story: time, location, characters. *When* did it happen? *Where* did it happen? And *who* was involved? We may not need to mention these in our final story, but it will help us to construct the rest of the story if we at least have these details

in mind. I include the word “ingroup” in brackets to remind us that we should – as far as possible – pick a character, a protagonist, who matches the audience.

Then we think about how we’ll introduce the situation. How much background is enough, but not too heavy going or boring?

Next, we consider the obstacles that the protagonist(s) encountered: each problem, issue or challenge. But we need to remember to turn those molehills back into mountains by including enough dramatic detail. We want to make these obstacles seem sufficiently momentous so that our protagonist(s)’s actions and ultimate success can appear all the more heroic – or their downfall even more tragic.

But eventually you always end with the resolution and its implied revelation for your audience. Did the protagonist(s) succeed or at least learn and grow? Or did the protagonist(s) fail and, in flunking out, teach us lessons about how *not* to behave?

## Running your story through a final check

Stories can allow us to pitch our ideas, products or services (or even ourselves) whether in person, via Skype or in print. But a truly persuasive story should be more than just a factual description of what occurred. Report only the facts and it becomes a dull transcript – more like the kind of description someone would write when making an insurance claim – rather than an engaging, evocative adventure. A storyteller should be able to make an audience *want* to find out what came off next.

Imagine watching a TV detective show where you really don’t care who murdered the victim. Imagine watching a play at the theatre



and being more interested in checking your Facebook updates or Twitter feed. Or how it feels when you're reading a school textbook rather than a gripping novel that makes you want to turn page after page to read more, more, more.

Sometimes the storytellers that I've worked with get caught up in working out *what* happened, *when* it happened, *where* it happened and so on. But the ultimate test for your story is: do people *want* to listen to your story and its outcome?

Stand-up comedians seem like gifted, master storytellers. But even the very best have to prepare and hone their stories. Many comedians practise their craft at dozens of small gigs before they decide on the anecdotes that will work best on television or on the arena tour. So don't expect to write a perfect story in a single sitting.

If you're putting together a script for an important meeting – say to investors, shareholders, potential clients or even an interview panel – I'd suggest drafting your stories and then setting them to one side. After a few days, come back to them. Read them out aloud and ask yourself: do *you* think it's a great story?

This final box may help you to refine your stories and will hopefully propel you towards more persuasive stories.

**The ultimate test for your story is: do people want to listen to your story and its outcome?**

### Ensuring your stories transport people

The Ohio State University researchers Melanie Green and Timothy Brock devised a scale for measuring the degree of transportation. If you want to make sure that your stories are sufficiently engaging to whisk your audience away (and

*(Continued)*

therefore change their attitudes or behaviours), you may wish to use the following checklist.

Share your story with a couple of friends or colleagues and ask them:

- When reading (or listening to) the story, could you picture the exploits described in it?
- Were you mentally involved in the story while reading (or listening) to it?
- Did you have a vivid image of the protagonist(s) in the story?
- Did you want to learn how the story ended?
- Did the story affect you emotionally?

Of course, not every story will elicit a “yes” response to all of these questions. We may not always have time to tell lengthy sagas that fully transport people. Or sometimes, we may wish to tell only shorter anecdotes that serve a simpler purpose. But the very best stories will get a resounding “yes” to all five.

Like most skills, storytelling doesn't come overnight. But it doesn't take much practice either.

I worked with a manager who had been told that his presentations were effective but somewhat lacklustre. Anthony, a dark-bearded Scotsman with a disarming Edinburgh accent, was at first puzzled by the remarks. He knew that he was articulate and poised when giving presentations; he made good eye contact with audiences and spoke in a clear, ringing voice. But with a little digging, we gleaned the truth.

His colleagues saw him as someone who could get an audience nodding politely with approval rather than the kind of mesmerizing charmer who could make people *want* to hear more. He was viewed

as a “safe pair of hands” who was best at presenting fairly factual updates and forecasts – at talking through PowerPoint bullet points – to existing clients rather than an inspiring leader who could rouse and win over prospective clients.

I began by working with Anthony on varying the volume, pace and intonation of his speech so that he could portray a broader range of moods and emotions. We also decided that he came across as more energetic when he walked around and used his arms and whole body to act out what he was saying to a greater degree.

Arguably the biggest transformation, though, came from weaving personal stories into his presentations. He began by relating case studies of clients he’d worked with or witnessed. When he became more practised, he even started drawing from his personal life. He spoke about his own career regrets to illustrate how clients should pounce on fleeting opportunities before they disappeared. And to make a point about the importance of planning but being flexible too, he told of the birth of his first child and the joy but also chaos that a baby girl introduced into his life.

Like many people, he had found it difficult to get excited when reciting mere facts and figures. But in talking about his own experiences and what they meant to him, he was able to access a much deeper well of emotions. He showed that he could be funny, sad, courageous, passionate or dramatic – all of which made him so much more engaging and darned entertaining to listen to.

We are all creatures of emotion so much more than logic. While we may understand a rational argument in our heads, we typically respond so much better with our hearts. Who doesn’t have hopes, fears, ambitions and desires?

So whether you’re pitching a concept, product, vision, noble cause or even yourself to an audience, consider telling more stories. Tell

customers about how a product – a car, home, piece of software, whatever – helped a particular customer to live a better life. Tell the story of how your charity helped a single child, an abandoned puppy or a struggling village. Tell interviewers exactly how you made your last organization a better, more successful place.

Tell a good story and people *want* to know what happened. Tell stories and you may find that people can't help but respond.

## Onwards and upwards

- Consider that humanity has probably been telling stories for tens of thousands of years. And while few people enjoy being told what to do or sold to, they are invariably much more willing to listen to stories.
- Remember that stories somehow manage to be influential and persuasive often *in spite* of people's better judgement. Most audiences realize that they *should* pay attention to facts and statistics, but still can't help but be swayed by stories.
- Use the "SOAR vividly" phrase to assemble basic but effective stories. Think about the Situation or setting of your story. Describe the Obstacles and the Actions that happened. Finish your story with a Resolution. And don't forget to add in vivid details to help your audience visualize what transpired.
- If you're trying to encourage your audience to change their attitudes or behave in a different way, aim to tell stories involving characters from a similar ingroup (i.e. people with a similar background to your audience). Most people find it easier to empathize with characters like themselves, which leaves them more open to persuasion.
- Keep in mind that an effective story is one in which an audience feels transported away from the real world and into the

world of your tale. When you've drafted a story, read it back a couple of times. Is it dynamic and evocative? If not, think about tweaking it – perhaps by adding some more florid language to craft more vivid mental images.

- Finally, remember from our discussion of growth mind-sets (in Chapter 1: Developing a Winning Outlook) that everybody can get better at these skills. You just need to have an open-minded attitude and be ready to work at it.