

The 10 Immutable Laws of Storytelling

- 1. Stories are always about people.** Even if your organization is devoted to saving flora, toils in the dense thicket of policy change, or helps other nonprofits work more effectively, human beings drive the action. So your protagonist must be a person. And since this person guides the audience through the story, provide some physical description. This helps your listeners form a mental picture — it's hard to follow what you cannot see.
- 2. Your protagonist must want something.** A story doesn't truly begin until the audience knows precisely what the protagonist's goal is and has a reason to care whether or not it is attained. Within the first paragraph or two, make it clear what your hero wants to do, to get, or to change. And beware the passive voice — stories are driven by desire!
- 3. Fix your story in time and space.** The moment you begin telling your tale, your audience will want to know: Did this happen last week or 10 years ago? Are we on a street corner in Boston or a Wal-Mart in Iowa? Help your listeners get their bearings quickly; they will more readily follow you into the deeper meaning within.
- 4. Let your characters speak for themselves.** When your characters speak to each other, it lends immediacy and urgency to the piece. Listeners will feel as if they are the proverbial fly on the wall, hearing in real time what each person has to say. Direct quotes also let characters speak in their idiosyncratic voices, lending authenticity to the dialogue. “The name is Bond, James Bond,” is way better than, “the agent introduced himself, characteristically repeating his surname twice.”
- 5. Surprise the audience.** Right away, you have to make your audience wonder, “What happens next?” or “How is this going to turn out?” As the people in your story pursue their goal, they must run into obstacles, surprises, or something that makes the listeners sit up and take notice. Otherwise, they'll stand up and walk away.
- 6. Speak the audience's language.** According to national literacy studies, the average American reads at a sixth-grade level. Plain speaking is the order of the day. Good storytellers also have a keen ear for the colloquialisms and local slang that establish common ground between the teller and listener.
- 7. Stir up emotions.** Even when you have mountains of hard evidence on your side, you must make your listeners feel something before they will even glance at your numbers. Stories stir the emotions not to be manipulative or melodramatic but to break through the white noise of information that inundates us and deliver the message, “This is worth your attention.”
- 8. Stories don't tell: They show.** Intellectually, your audience will understand the sentence, “When the nurse visited the family, she was met with hostility and guardedness.” But, if you say instead, “When they all sat down in the living room, the family members wouldn't look her in the eye,” your audience will see a picture, feel the hostility, and become more involved with the story.
- 9. Include a “moment of truth.”** At their essence, the best stories show us something about how we should treat ourselves, other people, or the world around us. We look to stories to be containers of truth, and your audience will instinctively look for this kind of insight.
- 10. Stories must have meaning.** When the final line is spoken, your audience should know exactly why it took this journey with you. In the end, this may be the most important rule of all. If your audience cannot answer the question, “What was that story all about?” it won't matter how diligently you followed rules one through nine.

RESOURCES: *Storytelling as Best Practice* by Andy Goodman. www.agoodmanonline.com