

The Four Essential Phases of a Great Story

We've just talked about story-selling techniques, from its preparation to its delivery. Now let's take a step back and review the structure or framework of every great story. There are four phases that are absolutely essential to making your story cohesive, clear and easy to follow. The first phase involves setting and characters. Your audience needs to have some sense of where and when the story is taking place. Did this story happen in the past or is it occurring in the future? What era is it supposed to take place in? Where does the action take place? On a farm, in the workplace, on a fishing trip or at a store? Immerse your audience within your story's context as much as possible so they can identify with it as much as possible. Remember, you must paint the picture for them. You need to take them into your story. With effective story selling, your audience is watching your movie in their mind. Also, take the time to not only introduce your character but also to really develop them. If your audience can't grasp who the characters are—their strengths, their faults, their dreams and what makes them unique—then they won't be able to relate to your story. When they know the story's characters, they will appreciate your story's climax when it comes. That's because they will have the necessary background information to draw from so they can connect with why the experience being conveyed would be significant to a particular character.

The second essential phase of a great story involves presenting a clear challenge or problem with which the characters must cope. Challenge generates interest and suspense. The audience is drawn in to wonder what the character is going to do about the dilemma. When presented with a challenge, it is instinctive for human beings to start guessing and projecting what they think the character will do, or better yet, what *they* themselves would do in the same situation. The more the challenge is a situation audience members can readily relate to, the more it will hit home.

Why is this story-selling component so crucial? If there is no obstacle to overcome, no vision to fulfill and no questions to be answered, then what's the point of telling the story in the first place? Conflict and tension also create energy and give momentum to the story. The more engaged your audience is, the more eager they are to hear your story's

outcome. Finally, effectively setting up the story's challenge will make the solution that much more powerful. In addition to making the story itself more powerful, the audience is able to reach a greater level of appreciation for and acceptance of your point. Create appropriate tensions when presenting the conflict so that the impact of the solution is that much more inspiring.

The third phase of an excellent story involves its climax, or turning point. The climax is the point where all the buildup has taken you. The momentum has driven you to this one peak point in the story. It is the cliffhanger! What will happen next? What is she going to do? How will he get out of this mess? By the time you arrive at your story's climax, you want your audience to be on the edge of their seats. It is important not to confuse this story-selling strategy with the preceding step, even though the two effects overlap. The climax of a story is a distinct point rather than a chain of events. It is the pivotal, make-it-or-break-it moment; it is the height to which all the momentum and action has led up to. This step in the story-selling process helps give your story form. Without it, your story will lack direction. Your audience will feel emotionally disturbed if all the activity rambles aimlessly with no climax and resulting conclusion. The climax is part of a clear path and it feeds off the story's preceding action. Its culmination, followed by its solution, gives your story great flow and energy.

Finally, your story must conclude with a resolution. If you've told an effective story, you have brought your audience through an emotional journey. They are now alert and attentive because they want to know how the characters they've identified so strongly with will fare after all they've been through. Your story's resolution is the moment where the lesson is learned. Will your audience grasp your message, the moral of your story? Did they experience what you wanted them to experience; did they feel what you wanted them to feel?

As I've outlined in the preceding paragraphs, you will impart your message most strongly if a serious issue is clearly juxtaposed with a brilliant solution. Don't skip any of these story phases. They work together synergistically to produce a story that is powerful,

compelling and inspiring. Often when we hear someone speak, we remember little of the discussion, yet the stories still remain with us. For this reason, you must embed your message, your main point, into the story. Deliver your message in a way that it will ring distinctly true and make a lasting imprint on your audience's minds.

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