

**FREE
GUIDE**

MY BEST

STORYTELLING TIPS FOR STORYTELLERS



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ABOUT MATTHEW DICKS

Matthew Dicks is the internationally bestselling author of the novels *Memoirs of an Imaginary Friend*, *Something Missing*, *Unexpectedly*, *Milo*, *The Perfect Comeback of Caroline Jacobs*, *Twenty-one Truths About Love*, and *The Other Mother*, and the nonfiction titles *Storyworthy: Engage, Teach, Persuade, and Change Your Life through the Power of Storytelling* and *Someday Is Today: 22 Simple Actionable Ways to Propel Your Creative Life*.

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Matthew's clients have included Amazon, Slack, Johnson & Johnson, Saatchi & Saatchi, Salesforce, MetLife, Pfizer, The Freeman Companies, Rustic Pathways, and many more.

Matthew is the creator, producer, and co-host of *Speak Up Storytelling*, a podcast that teaches people to tell their best stories.

Matthew is married to friend and fellow teacher, Elysha, and they have two children, Clara and Charlie. He grew up in the small town of Blackstone, Massachusetts, where he made a name for himself by dying twice before the age of eighteen and becoming the first student in his high school to be suspended for inciting riot upon himself.

A MESSAGE FOR STORYTELLERS

Good news: Storytelling is easy.

Storytelling is easy in that everyone can do it, and we do it all the time. As soon as a human being can assemble meaningful sentences, they begin telling stories. There is no barrier to entry.

Also, people readily accept (and even embrace) bad storytelling because it's the most common form of storytelling in the world today and everyday. Rather than artfully, strategically, and thoughtfully telling a story, most people simply report on their lives by saying the first thing that comes to mind, without concern over where to start, where to end, and what should be omitted. There is rarely any concern for stakes, suspense, or surprise. Humor is oftentimes situational, meaning something funny happened, so explaining what happened will inherently be funny.

But humor beyond the situational variety is often hard to find.

Sadly, most storytelling is pedestrian at best. And quite often, those pedestrian storytellers get flattened by a truckload of mind-numbing tedium, needless tangents, and time-sucking wastefulness.

But don't despair, because remember what I said:

STORYTELLING IS EASY.

Storytelling is also easy in that you can improve your storytelling skills quickly by learning some easily implemented strategies and practicing them daily. Storytelling, at its essence, is about decision making. The size of your vocabulary, your facility with the spoken language, and your knowledge of grammar make little difference when becoming an entertaining and engaging storyteller.



Make good decisions about what to say, when to say it, and how to say it, and you'll improve rapidly. Happily, even joyfully, it doesn't take much to become a very good storyteller.

Inside this guide, you'll find some of my favorite tips and strategies to help make you a better storyteller. They are easy to understand, simple to implement, and can be practiced almost daily.

Best of all, you don't need to master them all to become a better storyteller. Just one of these tips or strategies can make you a much better storyteller because storytelling is not an all-or-nothing proposition.

If you're sending astronauts to the Moon, everything needs to be perfect.

IN STORYTELLING, EVEN A LITTLE BIT OF IMPROVEMENT CAN BE EXCEPTIONALLY POWERFUL.



So take a look at the tips and strategies contained in this guide. Use the ones that make the most sense to you. Find the ones that will help you most in your life or your career.

These 21 strategies are just the tip of the iceberg of what I have to offer, but they can still make an enormous difference in your ability to be an entertaining, engaging storyteller who connects to audiences and moves them in meaningful ways.

Congratulations. Most people do not make decisions when speaking. They say the first thing that comes to mind, absent any thought, planning, or calculation.

You're different. You are a storyteller.

Warmly,
Matt

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TIP #1 - BE MEMORABLE

My friend asked me to play golf after school this week. Though nothing sounded better, I had scheduled a parent-teacher conference for that same afternoon, so I had to pass. It killed me.

The meeting proved to be productive. We sat at an outdoor table at a safe distance - parents, student, and myself - and discussed their child's progress thus far. I like the parents a lot, so in addition to setting goals for their son, we chatted about a variety of topics. If I couldn't be playing golf, it was a good alternative.

As the meeting wrapped, I rose from the table and turned. Standing about ten feet away was a young woman who I recognized immediately but couldn't quite place. Standing beside her was a young man.

"Do you know me?" she asked.

"I do," I said. "But what is your name?"

She told me. Instantly I knew exactly who she was. A former student nearly a decade ago, all grown up. Then the fifth grader still sitting at the table shouted, "It's really you?" Even though we've only been in school for about 40 days, I've already told my "Of course I do," I said. "In fact, remember the Barbie doll that you gave me on my birthday? It's still there."

When she was in fifth grade, this student arrived at school on my birthday with a gift. I happened to be sitting at my desk alongside my principal, Plato, with whom I share a birthday. Her gift was a Barbie doll. I took it, examined it, and quickly realized that something was wrong with this doll. It was dirty. The clothing was tattered. The hair was snarled.

"Where did you get this?" I asked.

"The dumpster," she said with a devilish smile.

I tossed it across my desk in disgust, but Plato quickly snapped it up. "No," he said. "You can't reject a gift from a student." He rose and placed the doll on the corner of a bookshelf, overlooking my desk. "This needs to stay right here," he said, grinning from ear to ear. "Until the day you retire."

"It's really still there?" my former student asked.

"Come see." I couldn't invite her into the classroom because of pandemic procedures, but I popped open my door and allowed her to peek inside. "I can't believe it," she said. "It's still there. That was..."

"Nine years ago," I said.

She slapped the young man standing beside you. "See?" she said. "I told you he wouldn't forget me."

"Never," I said.

My former student is now a sophomore in college. She returned home this week when her college shut down due to the pandemic. On a whim, she decided to stop by to visit me.

I'm so glad she did.

She told me that I hadn't aged a bit, which was sweet and possibly a lie, but we chatted for a while. I listed the stories about her that I had told my current crop of students so far, including the story of the Barbie doll and the time she had come to school on Columbus Day, not realizing there was no school.

"Where were you guys?" she asked the next day. "Was that some kind of prank?"

I also listed the stories that I had yet to tell. An incredible story about how she turned her life around in fifth grade. A time her father threatened to kill me. Her amazing end-of-year poem.

She remembered them all, too.

"It's great to be remembered," she said. I told her that I felt the same.

This is why we must find and tell our best stories. When we do, we remember others, and in turn, we are also remembered.

I missed out on a round of golf on a picturesque fall day alongside a good friend. Instead, I received something far better. Glorious, even. Thank goodness I had scheduled that parent-teacher conference or I might have missed her altogether.

Yes, it's true. There are some things better than golf.

TIP#2

FINDING INSPIRATION FOR STORIES



Taking a lesson from my friend, Bengi, I spent this week going through old photos and finding some new stories.

Ever since Bengi has begun digitizing and sending me photos from our teenage days together, I have been awash in memories long since forgotten, and along with many of these memories comes a new story to tell.

The best storytellers in the world are the people with the most stories to tell. The right stories to tell. Spend a lazy summer afternoon with a pile of old photographs, a dusty photo album, or if you're too young for that, your phone or laptop, thumbing through the images.

You've got stories hiding in those images. I promise.

What a joy it has been to find them.

TIP #3

STORIES ARE ABOUT THE THINGS HAPPENING INSIDE OUR MINDS

In the time of the pandemic, many of us are doing far less in the world than ever before. We are seeing fewer people, going to fewer places, and finding ourselves with far less variety in our lives.

One might think that this would be a terrible time to find stories in your life, but that is wrong. In fact, looking back on my Homework for Life ([See my TEDx Talk entitled "Homework for Life."](#)) for the previous month, I can find more storyworthy entries in the last 30 days than in the previous three months.

Why?

Because of this simple fact:

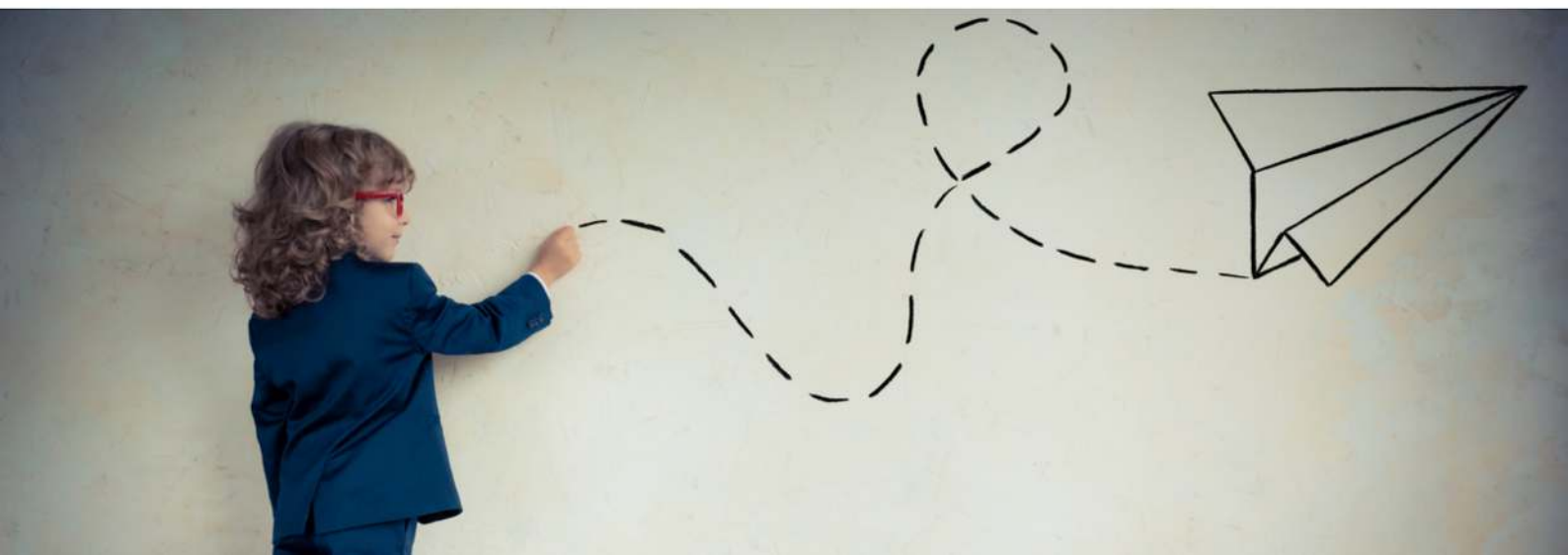
Stories are not about the stuff that is happening on the outside of our bodies. Stories are about the things happening inside our minds.

So often, people think that in order to tell a great story, you must do something extraordinary. Bungee jumping. A terrible first date. A vacation to Tibet. A car accident. A battle with an in-law. Marriage. Divorce. A gun battle with a drug cartel.

No, no, no. These moments might all make great stories, not because of what you were doing but because of what you were thinking.

Stories are about transformation or realization. Change over time. These changes always, without exception, take place in our minds.

During this period of social distancing, I've been spending an enormous amount of time in my head, thinking about the changes taking place in the world.



The fears I have for my family and friends. The shifting beliefs about how and where our world will finally end up. The way my friends and family are managing their lives. The way my wife and children are reacting to the pandemic.

At the height of the pandemic, in the midst of fear and uncertainty, my wife and I took our children to the park. As we lay in a field, staring at the sky, my daughter, Clara, said, "This is one of the best days of the year."

In the middle of the pandemic, unable to attend school or see friends, a simple trip to the park made my daughter so happy.

What a story to tell.

The thesis statement for my story goes like this:

I was once a father who worried that his children were losing out on precious childhood days because of the pandemic, then something happened, and I realized that I was wrong.

That's it. That's the story. And what happened in order for this realization to take place?

My daughter looked at some clouds and then said a single sentence to me.

Hardly bungee jumping or a gun battle with an army of drug smugglers.

The moment couldn't have been more benign. Yet it was incredibly profound, and it'll make a great, great story someday.

So don't give up on seeking out stories during these strange, isolated days. Don't worry about the lack of people, places, and variety in your life. Stories happen inside each and every one of us. Constantly. And so many of us have so much happening inside of us during these uncertain, frightening times.

Stay tuned to those moments when something fundamentally or incrementally shifts inside you.

When that happens, you probably have a story to tell.



TIP#4

TELL SHORT STORIES

This is a simple one:

The shortest version of every story is almost always the best version of every story. This means telling stories absent the details that mean something to you but nothing to the people who are listening.

For example, if you yourself struggling to remember the name of a person in your story, please don't. The actual person's name almost always means nothing to your audience, and the search for the name is painful to anyone who is listening.

Describing the beauty of a recent vacation destination? Don't. Nobody cares. Audiences want to know what was said, what was done, and what you thought.

Dialogue (inner and outer) and action. These are the things that matter. Not description.



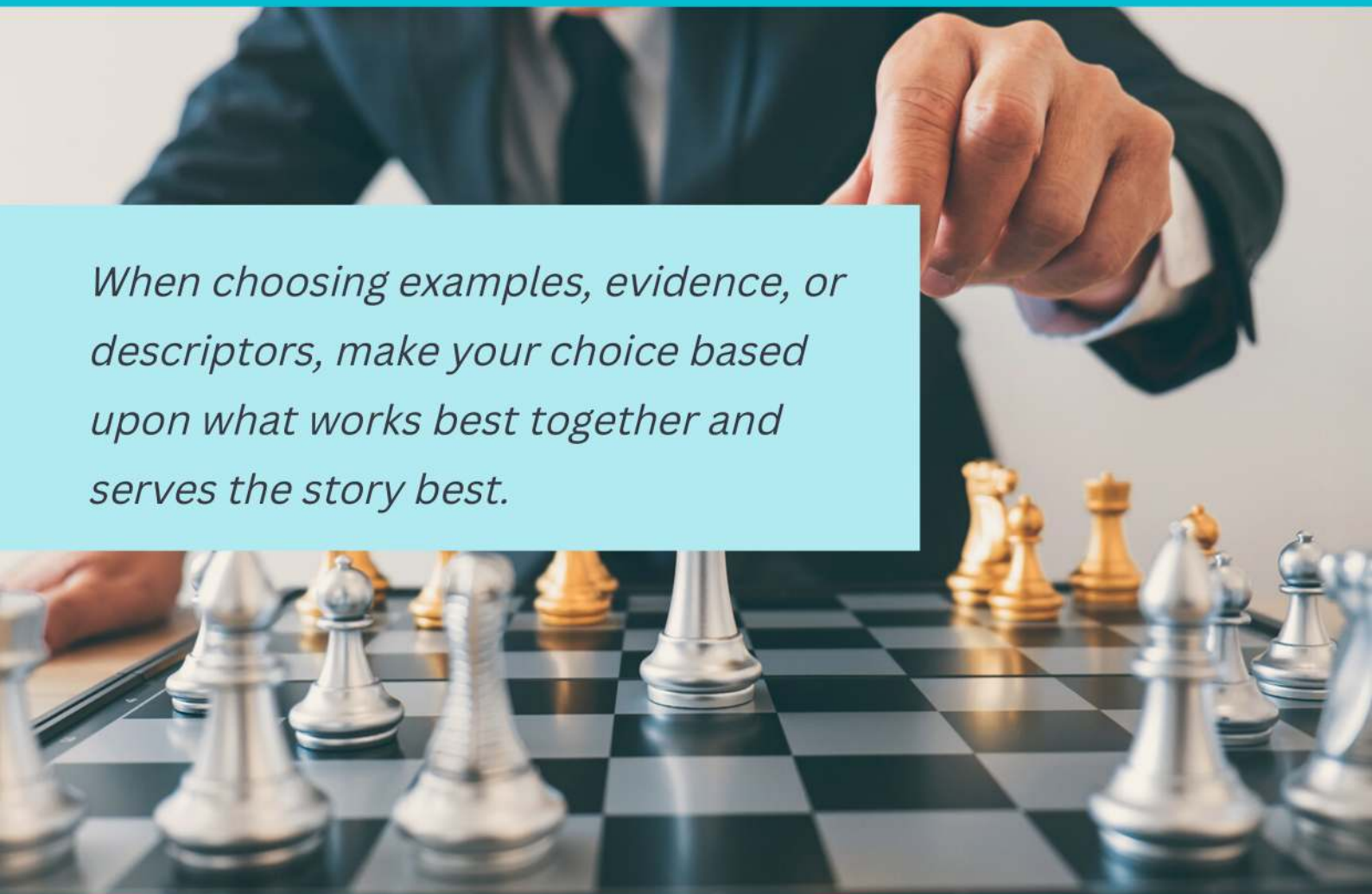
The white sand beach and the seaside villa don't matter unless you nearly choked to death on the white sand or your seaside villa toppled into the ocean during an unexpected typhoon.

No one has ever listened to a story and thought, "That was great, but exactly how white was that white sand? And how many bathrooms are in that seaside villa? Was it decorated in a modern or postmodern way? And would you say the ocean was crystal clear or nearly crystal clear?"

These are details that matter to you, but they almost always mean nothing to your audience. Spare your listeners of the images burned into your brain and stick to the things that matter.

TIP #5

GREAT STORYTELLERS ARE MORE STRATEGIC

A photograph of a person in a dark suit and tie, pointing their right index finger towards a chessboard. The chessboard is black and white, with several silver and gold chess pieces visible. The person's hand is in the foreground, and the chessboard is in the mid-ground. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

When choosing examples, evidence, or descriptors, make your choice based upon what works best together and serves the story best.

I told a story at one of our Speak Up Storytelling shows that required me to describe how I have an unfortunate tendency to engage with strangers who are acting rude, unruly, and stupid.

I had many, many examples from which to choose.

In these cases where examples, descriptors, or evidence are required in a story, I think that most people choose the first three ideas that come to mind or the three funniest ideas or the three most recent examples, or their three favorite examples.

Great storytellers are more strategic.

I chose these three examples for specific reasons:

Story 1

When a person in a line at a place like a pharmacy turns around and whisper-complains about the speed of the cashier, I respond in a loud voice, asking why they are complaining to me and suggesting that they instead lodge their complaint with the cashier. This embarrasses and sometimes enrages the passive-aggressive gossip, and rightfully so.

Story 2

When the crowd rose and removed their caps during the national anthem at a Patriots game, a large, thick-necked moron in the back row shouted down to a man in the front row that he had forgotten to remove his cap, so I turned and pointed out that shouting at someone during the national anthem for forgetting to remove their cap in sub-zero temperatures might be more disrespectful than failing to remove the cap.

The man was none too pleased.

Story 3

I made an old lady cry by belittling her for insulting a McDonald's employee in an elitist or racist way. I told her that she was a terrible person and promised to tell everyone I saw that day about her awfulness.

I chose these three examples for specific reasons:

1. They take place in very different locations.
2. They involve very different kinds of people.
3. They worked well in terms of their order of escalation.

The first example was highly relatable.

The second demonstrated my willingness to place myself in danger to make a point.

The third showed how far I am sometimes willing to go to make a point.

Each example offered a different side of my propensity for verbal confrontations and escalated nicely.

But I had many examples. Some that I liked better and some that are hilarious. I wanted to tell you about the time I refused to play a third Chicago song at a wedding and was threatened with violence by a guest if I didn't reconsider. Rather than playing the song, I accepted the challenge to meet him in the parking lot so I could kick his ass and still not play a third Chicago song, at which point Mr. Tough-Guy backed down and accused me of being crazy.

I love that story. But it's complicated and would slow the pace of the story too much.

When choosing examples, evidence, or descriptors, make your choice based upon what works best together and serves the story best.

Not what makes you happiest.



TIP#6

YOU HAVE CHOICE WHEN YOU BEGIN A STORY



You can establish characters and setting or you can establish wonder, suspense, intrigue, and/or humor.

What do you think is better?

So often I hear storytellers begin their stories with landscaping, meteorology, wardrobe, geography, and architecture instead of something that grabs the attention of the audience immediately. They waste the first few sentences describing people and places instead of giving the audience something that excites or intrigues them.

I recently told a story of a life-or-death race between a hawk and a rabbit while my fifth-grade students looked on in horror.

I could've started my story with a sentence like:

"I'm standing outside my school with my fifth-grade students, waiting to enter the school and begin a new day."

Or...

"First I see the rabbit, then I hear the scream."

Is there any question which is better?

I can still tell the audience that I'm standing outside my school with my fifth-grade class, waiting to enter the building, but I can tell them that after I've grabbed their attention. After I've created suspense and wonder in their minds. After I've really launched the story.

The first few sentences of any story are rarified territory. Precious and important. Use it wisely by engaging the audience's attention. Putting them in a position where they must hear the next sentence.



TIP #7

"LOCATION AND ACTION"



This is the mantra I offered a pair of storytellers this week.

In all stories that you tell, begin with location and action.

Make it a habit.

Location activates the imagination. It sets the scene. It almost always is imbued with hundreds of unspoken adjectives.

Action lets the audience know that the story has begun. There is no warm-up act. No exposition. No backstory. The story is launched. We are moving fast.

Location and action are the best ways to start stories. These two elements begin the movie that the storyteller attempts to create in the mind of the audience.

Simple. Easily repeatable. Make it the way you start every story or almost every story and you'll transform the stories that you tell instantly.

TIP #8

START WITH A MOMENT OF MEANING



In medias res: (Latin) the practice of beginning an epic or other narrative by plunging into a crucial situation that is part of a related chain of events; the situation is an extension of previous events and will be developed in later action.

This is a term (and a practice) that every storyteller must understand well. All too often storytellers start their stories in exposition, assuming that the audience needs to know everything (or even something) before anything can happen.

Not true. Audiences want stories to start. They want to be thrust into the story. They are willing to be taught things along the way, but get that story started and help the audience catch as you move forward with action and dialogue.

Do the same for each scene of your story.

Don't start your restaurant scene with your arrival at the restaurant.

Don't start your airplane scene with the arrival at the airport.

Don't start your embarrassing high school locker room scene when you're fully clothed.

Start with a moment of meaning. Push into the story and each scene to a place that will grab the audience's attention.

Start in medias res. Make the audience WANT to hear your story.

TIP#9

CREATING A CONVERSATION BETWEEN THE BEGINNING AND END



Last night my wife, son, and I were watching *Captain America: Winter Soldier*. At the top of the film, Captain America is running around the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool, constantly passing the man who we later discover is the superhero Falcon.

Quite the coincidence.

Each time Captain America passes by, he says, "On your left," a phrase used by runners to indicate they are about to be passed. Falcon does not appreciate the constant reminder that Captain America is about 10 times as fast as he will ever be, sparking anger and finally grudging respect.

Captain America is only inhumanly fast because of a serum administered during World War II. It's not like the guy exercised his way into superhuman abilities, I'll ignore that for now.

At the end of the film, Captain America is in a hospital bed, having barely survived the final battle. He opens his eyes, and Falcon, sitting bedside, says, "On your left." Captain America turns and sees his friend sitting there, smiling.

My 7-year-old son, Charlie, says "The story has come full circle."

First of all, my son is clearly brilliant.

But also, he's right, and doesn't it feel good when that happens? When something from the beginning of the story returns in a new and revelatory way at the end, don't we as audiences, listeners, and readers love that? It makes it feel as if everything was so brilliantly sewn together. Perfectly assembled. No wasted content.

This is one of the reasons that the beginning and ending of a story must be in conversation with each other and must in some way be the opposite of each other. A reflection of each other. Audiences, listeners, and readers want to feel like they've been on a journey of transformation and change, and that is best demonstrated when there is something at the end that reminds us where we began.

How far we have come.

This is the difference between a chronological accounting of time and an actual story:

The former has no structure. The latter provides the audience with a clear journey from beginning to end.

"Pretty cool," Charlie said after commenting on the circular nature of the story.

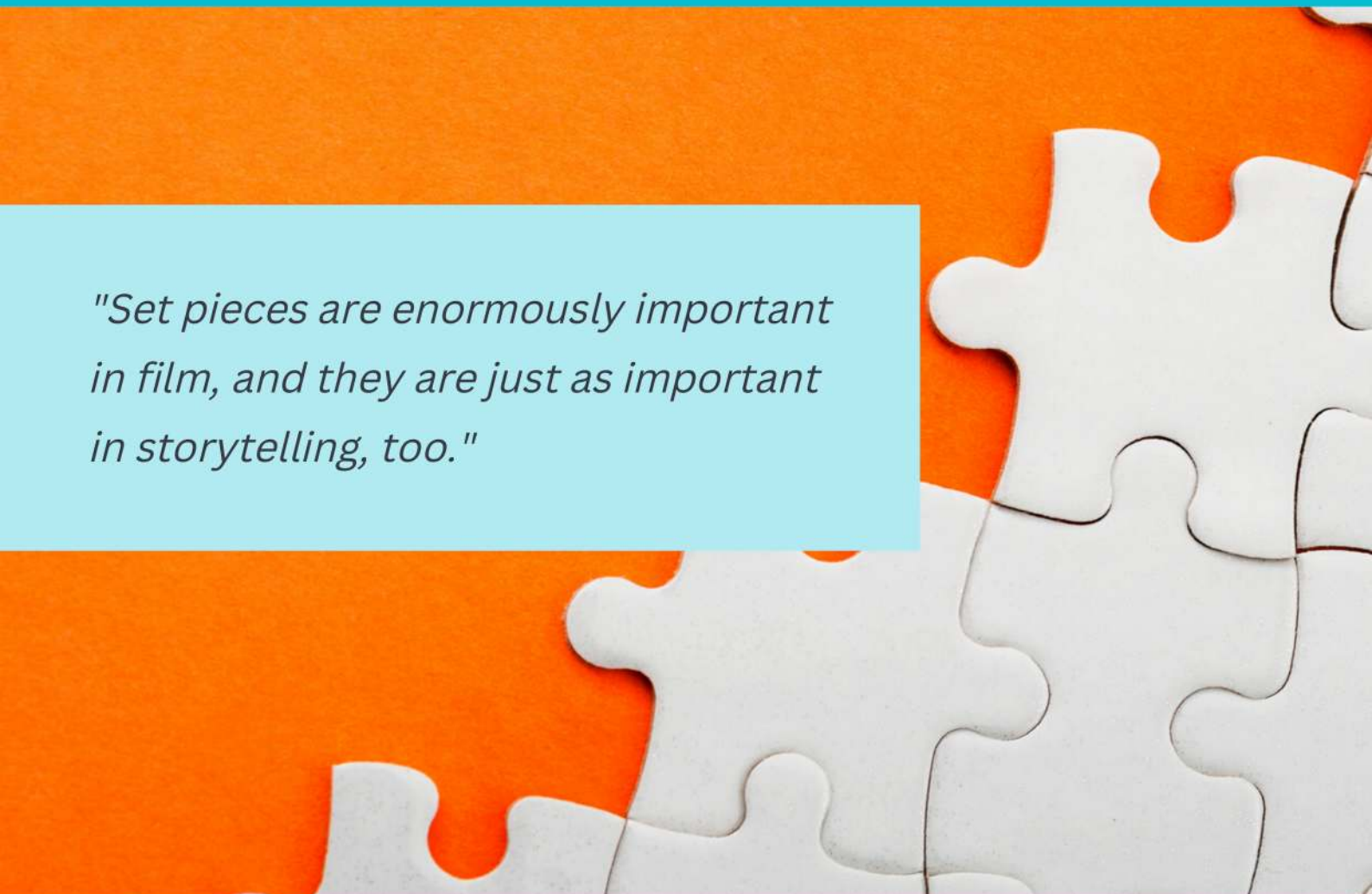
Yes, Charlie. Very cool.

And something storytellers should strive to achieve in some way - great or small - in their own stories.



TIP #10

THE IMPORTANCE OF SET PIECES IN STORYTELLING



"Set pieces are enormously important in film, and they are just as important in storytelling, too."

In the film, set pieces are the large, complex, memorable scenes that everyone remembers when thinking about the movie.

The T-Rex attack in Jurassic Park (among many others).
The storming of the beaches on D-Day in Saving Private Ryan.
The wedding dress shopping gone bad scene in Bridesmaids.

Set pieces are enormously important in film, and they are just as important in storytelling, too.

In order to take advantage of these potential set pieces in your stories, you need to allow these moments to expand and breathe. These are the moments when the storyteller must slow down the action so that the audience to get a sense of the importance of the moment and enjoy the scene for all it has to offer.

In a recent storytelling show,, these were moments when the storyteller was slapped in the face by a camp counselor and a moment in a closet where a little girl was staring at a single lightbulb, dangling on a chain, waiting to see if it would turn off.

The whole story hinged on whether or not this lightbulb went dark.

In both of these instances, I advised the storytellers to take these pivotal, set-piece moments, and make them special. Give them more time. Slow things down. Offer the audience some inner dialogue. Add details to bring the scene into full clarity. Build suspense. Maximize surprise.

The first step is to simply identify these potential set pieces in your story - unforgettable, absolutely critical moments that people will never forget. The singular moments that audiences will remember long after you are finished telling your story.

You want your audience to remember these moments in the same way we remember the T-Rex attack in Jurassic Park, the Allied landing in Normandy in Saving Private Ryan, and the image of Maya Rudolph, collapsed in the middle of the road in her wedding dress, pooping her heart out.

Make your set piece scenes just as memorable in your stories by setting them apart from the rest.

Make them special.

Indicate to the audience that they are special.





TIP#11

WHEN IT COMES TIME TO DESCRIBE SOMETHING, IT'S APPEARANCE IS ALWAYS SECONDARY

Instead, ask yourself this:

How do I want my audience to feel about this thing?

In a story that I'm working on for an upcoming Moth GrandSLAM championship, I'm standing beside a baggage carousel at an airport. I could say many things about the carousel, but I want my audience to despise it as much as I do, so I will only describe those things that make it sound awful:

The depressing, unidentifiable color of the carpet. The zombie-like expressions on the people around me. The desperation in the air. The flickering, fluorescent lighting.

It's a baggage carousel, so it's admittedly not hard.

But remember:

Description is not about accuracy. It's about emotion. We don't invent things that didn't actually exist, but we can pick and choose only those descriptors that suit our purposes.

Storytellers are not objective reporters. We are manipulators of emotion, suspense, surprise, humor, and wonder. As such, we only include those things that serve our story.

TIP #12

A SIMPLE WAY OF DETERMINING IF YOU LIKELY HAVE YOUR AUDIENCE'S ATTENTION



Is time moving forward in your story?

If you're telling about action or dialogue (external or internal), then time is inevitably moving forward, and if your story is interesting at all, it's likely that you have your audience's attention.

But if you're describing things in detail, listing, offering examples, explaining processes, philosophizing, sliding into tangents, or cracking jokes, it's likely that time has ceased moving forward in your story, and you've thus entered dangerous territory.

Time has come to a stop. Audience attention will inevitably wane if you're not exceedingly careful.

It doesn't mean that these elements aren't sometimes required. Description is essential to stories. Examples add much-needed context. The way that something is done is oftentimes integral to the story making sense.

But when you're doing one of these things, know that your story has ground to a halt, so you'd better do everything you can to get time moving again by mitigating these moments as much as possible.



You can do this by:

- Making them as short as possible
- Injecting humor
- Choosing examples that are odd, unique, or compelling
- Using phraseology that is not cliché, staid, or overwrought
- Increasing or modifying your cadence or pitch

Always be wary of the stoppage of time in a story. This is where audiences stop caring, stories stop moving, and a potentially great story dies a slow, painful death.

Avoid it at all costs.

TIP#13

NO DREAM SEQUENCES. PLEASE.

Dream sequences are absent of stakes and oftentimes an obtuse attempt to explain something that would be better explained as a nuanced part of your actual story.

The problem is that nothing in your dream actually happened. As much as you might want your audience to understand how horrific, hilarious, or revelatory the dream was, we all know that it only took place in your head while you were unconscious.

No one wants to hear it. Almost ever.



Exceptions to this rule include:

- Some therapists
- Professor Trelawney from the Harry Potter series
- Almost any character the Nightmare on Elm Street series
- The rare instance when the person you're speaking to made an appearance in your dream

Even that can be dangerous. The last thing you want is for some coworker to misconstrue their appearance in your story as some attempt to flirt, threaten, or indicate an obsession with the person. So let's keep those dream sequences out of your story and stick to real-life stuff.

TIP#14

STAY IN THE FIRST PERSON AT ALL TIMES

I was working with a storyteller whose grandmother passes away in the middle of the story. In order to inform his audience about her death, he shifts perspective and presents the scene in which his brother finds their grandmother lying in bed, having peacefully passed away in her sleep.

But this is a mistake. The story is being told through the eyes of the storyteller, so shifting to a scene where the storyteller was not present is both jarring and breaks the point of view. It emotionally detaches the audience from the storyteller. It severs the all-too-important connection that the storyteller and the audience have established.

Instead, I told the storyteller to inform the audience about the death of his grandmother in the same way he learned about it:

Through a phone call from his brother.


The details of his brother finding their grandmother can still be told to the audience, but they can be told via the phone call, which maintains the storyteller's emotional attachment to the audience. In fact, it's a more dramatic, emotionally impactful scene when described through the lens of the phone call. The audience gets to experience the emotional impact of the news in the same way the storyteller did. Rather than viewing a scene through the lens of something the audience doesn't know, they get to witness the actual experience of the storyteller.

This is what audiences want. They want to understand a storyteller's experience. They want to know what the storyteller thought and how they felt. Staying in the first person and allowing the story to unfold through the eyes of the storyteller is the first step in achieving this goal.



TIP #15

IMPERFECTION IN STORYTELLING



"When a storyteller takes the stage and shares a bit of her life, the audience is drawn to the vulnerability on display. "

As I watched the Super Bowl halftime show on Sunday, I found myself wondering if Jennifer Lopez and Shakira were lip-syncing their performance.

It sure looked like it.

I turned to the internet for answers and discovered that most Super Bowl halftime performers lip sync at least some of their acts. So, too, does the person singing the national anthem.

The NFL actually recommends it.



There was also a great deal of backlash on the internet about this practice. Earlier in the week, Lady Gaga even warned Shakira and Lopez that she "didn't want to see any lip syncing," and fans traditionally despise the practice.

I attended a Britney Spears concert years ago, and that entire show was lip-synced. I hated every minute of it.

I found myself wondering:

Would fans prefer a sonically flawless performance that is pre-recorded and lip-synced, or would they prefer a performance that is far from perfect but performed live?

I think they would almost always prefer the latter because the latter allows for authenticity and vulnerability. It's real. We like to watch live events because the performer is putting their soul on the line. Whether it's a football player or comic or trapeze artist, that person is performing live, and anything could happen.

Performing live requires expertise and skill and courage. It's the courage we admire most.

As human beings, we are drawn to vulnerability and the bravery that it requires. The courage to put everything on the line in a public way.

I think the same thing about storytelling. When a storyteller takes the stage and shares a bit of her life, the audience is drawn to the vulnerability on display.

This is one of many reasons why I advise storytellers not to memorize their stories word-for-word. Audiences do not want word callers reciting perfectly memorized lines to an audience. They do not want monologists. They want to feel like the storyteller is speaking from the heart. This is why we tell stories without notes, and it's why there is an enormous difference between a writer reading a story to the audience and a storyteller telling a story to the audience.

Reading is easy. Telling is hard.

Audiences don't expect your story to be unprepared, but they also don't want to think that the storyteller is simply reciting 847 perfectly memorized words.

Audiences do not want perfection. They want something real.

In fact, imperfection in storytelling is a beautiful thing. It's a signal to the audience that the storyteller is speaking from the heart and not from a script.



Just think about that Super Bowl halftime show:

Did you love that sonically-pure performance? Or would you have preferred to hear those performers sing live, risking mistakes, with all of the imperfections that a live performance would've surely contained?

Sonic perfection belongs on the radio. Not on the stage.

The same is true for storytelling.

TIP #16

CREATING HUMOR THROUGH SIMPLICITY

In a recent class on humor, I was teaching storytellers about the power of defining things in their simplest, most limited, most functional terms as a means of both being funny and highlighting aspects of something that can be useful to your story.

For example, my cat, Tobi, is a small, white, vomit-machine physicist who is constantly experimenting with gravity by pushing objects off tabletops.

The window beside my desk is a rectangular hole in the side of my house that affords me a nearly constant and ever-changing view of the work that my neighbor does on his lawn that I refuse to do.

My children's toy box is a receptacle for objects not touched for hundreds of days yet are still so precious that I must throw them into the neighbor's trash bins in the middle of the night lest the small humans in my home catch me disposing of their forgotten toys and kill me.

I'm not currently working on stories about Tobi, my office window, or the toy box, but it's an exercise that I practice often to sharpen my storytelling and comedy chops.

Try it yourself. Look around the room where you are reading this. Find an object. Attempt to define it in the simplest, most distilled, most functional way possible.

See if you, too, can find something amusing, enlightening, or even storyworthy about the simple objects in your home.



TIP #17

LOTS OF THINGS CAN IMPACT THE PACING OF A STORY



If you're competing in a Moth GrandSLAM championship, as I often do, the pacing is dictated - at least in part - by the six-minute time limit of the competition.

If I wanted to win, I needed to land my story in the designated amount of time.

Happily, it managed to come in under the wire and ultimately win the championship.

Remember: The shorter version of your story is almost always the best version of your story.

But maybe you're telling a story at a party and know you can only hold your audience's attention for so long before you'll be interrupted or lose people's interest.

Or perhaps you're in the midst of a three-day epic car ride and have all the time in the world, in which case perhaps you're slowing the pace, knowing you have a captive audience in need of entertainment and plenty of time to fill.

Or maybe you're telling a story as a part of a sales pitch, marketing rollout, or inspirational speech. In those cases, the pacing of the story is often dictated by the content surrounding your story.

Lots of external needs can impact your story, but the story itself should also dictate pacing.

In one of my Moth GrandSLAM winning stories, for example, opens with a fast pace because I start the story by chasing a child across a playground. I wanted the pace of the words to be reflective of the actions taking place within the story. Throughout the course of the chase, I speak quickly to capture the spirit of the moment.

When the story shifts to my classroom, where I'm trying to lull my student into a false sense of security, things slow down. My pacing becomes more methodical and measured.

But when there are just minutes left before the end of the school day and my plan has not yet come together, my pacing increases again because now there is time pressure. A literal ticking clock.

Near the end of the story, my pacing gets downright glacial as I'm saying the most important words of the story. Heavy, ponderous words reflect the gravity and solemnity of the moment.

When your pacing matches your content, your story can come to life for an audience without them even realizing what is happening, and there is a multitude of ways of making this happen. These are just a few.

While adjusting your pace to match the content of a story is not necessary to tell a great story, it's another powerful tool in the toolbox of the storyteller when used well.



TIP #18

BE CAREFUL NOT TO TELEGRAPH SURPRISE

Be careful not to telegraph surprises to an audience by injecting your present-day perspective into your past. This week, I heard a storyteller say, "I thought I had finally found a safe place to lay my head."

But the words "I thought" signal that the storyteller was wrong. It wasn't a safe place to lay his head, but the storyteller didn't know that he was wrong at that moment, so the audience shouldn't know it either. Audiences want to experience stories in the same way the storyteller experienced the story, beat by beat.

This is why sentences like, "Little did I know that..." or "I would soon find out that..." are terrible sentences for stories. They ruin the possibility of surprise and telegraph subsequent events and their results to the audience.

That stinks for an audience member, so it stinks for a storyteller to do.

So don't. Okay?

Beat by beat. Now ominous hints at the future. They don't exist in real life, so don't stick them in your stories.



TIP #19

ALWAYS KEEP 'EM GUESSING



Basketball coach Doug Oliver famously said, "Always keep 'em guessing."

Good advice in hoops. Better advice in storytelling.

I've recently been listening to stories for which the endings were abundantly clear. Halfway through the story, I already know how these stories would end.

No surprise whatsoever.

This is not good.

If you're telling the story of your attempt to run a marathon, it should not be clear halfway through your story that you will succeed.

If you're telling the story about asking a girl to the prom, it should not be obvious well before the finish that the girl says yes.

If you're telling a story about applying to Harvard, your audience should not know that your blood runs crimson red long before you speak your last word.

To keep an audience wondering, the ending cannot be all but certain halfway through your story. You must find a way to "Always keep 'em guessing."

False stakes, misdirection, and the creation of a possibility tree are all excellent strategies to keep the ending of your story obscured and uncertain.

I can teach you how to do all of these and many more.

TIP #20

HERE'S A WAY TO GRAB AN AUDIENCE'S ATTENTION

A man with dark hair, wearing a white t-shirt, is shown in profile, shouting into a white megaphone. The background is a solid orange color. A light blue rectangular box is overlaid on the image, containing the tip text.

"Say the suspenseful thing first. ."

In a story I'm developing, I plan to begin with a line like, "The scissors hidden in my lap are sharp. Sharper than I expected. Now I wait for the teacher to turn his back so I can use them."

The most suspenseful object in the scene - and perhaps the story - is the pair of scissors, so I lead with them to create wonder, suspense, and even worry.

Why are you hiding scissors in my lap?

What do I plan on doing once the teacher turns his back?

Why are they so sharp?

The scissors play a very minor role in the story, but I lead with them to grab the audience's attention. I force my audience to wonder what will happen next. String enough "I wonder what will happen next" moments together and you've got yourself a story.

TIP #21

YOUR LAST WORDS



FINALLY!

I attended a storytelling show recently and became frustrated while listening to storyteller after storyteller fail to make proper use of the last sentence or two of their story.

The last thing that you say in a story is critical. It's the final note. The reason you began speaking in the first place. It's the fulfillment of the promise made at the beginning of the story that their time will be well spent.

No one begins listening to a story hoping that it will end with a pun or a joke or something dramatic like, "Yes, Mother, I see that now. I see that now."

This is what I heard storytellers do at that recent show. They ended their stories with a joke. A pun. A comment about someone else in the story. Dramatic dialogue. A sentence designed to wrap up the plot but say nothing about the real purpose of the story.

Sometimes a story is only plot, which is another problem entirely.

When you're finishing your story - a story about transformation or realization - make those final couple sentences do these two things:

1

End in your own heart and mind. Speak about yourself. The story is about you, so end the story with you.

2

Say something important. Talk about how you felt at the end of the story. Describe the change that has taken place. Make it clear to the audience what you were trying to convey when you started telling your story.

When you fail to end your story with meaning, your story will ultimately have no meaning. Storytellers save the most important things for the end of our stories because that is what we want the audience to remember most. We want it to be clear that we went on a journey for a reason, and that reason was so important that it was the last thing we said.

This is what audiences want at the end of stories.

