

# 4



## The Splendour of Storytelling

*At a glance: Telling stories can have far more impact than merely reciting facts. But they require key elements to be effective, including structure, jeopardy, pace, morals, messages, characterisation and a fulfilling ending.*

I delight in all the elements which make up the wonderful world of communication. But one I love the most, and that's storytelling.

The reasons are many and varied. Firstly, storytelling just sounds so marvellously enjoyable. Indeed, *it is* marvellously enjoyable. The noble art carries us gently back to the sunshine days of childhood, being read stories, discovering stories to enjoy, and inventing stories of our own.

Secondly, storytelling is a fundamental of the fabric of our lives. Do you happen to know what percentage of our day to day conversations are made up of stories, according to the research? The answer may surprise you.

The figure is . . . according to the eminent anthropologist, Professor Robin Dunbar, who published research on the subject in 1997 . . . no less than . . .

Sixty-five per cent.

Yes, that's right. Almost two-thirds of our daily chattering is made up of stories. But now you think about it, that makes sense. Something strange happens on the way to the office and you tell your colleagues over a coffee: *Hey, you wouldn't believe what I saw . . .* And you relate the story.

You pull off a coup at work, and you get home and let the family know: *Hey, guess what I did today?* Then you tell the story. And on it goes.

Stories stretch far back in human history. Before we had the printing press and books, and way, way before the Internet, knowledge and wisdom were handed on by elders in storytelling sessions. Our favourite novels, TV shows, films, plays, box sets, even video games, they're all based on stories and storytelling.

Thirdly comes the most important insight, the lead role which stories play when it comes to being a compelling communicator. Storytelling lights up the mind in a way which leaves mere facts floundering in its wake.

For example, have you noticed something curious when you're watching a film? The moment it comes to an action scene, you often find yourself fighting it out with the characters. Or when the story turns to sadness, you can feel the tears forming.

That's how stories infuse our minds and engage our emotions. To borrow a wisdom from another of our great communicators, this time let's hear from the English writer Philip Pullman:

- After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world.

## The Power of a Story

If you want a message to be noticed and remembered, turning it into a story is a wise strategy. Because, in yet another of my indented for importance mantras:

- Facts fade, but stories stick.

Don't believe me? Still need convincing? OK, let me tell you a story and we'll compare the impact it has with a bland statement.

I expect you know the imposter syndrome. That awful feeling of dark self-doubt, the fear we're not up to everything the world demands of us. Would you like to know how to beat the imposter syndrome?

I thought you might. Well, no problem at all. The solution is simple and goes like this:

Everyone suffers with the imposter syndrome. It's a fundamental part of us all. I get it, my friends get it, the brilliant people I know from my BBC days and here in Cambridge struggle with it sometimes. Even Albert Einstein complained about it, which sure tells you something.

So, the next time the awful thing comes calling, remember that. Everyone suffers the imposter syndrome, not just you. It's simply a part of being human.

There. I hope that helps.

Oh, hang on. What's that I sense you're thinking? Perhaps ... I was promised a remarkable story which would help me to beat the imposter syndrome. And all I've got is this Simon idiot muttering a few bland reassurances. That's rubbish! I feel cheated.

Fair enough. You've got a point. You're never going to be moved by my vaguely comforting words, let alone remember them. So, instead of a statement, that not to worry, everyone suffers with the imposter syndrome, how about a story instead? And one of a true life, truly remarkable experience:

My trick for beating the dreaded imposter syndrome was born of an extraordinary moment of pure revelation.

My main charitable work is visiting ordinary British schools, like my own, to talk to the students about their futures. Many don't know what they want to do with their lives, or the possibilities that are open to them.

So I tell the young people about how I was once like them, unsure what I could achieve. But with hard work, and putting the talents

I had to good use, I went on to work for BBC Television, write books, run my own business, and teach at the renowned University of Cambridge.

I call my talks – modestly enough, well, you know me – *The Secrets of Success*. And one of the secrets I reveal is how to beat the imposter syndrome.

I usually cover it by talking about a couple of famous people who have suffered the horrible thing, and how they've handled it. But this time, on this day, something strange happened.

The talk was at a school not far from Cambridge. There were about 200 students in the audience, all aged 16, 17 and 18, and we were in a large, wood panelled hall. It was echoey, full of sunlight, and smelled of wood polish. I was on a stage, at the front, with the headmaster next to me, smartly dressed in his suit and tie, and there were lots of teachers in the audience. It was quite an occasion.

I came to the point about the imposter syndrome. As usual, I was going to mention the celebrities who had suffered it, when an instinct whispered from a corner of my mind. *Do something different*, it said. So I did.

I remember wondering what I was thinking. This was a big event and I could be about to make an utter fool of myself. I had a script which had worked many times before. Why take the risk and abandon it in favour of a shot in the dark? But I went with it anyway, however much a part of my mind was screaming *Nooooo!*

I paused for a second, looked around the hall, and asked: *Who here suffers from the imposter syndrome?* And there was a silence. Because, of course, these were young people and they didn't want to look uncool in front of their friends.

The silence ticked on. I think the sun even went in briefly, as if to emphasise the drama of the moment. The seconds passed and I kept waiting, waiting, waiting for a reaction.

Then, at last, near the front, one of the students, a young woman, slowly, shyly, raised her hand. And then, next to her, a young man raised his hand. Then a couple more students raised their hands. Then a teacher. Then a few more students. And then, next to me, at

the front of the hall, the headmaster himself raised his hand. And I raised mine, and more and more students and teachers put their hands up, until, remarkably quickly, everyone, all 200 of us, had our hands in the air.

And it was a most incredible – most beautiful – moment of realisation.

The students were saying to each other: *You suffer like that? I always thought you were so cool and sorted. And look, look the headteacher does as well. And Simon, that guy from the BBC and Cambridge. And wow, just everyone does . . .*

Revealed there in that school hall, on a sunny, springtime day, was the truth of the dreaded imposter syndrome. It's a part of us all. Maybe it's evolutionary, there to stop us being complacent, to drive us on, to keep us working and growing.

Whatever the reason, whenever the next time it bites, never forget. The imposter syndrome is just a part of being human. We all suffer it sometimes, so remember my story, remember the truth it tells us, and remember to stay strong.

And roll the credits. Relax. But remember the point. Which, of course, is this.

What will you remember? My bland statement, telling you not to worry about the imposter syndrome because it's a part of us all. Or my story?

That's the splendour of stories. So now we'll explore the secrets of storytelling, and how this simple, beautiful and uplifting art can help you become the most celebrated of compelling communicators.

## The Ingredients of a Story

Just before we move on, let's briefly explore something which I think will interest you. Checklist the imposter syndrome story against all we've covered in the book so far. Specifically:

- Is the story clear? Could you sum it up in just a handful of words?

- Is the start of the story striking enough to attract your attention?
- Is there a sense of my unique communication style, or voice, coming through?
- Can you see the art of show not tell working in the story?
- Does the narrative follow the sacred golden thread?
- Is the language simple and effective?
- Is the style modern and inclusive?
- Does the story contain all the facts Kipling demands, and also follow Orwell's rules?
- Is the story relatively brief, saying only what needs to be said?
- Does the ending sum up the key message, and memorably, with the use of a soundbite?

**As well as being another of my tests, there's a more significant point here.**

**Nearly everything we've explored so far will help to make you a splendid storyteller. That goes from a striking start, to a clear narrative, a memorable ending and all else in the checklist above.**

## Storytelling Structure

**Although the imposter syndrome story follows the great majority of the principles of compelling communication, there is one big difference. I expect you noticed, but just in case, I'm talking about the ending.**

**It's in the nature of a story that the most important information is usually the conclusion. Which is the opposite of the inverted pyramid structure. That's because, in a story, you have to draw the audience in, and build up the suspense and emotion. For example:**

- In the case of a thriller, it's the final showdown between hero and villain.
- With a romance, it's which character gets to walk off into the sunset, hand in hand with the hero or heroine.
- For the imposter syndrome, it's the big reveal of how to deal with the dreaded thing.

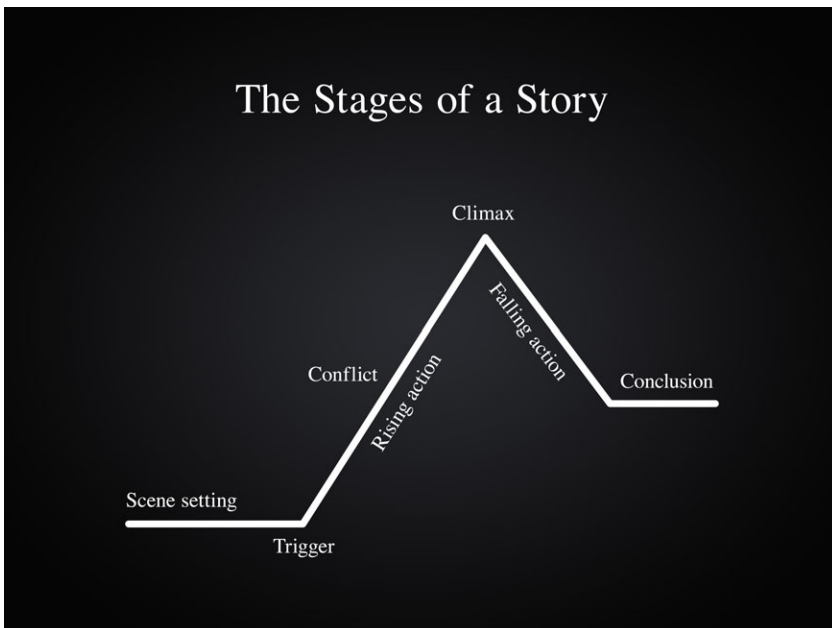
That, of course, raises a question. If stories don't unfold according to the same principles as the majority of communication, how do we structure them?

The answer is that there is no set way to tell a story, despite what some people might claim. But there is an outline which can help.

The image below demonstrates a classic narrative structure for a story. Does it look familiar? It should! You've seen a similar version when we explored the golden thread and how it worked in the film *Alien*, earlier in the book.

Once again, the line represents the thread. But this time it passes through the typical stages of a story rather than the specific events (Figure 4.1).

Stoking up the suspense, building up the drama, stepping up the tension towards the climax before the big reveal is classic storytelling. Only after



**Figure 4.1** The stages of a story

the resolution can the audience breathe out again and relax. Have a look once more at my imposter syndrome tale and tick off the various stages. To explore them further:

- Setting the scene

In a thriller, for example, we might see a priceless painting put on exhibition for the first time amid high security. But we also witness background muttering from a brilliant gang of criminals about the irresistible challenge of stealing the ‘unstealable’ artwork. With the imposter syndrome, it’s my talks at schools and describing this particular event.

- The trigger

Stories usually have a trigger moment, and it tends to come early in order to set the action in motion. For example, in our thriller it might be the theft of the painting. The rest of the story is then about the hunt to retrieve it. For me, it was the instinct whispering to *do something different*.

- Conflict

Conflict helps to raise the tension and engage the audience. For example, in *Star Wars*, it’s the rebels against the Empire, a modern take on the old classic of good versus evil. In *Alien*, it’s humanity versus the creature. In our thriller, it’s the heroine versus the gang. In the school hall, it was my moments of internal doubt, wondering what on earth I was doing.

- Rising action

The tension increases. Perhaps our heroine, a famous art detective called out of retirement, has a series of leads, but each comes to nothing. And she’s running out of time to get the painting back. For me, it was those awful seconds of silence as I waited to see if the audience would react to my question about who suffered with imposter syndrome.

- Climax

This is the moment of truth in a story, the point where the conflict is resolved. In *Star Wars*, can Luke Skywalker destroy the Death Star? Can Ripley kill the creature in *Alien*? Can our heroine retrieve the painting



from the gang? Would the young people respond to my question, meaning my gamble had worked?

- Falling action

Following all that action and suspense, this is where the tension eases. In *Star Wars*, the rebels get together to celebrate their victory. In *Alien*, Ripley can finally head home to Earth. In our thriller, the heroine turns down international fame, donates the vast reward to charity, and goes back to her organic blueberry farm. Or something like that! For me, it was when the students were looking at each other and the moment of realisation.

- Conclusion

Often this is the moral of the story, the lesson we learn. It's better to be good than evil in *Star Wars*, that human resilience triumphs in *Alien*. For our heroine, perhaps it's that you don't need to seek celebrity to be happy and a success. With the imposter syndrome, it was the understanding that such darkness is part of us all.

Finally for this section, it's worth noting that the classic storytelling structure is not prescriptive. As I may have mentioned more than a couple of times already, communication is an art. Sometimes you can get impressive results from breaking the rules.

But if you're not an experienced storyteller, the architecture we've explored here will help to ensure you wield stories effectively. You can always start to experiment with your technique as your confidence grows.

- Exercise: Think about one of your favourite stories, whether a TV show, film, book, play or whatever. Does it follow the classic story structure? Then think about a story you sometimes tell. Does it do likewise?

## The Long and Short of Storytelling

I'm often asked a deceptively simple question about storytelling:

- How long should a story be?

The answer is that it depends on what the story is worth. In my BBC days, the average duration of a TV news report was about one minute and forty seconds. Cue nostalgic picture of me in action in those long ago times (Figure 4.2)!

On big news days, when there was a lot to cover, the duration of a report could stretch to more than five minutes. But the stories could also be much shorter. If you were able to say all you needed in only twenty seconds, then that's how long you took.

**Figure 4.2** The author during his BBC career



Once more, we return to the principles we've met before. So long as you cover the key points, say what you need and stop, you should have told an effective story.

There's much disagreement about what is the longest book, or story, ever written. *War and Peace*, by Leo Tolstoy is commonly cited as a very long book. And at 361 chapters, and almost 600,000 words, it is indeed a hefty work. But *À la recherche du temps perdu*, or *Remembrance of Things Past*, by Marcel Proust trumps it easily. The book comes in at nearly 1.3 million words, although it is split into multiple volumes. Imagine trying to read it in bed otherwise.

That, however, is a relatively quick read compared with *Marienbad My Love*, by Mark Leach. The word count here is – wait for it – 17.8 million. Yes, really, almost 18 million words, in a total of 10,700 pages. But, as the author says, it contains thirty years' worth of work both by himself and borrowed from others.

All those tomes are impressively long when set against the average length of a novel, which is generally around 80,000 to 100,000 words. But, bearing in mind our key principles of brevity and less is more, perhaps more interesting is the shortest story.

In fact, here's a question for you. What would you say is the fewest number of words which would be required to tell a story?

Once again, there is no definitive answer. But there is one which is famous and celebrated. As with many great tales, this is disputed. But legend has it that Ernest Hemingway was once challenged to write a story in only six words. And the answer he's said to have offered has become iconic.

- For sale, baby shoes, never worn.

I'm wondering what happened when you read that story. Did your imagination go flying away, exploring what could have happened, the events behind the words? Mine certainly did. Which, of course, is much of how the story works.

A hidden corner of London boasts a wonderful example of short form storytelling. Postman's Park is one of the city's best kept secrets. I often visit whenever I'm in the capital and have time.

The park is a memorial to those who have sacrificed their lives to save others. The stories are told in simple plaques, some of which you can see in Figure 4.3. And they always make my imagination spin, and often bring tears to my eyes with the results.

Try a visit to the park anytime you're in London. It's near St Paul's Cathedral, an oasis of calm and reflection, and a thoughtful way of spending half an hour.

Anyway, tour guide aside, remembering to leave space for the imagination is one of the great arts of storytelling. Writing works best when the author and the reader work together, as an old saying of the trade has it.

But, for now, the point to remember is that a story should be only as long as a story needs to be. No less, and no more. I'll leave this section with an example in action, one with just the necessary amount of words, and which also triggers the imagination to do its magical work.

There is, however, a twist. Because it's me, I'm going to share a favourite joke. Gags are often stories too, after all.

In homage to my wonderful father, who you can blame for my sense of humour, it's time for the joy of Tommy Cooper. He was Dad's favourite comedian. I fondly remember youthful days, with us sitting together on the sofa watching Cooper on the television:

The minute I got off the plane in New York, 15,000 people started crowding around me. If you don't believe me, ask Marlon Brando. He was standing right next to me.

Did you feel your imagination fly, and your mind fill the gaps so that the joke made sense? And all that in just a handful of well-judged words, which was all the story needed.



**Figure 4.3** Plaques at the Memorial to Heroic Self-Sacrifice in Postman's Park in London, UK. © Chris Dorney/Shutterstock



Figure 4.3 (cont.)

## Pace

Some stories can last a long time. There's one I tell which goes on for about ten minutes, although much of that is due to the audience laughing. Since you ask, it dates from my BBC days, and is about what to do when you urgently need to thaw out a frozen otter.

Yes, really, you did read that right. Yes, it is all absolutely true. And yes, I will tell it later, however absurd it may be. That should keep you reading, if nothing else does!

But for now, the question is this. How can you be sure to keep an audience engaged with a longer story, when modern attention spans are so brief?

The answer is pace.

Think back on some of the films, box sets or books which have absorbed you. Why did they have you spellbound, page after page, scene after scene, or episode after episode, eagerly wanting to find out what happened next?

I'm guessing it's because there was so much going on. Take one of my favourites, the box set *Breaking Bad*. It's commonly cited as among the greatest TV shows of all time. If you don't know it, the story focuses on Walter White, an ordinary family man and chemistry teacher in New Mexico, America. He's horrified to be diagnosed with lung cancer and turns to crime to make money in order to secure his family's future.

Walt begins producing drugs, and gradually gets drawn into the sordid depths of the criminal underworld. The series is about how he, and those around him, navigate the range of mortal dangers they come to face.

There's so much to learn from *Breaking Bad* about storytelling. The characters, the settings, the plots are all outstanding. But one thing the writers always ensure is that the story develops fast. Whether it's Walt under threat of being murdered by a rival drugs gang, potential capture

by the police, or his family turmoil, there's always so much going on that the viewer never loses interest.

That's the power of pace.

So when I'm thinking about telling a story, I find it useful to jot down a rough outline. Not only does that help me remember what to say, it also acts as a check to make sure enough is happening to retain an audience's interest.

As an example, take a story which is very meaningful for me. I'll tell you why a little later.

Brothers together, Joe and Vlad played soldiers until bedtime forced a draw. Next morning, Vlad bought a new tank and won the battle. Then Joe bought a tank, then Vlad, then each bought tanks until all their pocket money was gone. Brothers together, they stopped playing and began to fight.

I'm not going into exactly what that brief tale is about yet, although I suspect you might have guessed. For now, as an exercise, just list the developments. And while you're doing so, also note the stages which the story runs through, according to the classic structure we explored earlier.

So, how many developments have you spotted?

I make it eight. We might not agree, because it's debatable whether some of these are one or two. But this is my analysis of the developments, along with the structure:

- Brothers together, Joe and Vlad played soldiers until bedtime forced a draw.  
*One development, bedtime and a draw. Setting the scene.*
- Next morning, Vlad bought a new tank and won the battle.  
*Two developments: Vlad buying a tank, then winning the battle. Trigger.*
- Then Joe bought a tank, then Vlad, then each bought tanks until all their pocket money was gone.  
*Three developments: Joe buys a tank, then Vlad, then both as many as they can afford. Conflict. Action rises.*



- Brothers together, they stopped playing and began to fight.  
*Two developments: the brothers stop playing, then start to fight. Climax and conclusion.*

Did you spot how new developments kept on unfolding, even in just one brief paragraph? That gave the story pace. It's remarkable how much can happen in so few sentences. Notice also how not a word is wasted. Or, at least, it shouldn't be. The story had to total exactly fifty words.

Why? Well, because that was the only rule of a mini-saga competition at the Littlehampton School, on the south coast of England, circa 1985. I entered the story you've just read for the simple reason that we all had to enter a story. But however much I might have complained, it led to something very strange happening. And, as I've mentioned, something even more meaningful.

I was far from a model student when I was in my teens. I was disruptive, fighting, vandalising, was suspended from school a few times and even arrested by the police on a couple of occasions. In fact, for a while, those were my sole distinctions, however unhappy.

Anything remotely to do with academic achievement had entirely passed me by. Until it was I wrote that story.

So came the day the headteacher stood up in an assembly to list the mini-saga competition winners. To be honest, I pretty much tuned out. This wasn't going to be something which would ever involve me. I remember half listening as he listed the third and second prizes, read them out, then came to talk about the winning entry.

It was brilliant, he said. An outstanding work of political and social commentary. So thoughtful, perceptive and simply darned smart. A genius of allegory, he proclaimed. And all that in just fifty words.

I began looking around the draughty, falling-down old hall, wondering which annoying creep was being praised so enthusiastically. Which meant it came as one of the greatest surprises of my life when the head called me up on stage to receive my prize.

I even remember looking around, thinking this had to be a case of mistaken identity. No one used the words genius and brilliant in relation to me. No one. No time. Never.

I should admit that I've changed the names from the original story. Vlad and Joe were Ronnie and Mike in the 1985 version. You'll appreciate why if you think back to the era of American and Soviet Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev. And OK, it might not be the most subtle of ways to invoke the fear of nuclear Armageddon, but it wasn't bad for a generally unruly and unpleasant sixteen-year-old.

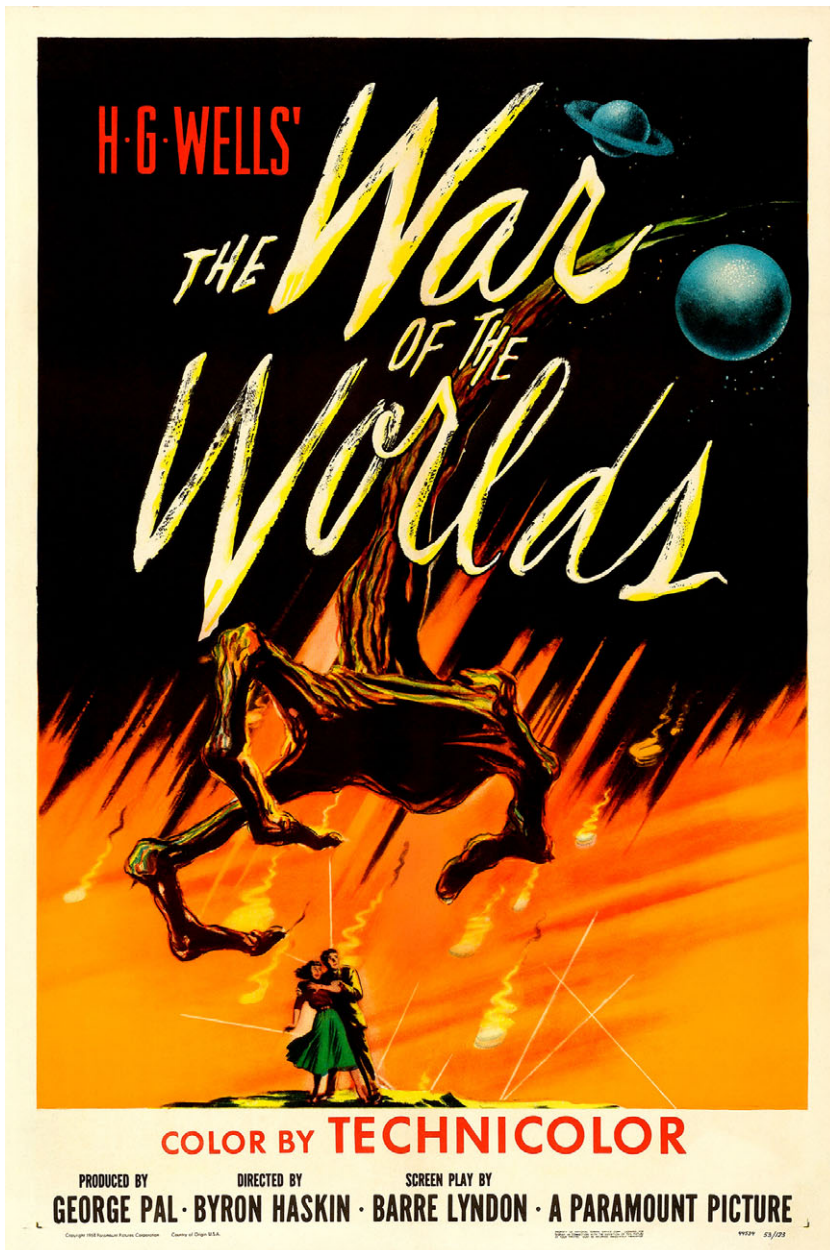
I'll leave this section with one final memory. It was that story which made me think I might just have one vaguely useful talent in the world. And so, that day, perhaps began the journey which led me to working for the BBC, writing books, leading a course at the University of Cambridge, and – drumroll please – to the book you're currently reading.

## Jeopardy

For a story to really make an impact, a sense of jeopardy is important. Unless there's something to win or lose, an audience is likely to wonder why they should care and switch off.

Sometimes, the stakes are as high as they can be. That's partly why extinction-of-humanity-type stories are so popular. H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*, where the Martians are out to get us, is one example. Not many people who will be reading the book, watching the film (Figure 4.4), or listening to the radio adaptation won't feel a part of the fight for the survival of our species.

Likewise with the film *Armageddon*, where a giant asteroid is on a collision course with Earth. A team of astronauts, led by Bruce Willis (who else?) has to intercept the threat and blast it off course. In more modern times, stories about how climate change could mean the end of humanity have become common, for obvious reasons. *The Day After Tomorrow* is one example, with millions of people being killed by extreme weather.



**Figure 4.4** Theatrical release poster for the 1953 film *The War of the Worlds*, the first cinematic adaptation of H. G. Wells' 1897 novel of the same name. Illustrator unknown. © 1953 Paramount Pictures Corporation, via Wikimedia Commons

But the stakes don't have to be the end of life as we know it for a story to work. Which is fortunate, as for most of our real-life storytelling that's unlikely to be a realistic scenario. Hopefully, anyway!

*Breaking Bad* is a step down from apocalypse type plots, as the jeopardy threatens Walt, his friends and associates. Whether it concerns their lives, or their freedom, it works because we're invested in their fates. Likewise with *Alien*, when the stakes are the survival of Ripley and the crew.

But you can step down even further on the peril scale. Generally, all you need for jeopardy is an understanding that the situation matters to those involved, and preferably a great deal. That's the case with most romantic fiction, for instance. But whatever the nature of the story, you have to make sure the peril is clear soon after the outset. That way, the audience should be drawn into the plot and eager to know the outcome.

What do you think was the jeopardy in my imposter syndrome story? Look back once more and have a ponder.

I'd say it was twofold. Firstly, me risking making a fool of myself in front of a large audience. The other element was not communicating effectively how to deal with self-doubt. Which would be a loss for the young people who had come to listen.

In the otter story, the jeopardy arises from a fear of professional humiliation. If I can't thaw the creature out in the next half hour, I'll miss the deadline for the story to get on the news. By setting out at the start that not meeting a deadline is a cardinal sin of journalism, I give the audience a clear understanding of the peril in play.

OK, so it might be ridiculous, but it's clear and present nonetheless. And I can promise you, from the wonderful reactions I've enjoyed when telling the story, that the strangest jeopardy works. Just so long as it's obvious and highlighted early in the narrative.

P.S. OK, yes, I've done enough teasing. The otter story is coming in the next section. Be warned!

- Exercise: Think of a story you might tell in your professional life. What's the jeopardy? How can you make clear it matters, and also establish it early in the narrative? And while you're thinking, also check whether the story has sufficient pace to keep an audience engaged.

## The Character of Your Storytelling

Storytelling, along with public speaking, is where the character of your communication style becomes most important.

I mentioned the legendary Tommy Cooper earlier as a tribute, but for another important reason too. Look him up online and watch a few minutes of one of his performances. I bet it's not long before you start laughing out loud.

But when you've got a sense of his style, next analyse some of the show. You might get a surprise. If you look at Tommy Cooper's act on paper it doesn't appear funny, let alone hilarious. Why then are most of us laughing so much?

The answer is the character that Cooper brings to the performance. With his wonderful expressions, manner of speaking and all round presence, it's hard not to start chuckling just watching him.

The lesson is to always unleash your own unique style when it comes to telling a story. And as you've got to know me reasonably well now, it's time. As promised, here comes the almost legendary tale of the frozen otter.

When you read it, imagine I'm relating this to you in person. Think about how I'd use my voice, the way I might gesture at certain points. The expressions on my face, the pauses I would leave for the audience to envisage the scene and react. Most importantly of all, on that basis, see how my character helps to make the story one which is usually a highlight of any talk I give.

I'm going to tell you the story of the most ridiculous thing I ever had to do in my BBC career. The competition is stiff, believe me. But this is the oddest of the odd.

The story goes back to when I was an environment correspondent. I was sent down to Cornwall, in the south-west of England, to cover a sad story.

There had been a spate of otters getting run over on the roads of the county. It was springtime and the theory was that the creatures were ranging away from their territories to try to find a mate. They were crossing roads to do so, being hit by cars, and killed. My editor wanted to do the story because it tugged at the heart strings. Everyone loves otters. They're incredibly cute.

A conservation group, the Cornwall Wildlife Trust, also wanted the story on the news. They could put out a warning to drivers to take care when near rivers and hopefully save a few otters' lives.

Before I set off that morning, I popped into the newsroom to talk to the producer of the lunchtime news. He was very keen on the story and wanted it on the bulletin. So we agreed I would do a couple of hours' filming, drive back to Plymouth, where the TV station was based, and edit together a report in time for the bulletin.

There was only one concern. The story had been set up the day before, and the Wildlife Trust had warned us they couldn't guarantee we would find a dead otter while we were out filming. But, fortunately, they had a solution.

The otter corpses were not disposed of, but sent to a pathology laboratory in order that scientists could learn more about the species. So the trust arranged to have a dead otter sent back from the lab by a motorbike dispatch rider in case we needed to film one.

It wouldn't be misleading the audience, because it genuinely was an otter which had been killed on the roads of Cornwall. It was just a way of making sure we could get the story on air. TV relies on pictures, and the critical footage was a dead otter lying beside a road. We simply had to have that shot.

By the way, if you think this story sounds strange already, it gets worse. Much worse.

I had arranged to meet the cameraman, Martin, and the Rivers Officer from the Cornwall Wildlife Trust, Kate, at a service station on

the main A30 road in the middle of Cornwall. I pulled in just before 10 o'clock to find them both waiting.

Kate told us there had been no otters reported killed on the roads overnight. However, that shouldn't be an issue in making the story work, because at that very moment the dispatch rider arrived. We had all we needed to do the filming.

Except! When the motorbike rider opened his pannier, I started to have my first concerns.

What he had brought was wrapped in black plastic. It was big, and it was clearly heavy, because he was struggling with it.

Oh well, I thought. Perhaps it's just a big otter.

The rider put the package down on the tarmac and rode away, leaving us to begin unwrapping it. And that was the moment when things started to go seriously wrong. Because what he had brought was an otter. Not a badger, or some other creature, as we might have feared. It was undoubtedly an otter. That was the good news.

But the bad news, the thing they hadn't told me, which would've been so useful to know was . . .

That they kept the dead otters in a deep freeze.

Which meant that what had arrived was a comedy frozen otter in a block of ice. There was no way we could put it beside the road and film it. No chance at all. It would look ridiculous.

The dearly departed and deep frozen creature would probably thaw out in a few hours, but the problem was we had very limited time. I had to drive back to Plymouth to make sure the story could feature on the lunchtime bulletin, as agreed with the producer. Missing deadlines is something you simply don't do in BBC News. It's a high crime against the corporation.

Martin, the cameraman, looked at me and cried, aghast, 'What are we going to do?' So I did some quick thinking and looked around. Was there anything here at the service station which could help?

Aha! Over there, in the corner, was a Little Chef, a branch of the roadside restaurant chain. Which prompted an idea. A ridiculous one, yes, it was true. But this was a desperate moment, and

desperate moments require desperate remedies. So I wrapped the otter back up in the plastic and tried to walk nonchalantly into the restaurant with it under my arm.

I don't know if you've ever tried to walk nonchalantly with a frozen otter under your arm. It's not easy, but I just about managed, and once in the restaurant headed straight for the toilets. There I found exactly what I was hoping for. One of those hot air dryers where you run your hands underneath.

I unwrapped the otter and started playing it back-and-forth under the streams of warming air. And, however weird this may sound, however absurd, the plan was working. The otter was thawing out beautifully.

A couple of men had come in to use the toilets while I was at work, and given me strange looks. But, bless them, they didn't say anything and just left me to my task.

After a few more minutes, I had almost finished. The otter was nearly thawed out. We were going to be okay. The day had been saved. The story would make the lunchtime news. Relief flooded through my veins.

But then the door opened again, and this time I had a bad feeling. I looked around and it was the manager of the Little Chef.

I remember him standing there, stunned, in the doorway. Because clearly his training had not prepared him for what to do when you find TV reporters thawing out frozen otters in your toilets.

'What are you doing?' he eventually gibbered. And I thought, well, I'm only going to get one chance to say this in my lifetime, so I replied . . .

'I'm thawing out this frozen otter, what does it look like?'

He gawped some more, and then said, 'That's incredibly unhygienic, I'm going to have to ask you to leave.'

I replied, 'Sorry, I didn't realise it was against the rules.' After all, there was no sign on the wall saying *Please don't thaw out frozen otters in here*.

Anyway, I wrapped the otter back up in the plastic, moved as rapidly as I could out of the restaurant, we went on to do our filming and the story got on air just fine. To much relief on my part.



Finally, a confession. I do miss the BBC occasionally. But one of the pleasures of leaving the corporation is at last being able to tell that tale!

## A Cautionary Tale

As well as being highly effective for getting your message across, stories are fun. A joy, in fact, as I hope I've shown (note: not told) you. I love sharing stories, as you may have noticed. Most of the people I work with come to delight in storytelling too. I hope you will, as well.

But, as a final note for this chapter, a brief word of caution is needed. The stories you tell in your professional life have to be relevant to your purpose. Otherwise, they're likely to fall flat.

What am I talking about now? It's just that I've seen presenters and hosts, bosses and staff who understand the power of stories. Which makes them desperate to include a tale in any talk they're putting together. So they choose one, a favourite, and they tell it . . .

Only for the anecdote to make no impression. Apart, perhaps, from an embarrassed silence. And why would that be, given the power of storytelling?

The answer is because the tale in question is not relevant to the setting, or event. Which leaves the audience baffled, unimpressed and sometimes even hostile. In other words, feeling disinclined to listen to whatever is being communicated, rather than highly and happily engaged.

When I tell the otter story, I make sure it's part of a clear narrative. If that's just a talk about my career and work, it's fine to introduce it as the most ridiculous experience of my BBC days. But sometimes, I also tell the anecdote when I'm teaching young journalists. In that case, I do so under the banner of always asking the right questions before you go out to cover a story. Doing so can save a lot of trouble. Or ridiculousness, as in the case of the otter.

I saw a splendid example of an irrelevant story, and the effect it can have on an audience, here in Cambridge. As I try to be kind in life, I won't name names. But it was a business event, about pitching for investment, and a sizeable one. There must have been 150 people in the lecture theatre.

The host introduced the evening, then told us a story about her son and his football boots. He had a lucky pair, apparently, which he simply had to wear or his team couldn't possibly win. But on Sunday morning, the magic boots could not be found. Despite a desperate hunt, and his protests, they set off for the game without the magic boots.

He wasn't far from distraught, she told us. He spent the whole of the twenty-minute drive lamenting that defeat was guaranteed because of the loss of the blessed boots. Even worse, how he was fated to a life of failure now that they were no longer a part of his world.

OK, it was a little melodramatic. But the set-up was effective and the story was working. The audience was swept up in it, waiting to hear what would happen. The scene was set. The drama was building. The conflict was growing. I was impressed by the classic structure of the story and the impact it was having.

So came the denouement of the tale. The suspense built a little further. The game was nil-nil. Then her son (wearing borrowed boots) broke away down the wing, beat a defender, then another, crossed the ball . . .

And it was duly headed in by the centre forward. The right team won. Cue celebrations. The curse of the magic boots was broken. Her son had his faith in the world and the chance of a happy future restored.

I remember the moment well. All of us, the whole audience, were leaning forward. We'd enjoyed the story. Now we were waiting for the punchline. Its relevance to the pitching event for which we had assembled. The moral it would impart.

But that didn't happen. Not in the slightest. Instead, she began to introduce the first business that would be presenting. Which left us in

the audience looking at each other in bafflement. There were many shaking heads and puzzled frowns. Most people were just bemused, but there was some annoyance too at what felt like a random waste of our time.

To this day, I'm not sure whether the story was supposed to have some relevance and the host just forgot to mention it. Or whether it was simply a tale thrown in because it felt like the right thing to do. A way to get the session off to a good start, maybe.

But what I can say for sure is that misplaced story certainly marred the start of the event. It also eclipsed everything which followed. I can't remember anything about the pitches, or the networking session afterwards. Only that arbitrary tale of football and life. So I suppose you could say it fulfilled one of the aims of telling a story, which is to be memorable. Just not in the right way.

Contrast that with a story I sometimes tell when I'm preaching the power of simplicity. I hosted an evening with two of the executives from Google. It was at the Judge Business School, part of the University of Cambridge, and a big event. There were a couple of hundred people in the lecture hall and several hundred more joined online.

To break the ice, I started with a ridiculous question:

*Bearing in mind the incredible achievements of Google, I said, I imagine everyone listening and watching has one thing they'd like to know. So I'm going to raise it right at the start. If you're ready, your opening question is this . . .*

*What is the secret of your extraordinary success?*

The question got a good laugh, as I expected it would, which warmed the atmosphere nicely, just as I had hoped. I didn't expect the executives to answer. That wasn't the point of the exercise. But, to their credit, they did.

That Google provided a great service was a given. But in addition, there was a secret they wanted to share. And it had two critical components.

Google was firstly swift, and secondly simple.

I've never forgotten that reply and always cite it whenever I'm working with an early stage business. For the best chance of making it big, learn from the masters. Ensure your product or service is both swift and simple to use. That it works well too should go without saying.

It's only a brief story, but always powerful in emphasising the importance of simplicity and speed in modern life. And part of the reason it's effective, however obvious it might sound, is that the anecdote is 100 per cent relevant to the point I'm making.

Lastly for this chapter, be wary of relating the same stories repeatedly if there's a danger your audience may have heard them before. That can also be a turn off.

We all have favourite tales to tell. Indeed, we'll look at the value of assembling a personal library of stories in the next chapter. But remember to rotate your anecdotes. Otherwise, the experience will be like another run of repeats on the television. Eye rolling, irritating and certainly far from captivating.