



STANFORD

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

CASE: M-323 (B)

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HOW TO TELL A STORY (B)

Storytelling is not what I do for a living—it is how I do all that I do while I am living.

—Donald Davis

Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it.

—Hannah Arendt

In “How to Tell a Story,” case number M-323 (A), students learned the craft elements of storytelling. Students learned how crucial storytelling can be in the context of persuading others to take action on behalf of another person or organization. However, storytelling is equally, if not more important in one’s own life and life goals. And the skill of storytelling is only honed through practice. Thus, in this companion (B) case, students will have the opportunity to use everything they have learned in the “How to Tell a Story” (A) case to their own lives and careers—telling personal stories and stories about their companies and organizations.

EXERCISE 1: TELLING YOUR STORY IN SIX WORDS

Art is the elimination of the unnecessary

—Picasso

Hemingway once wrote a story in just six words (“For sale: baby shoes, never worn.”) and is said to have called it his best work.

The goal of this six-word story exercise is to learn how to be concise in your storytelling about yourself or your company. It can be used as a warm-up for a meeting to get to know each other,

Victoria Chang prepared this case under the supervision of Professor Jennifer Aaker as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation. Contributors include Oren Jacob, Justine Jacob, Jeffrey Seth Cohen and Jessica Jackley. Special thanks to Dana Maurello and Jamess Forrest.

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or as groundwork on micro-blogging—to shed insight on what types of short sentences intrigue and spread.

Good six-word stories fall into several structure types.

- **Simple description**
 - Smart. Funny. Future oriented. Always felt different. (one student)
 - Goofball. Jock. Happy-go-lucky. (another student)
- **Evocative description**
 - Mind of its own. Damn lawnmower. (David Brin)
 - Road to Boston begins in Napa. (one student)
- **Shows development/change in a character or a situation**
 - Longed for him. Got him. Shit. (Margaret Atwood)
 - Failed SAT. Lost scholarship. Invented rocket. (William Shatner)
- **Sensationalistic/ attention grabbing**
 - Tick tock tick tock tick tick (Neal Stephenson)
 - With bloody hands, I say good-bye. (Frank Miller)

There are six-word stories that incorporate several of these structures—but for the sake of this exercise, attempt to craft one that is as specific to each category as possible. When constructing your six-word stories, keep in mind that what you exclude is as important as what you include.

For further inspiration, see: <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.11/sixwords.html>. Also, for another slice of mini-stories, see: <http://www.wdydwyd.com/>, where Tony Deifell, executive director of the Institute for Public Media Arts, allows people to post a picture and an answer to the question: “Why do you do what you do?” For example, Gloria Steinem, a feminist and political activist holds up a piece of paper that says: “for the same reason little kids say, ‘It’s not fair.’”

EXERCISE 2: CREATING A PERSONAL STORY BANK

Creating an inventory of personal stories – an exercise which will serve to get you familiar with the type of stories you already tell about yourself, or others tell about you. Just focus on the titles of each story. However, keep in mind that good stories should follow a template or structure. For example:

Story = Situation/Desire - Complication/Obstacle - Solution/Outcome

Thus, for each of the story titles you write below, ensure the title refers to a story, and not just a situation.

Stories you tell the most often (just write the titles)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Stories frequently told about you by a family member

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Stories frequently told about you by a friend

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

EXERCISE 3: ADVOCATING FOR YOURSELF – TELLING THE “WHO I AM” STORY

In this exercise, you will tell a story that will illuminate who you are, what you stand for, why you are here, and perhaps, hint at where you hope to be going. The goal of this story is to advocate for yourself - such as trying to get hired or a promotion; transitioning to another role or position; helping you get where you are going; or simply making it known what your career vision is to your constituents around you (boss, colleagues, etc.). Thus, your target audience is the people within your company or organization or those at a target company or organization.

Think of this story as a casual speech. It should have a conversational tone and be effective without the use of visual aids.

In crafting your story, describe who you are, the path you took that got you where you are today, and where you aspire to head in the future. Then, describe the organization, the path it took to get where it is today, and where it aspires to head. Clinch by detailing the connection between the two. Remember that a description without conflict or a challenge is not a story. And a story without a resolution is not a story.

Helpful tips:

- What are you trying to achieve; what is your goal?
- Who is the audience of this story?
- How will the story help you achieve your goal?
- How unique is the story – could anyone have told it (or just you)?

EXERCISE 4: ADVOCATING FOR YOUR COMPANY – TELLING THE “HOW WE ARE DIFFERENT” STORY

In this exercise, you will highlight the (unique) value that your company brings to its consumers. Rather than using facts and data, and memorizing text, you will craft a story that sheds insight on

the unique value that your company or brand delivers. The goal is to sell the audience on your company's product/service or to positively influence perception of the company.

As discussed in the "How to Tell a Story" (A) case, one formula for good storytelling is:

Story=Situation/Desire→Complication/Obstacles→Solution/Outcome

Create one "use case story" with two parts: 1) one situation fraught with problems or injustice; and 2) one where this tension becomes resolved due, in some way, to your company's contribution to the marketplace or the world at large. The use case subject could be relevant to a company you have worked for; one you would like to work for; or for an innovative new company you envision.

Helpful tips:

- Describe what life is like for a particular user *without* the product/service/social good platform, and then *with* it.
- Raise the stakes as much as possible by identifying the most dramatic, yet realistic, situations where the product/service/platform impacts the user's life.
- Sharply define your user character; his/her situation; and what happens.

Example: If you were telling a story about the Microsoft Office product, you might start by describing a day in the life of an office worker creating spreadsheets and slide decks before personal computers existed (or an office worker who uses competing tools such as Google's Internet-based apps). You would vividly describe the office worker, his or her environment, and situation. Then you would want to emphasize the headaches and inefficiencies, showing the most dramatic consequences. Finally, you would describe the efficient, productive work life of an Office user. Do the same with this person, her environment, and situation. You might even connect the dots by showing how the first situation could be transformed into the second by Office.

EXERCISE 5: SHARING BAD NEWS—TELLING THE APOLOGY AND RECOVERY STORY

The power of storytelling is not limited to helping you create positive impressions in your work. It can also be used to effectively communicate unfortunate news and manage the damage that can result. In this exercise you will create a story that does both of these.

Your story could deal with a transgression; poor company or team performance; or a broken promise. The goal of the story is to explain an important turning point and/or re-cultivate trust.

Your story will likely have four parts that correspond to the following structure:

Effect→Cause→ Synthesis→Future Course of Action

Helpful tips:

- First, talk about the negative effect or the problem.
- Touch on what the cause of the situation is (in your candid estimation).
- Discuss your interpretation of the situation and what you (or company) learned from it.
- Detail the future course of action that you (or the company or organization) will take as a result.

Think of each of these four components as acts in a play about your bad news story. Give each component a beginning, middle, and end—and ensure they flow into each other naturally.

EXERCISE 6: LEADING—TELLING THE “VISION” STORY

In this exercise, you will use the elements of effective storytelling within vision statements by rewriting weaker vision statements and creating new settings to bring the vision statement alive in story form.

First, peruse company websites to identify one “vision” statement that you deem especially effective and one that you deem ineffective. Identify the points that make each statement effective or ineffective.

Then, using insights from the effective statement, rewrite the ineffective statement to make it better. Keep in mind your target audience is those inside your organization. Seek to optimally share your vision for the future.

Finally, devise a clever and unique way, other than through a website, to deliver your message. You do not need to actually create this medium, but describe it as specifically as possible. For example, this could be anything from a video presentation featuring the CEO filmed in a location where the company’s product/service is being used, to a message written in the sky by an airplane above company headquarters on the day of a product launch.

Example:

Below are two short vision statements from Dupont and Nike, that take two different approaches—one that talks about the company and then about the value provided to users; the other only talks about the value to users. In this case, then, you could choose which approach you think is best and then either add information about the company or remove it. Then, you could detail how you would communicate the message in an innovative way. Perhaps this would involve showing videos of now-healthy DuPont customers; athletically-inspired Nike employees on television monitors in elevators within various offices; or video clips of every day people and athletes that are inspired to train and focus on fitness.

DuPont: “Our vision is to be the world’s most dynamic science company, creating sustainable solutions essential to a better, safer and healthier life for people everywhere.”

Nike: “To bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world.”

Now create a story that illuminates this short vision statement—in a way that is authentic.

An alternative structure for the vision story: Create a story about the future written in the past tense. That is, write a story about a company 10 years from now and how it has achieved its vision. This story encapsulates challenges it faces and how it overcame them and can provide a source of inspiration in the present to achieve the vision in the future. This type of story can be a powerful tool in instigation change and inspiration, and be a vehicle for goal creation.

FOR FURTHER INSPIRATION

Leader's Guide to Storytelling

By Stephen Denning

The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations

By Stephen Denning

Slide:ology: The Art and Science of Creating Great Presentations

By Nancy Duarte

The Triumph of Narrative: Storytelling in the Age of Mass Culture

By Robert Fulford

Storytelling as Best Practice

By Andy Goodman

Narrative Impact: Social and Cognitive Foundations

By Melanie C. Green, et al.

Listening is an Act of Love

By Dave Isay

Telling True Stories

By Mark Kramer & Wendy Call

Improving Your Storytelling

By Doug Lipman

The Power of Personal Storytelling

By Jack Maguire

Corporate Legends & Lore: The Power of Storytelling as a Management Tool

By Peg C. Neuhauser

Tales of a New America

By Robert Reich

What If? The Art of Scenario Thinking for Nonprofits

By Diana Scarce & Katherine Fulton

Tell Me a Story: Narrative & Intelligence

By Roger Schank

The Story Factor

By Annette Simmons

The Art of Storytelling: Easy Steps to Presenting an Unforgettable Story

By John Walsh

The Story Handbook—Language and Storytelling for Land Conservationists

By Helen Whybrow