

A practical guide for the workplace,
the marketplace, and everyday life

UNLEASH THE POWER OF STORYTELLING

WIN HEARTS, CHANGE MINDS,
GET RESULTS



ROB BIESENBACH

PRAISE FOR
UNLEASH THE POWER
OF STORYTELLING

“When a book is titled *Unleash the Power of Storytelling*, you expect it to... well, tell a story. In this engaging, no-nonsense, and often extremely funny handbook on the craft behind great stories, Rob Biesenbach does indeed tell you stories ... and does so masterfully. He shares his own storytelling roadmap without hesitation, giving you precisely what you need to raise your business storytelling to an art form. Take a bow, Rob, because this one gets a standing ovation from me!”

**Shonali Burke, ABC, President & CEO,
Shonali Burke Consulting**

“There is no greater skill that will positively impact your career as much as becoming a masterful storyteller. Well-told stories have the power to teach, clarify, and inspire. Rob’s experience and unique point of view makes him a go-to authority for ambitious leaders. I have enjoyed all of Rob’s books and *Unleash the Power of Storytelling* is no exception.”

**Patricia Fripp, Past President,
National Speakers Association**

“Storytelling is hard; just ask Ernest Hemingway. Rob Biesenbach makes it as easy as possible for you to become the Hemingway of your organization. In this book he reveals the secrets of good storytelling to help you create stories that command attention in this distracted age.”

**Dr. Nick Morgan, Communications Coach and Author
of *Power Cues* and *Give Your Speech, Change the World***

“Rob Biesenbach’s terrific book, *Unleash The Power of Storytelling*, is true to its claim that it’s a practical guide for the workplace, the marketplace, and everyday life. It offers storytelling tips from cradle to grave, from how to craft a memorable origin story for a company to creating a heartfelt eulogy for a loved one. His parting words, ‘Most of all, don’t hold back. Don’t let fear override your desire to share. Be open and generous and allow your individuality to shine through,’ is great advice for storytelling and life.”

Patrice Tanaka, Public Speaker, Founder & Chief Joy Officer, Joyful Planet LLC

“All the experts suggest you tell stories — in content, in speeches, in sales, in customer experience, in every aspect of business. But no one tells you how. That’s where *Unleash the Power of Storytelling* comes in. Rob Biesenbach provides a five-step process for crafting your stories, and six ways to ensure they’re relevant to your audience. After you read this book, you’ll never again have to wonder ... ‘but how?’”

Gini Dietrich, Founder and Author, *Spin Sucks*

**PREVIEW COPY OF
SELECTED CHAPTERS 1 AND 11**

NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION OR DUPLICATION

Unleash the Power of Storytelling:
Win Hearts, Change Minds, Get Results

Copyright © 2018 Rob Biesenbach

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any way or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published by Eastlawn Media
2011 Orrington Ave Evanston, IL 60201

ISBN: 978-0-9910814-2-4

CHAPTER 1: WHAT MAKES STORIES SO POWERFUL?

Study after study confirms what we all know intuitively: stories are uniquely powerful.

We witness that power when we dry our tears as the house lights come up. When the book we put down sticks with us for days, months, and years. And when we hold our loved ones a little closer after watching a tragic tale play out on the news.

If you want to break down walls with people, truly connect with them, and make an impact, few things beat a well-crafted, well-told story.

There is both a nature and a nurture argument behind why stories are so effective. Let's start with nurture.

We are Raised on Stories

Bedtime stories, fables, fairy tales, cartoons — we are immersed in stories from nearly the moment we're born. And we're inundated with them throughout our lives.

Worldwide we spend \$90 billion a year on movies and another \$90 billion on video games. And we watch more than 30 hours a week of television (at least in the United States, which appears to lead the world in this dubious distinction).²

So stories are embedded in our consciousness. When someone says they're going to tell us a story, it sets certain expectations in our mind. We assume it will follow a familiar pattern — setup, climax, resolution. When it doesn't, we are left dissatisfied.

As Kendall Haven argues in his book *Story Proof*, “The steady diet of stories that children experience modifies the brain to render it more predisposed to think in story terms.”³

And that's where things get really interesting.

Our Brains are Hardwired for Stories

Multiple studies show that stories have a unique effect on our brains.⁴ Researcher Paul Zak found that stories cause the brain to produce oxytocin, a chemical related to feelings of empathy and a desire to cooperate.⁵ This essentially softens up our audience, making them more amenable to our ideas.

Stories stimulate our senses in multiple ways, to the extent that listening goes from being a passive exercise to an active experience. In fact, multiple studies have shown that when we hear a story, it triggers the same areas of the brain that are stimulated when we experience an event.⁶

Think about that for a moment: as far as the brain is concerned, there's little distinction between story and experience.

And this is what makes stories so powerful: they sweep us up and involve us in multiple important ways — physiologically, emotionally, intellectually:

- As storytelling expert Nancy Duarte describes in a popular TED Talk, great stories cause our palms to sweat, our hearts to race, our eyes to dilate.⁷
- Emotionally, we empathize with the protagonist, we identify with her struggle.
- Mentally, we put ourselves inside that story, asking the essential questions, “What would I do in these circumstances? How would I measure up?”

Stories Trump Statistics

In the influential book *Made to Stick*, one of the authors did a memory exercise with his university students in which they listened to a series of presentations and were tested on what they retained.⁸ He found that while 63 percent remembered the stories they heard, just 5 percent could recall the statistics presented.

Stories stick. Here’s one that stuck with me.

I was working with a company that makes candy and gum, and they wanted to demonstrate their commitment to quality. So we put together a video crew and went looking for stories.

That’s when I met Estela, a factory worker whose job was to inspect packages of gum before they left the plant. I asked her what she does to ensure quality in her work.

Not surprisingly, my process-oriented question got a process-oriented answer. She walked me through her routines from the start of the line to the finish. She showed me the x-ray machine that checks for bits of metal, and she pointed to a laminated sheet with a matrix of various quality criteria that she judges each pack of gum on.

For many companies, this would be their story:

Our people are passionately committed to quality. They're on the line every day, utilizing state-of-the-art technology to test for impurities and applying our strict 24-point quality checklist, all to ensure that the gum you're enjoying right now is as fresh and tasty as the day it left our door!

But that's not a story; it's just a bunch of facts, claims, and data. And those don't stick.

Get to the Heart of It

I then went to the figurative heart of the matter. I knew Estela had children, so I asked her what they think about what she does. That's when she lit up. "They call me the Candy Lady," she beamed.

Then she turned over one of the packages of gum and showed me a code on the bottom. That code tells you exactly when and where the gum was made, right down to the individual shift and production line.

And here's the kicker: her children can read the code. So what do you think happens when her family goes to the store? The kids run straight to the candy aisle, turn over the packages of gum, and when they find the right code, they yell out, "This is Mommy's gum! Mommy made this gum."

Now *that's* a story. Here's a company you can count on for quality. It's good enough for your family because Estela is down there on the line every day making sure it's good enough for hers.

Six Keys to Powerful Stories

Estela's story perfectly illustrates six key ingredients that give stories their power.

1. Stories tap into emotion

The best stories trigger an emotional response, which is key to provoking empathy in our audience and unlocking decision-making. Research suggests that “emotionally charged events” carry far more weight and persistence in our memory than ordinary, neutral events.⁹ (For more on the role of emotion, see Chapter 4.)

2. Stories put a face on an issue

In the end, nobody cares about processes or programs; they care about people. So if you can embody your idea, your initiative, your brand in a great character that people can relate to, you're going to have more success.

3. Stories connect us

Most people have never stepped foot in a candy factory, but they can still identify with Estela's story. Why? Because it's not about candy manufacturing; it's about a mom looking out for the health and well-being of her children — something most of us can relate to.

4. Stories humanize us

The stories we tell offer a glimpse into who we are and what we value. And that's highly appealing. It's especially important for leaders — people want to follow humans, not machines.

5. They raise the stakes

The Estela story is not about manufacturing standards or error rates. It's about health and safety and love and family. Stories raise us up out of the everyday and the mundane, appealing instead to universal values that bring us all together.

6. Stories are about “show, don't tell”

As one of my instructors put it, “Actors express themselves through actions. That's why they're called actors, not talkers.” It's better to *show* us who you are and what you stand for than to just *tell* us about it. And that's one of the things stories do best.

Defeating Match.com Syndrome

The principle of “show, don't tell” is the antidote to something I call “match.com syndrome.” If you spend time on any dating site you'll find that everyone describes themselves the same way. They say they're “funny, intelligent, and adventurous.” (Would that that were true!)

These kinds of generic claims are ineffective because everyone makes them. Plus, few of us are objective judges of our own stellar qualities.

But “show, don't tell” means that instead of *saying* you're funny, *be* funny. Instead of *saying* you're intelligent, *talk about*

the last book you read. Instead of *saying* you're adventurous, *post a picture* of that white-water rafting trip you took.

All of those things together are going to paint a much more compelling and credible picture of who you are than any of the common labels we apply to ourselves.

Which we do all the time, as individuals and as organizations. "I'm resourceful," "I'm reliable," "I'm creative." Or, "We offer personal attention," "We provide the highest quality," "We care."

Stories give proof to these claims and they set us apart. Because anyone can talk about service excellence, but nobody else has your particular story about the overjoyed customer and the employee who bent over backward to personally resolve her issue.

A Lesson From *The Godfather*

This discussion leads us to *The Godfather* films, which any fan will tell you offer lessons for practically every circumstance in life.

In the opening scene of the first film we instantly recognize that Don Vito Corleone is a man to be reckoned with. Dressed in a tuxedo, he sits stoically in a darkened room behind a big desk, patiently listening to a nervous man pleading for his help.

It's all right there in the story: show, don't tell.

Now what if the movie opened with the Don saying, "Welcome to my office. I'm the most powerful leader of the five families. How can I use my vast criminal empire to crush your enemies today?"

That wouldn't be particularly effective (or entertaining).

Always challenge yourself to dispense with the hollow claims and tell stories instead:

- On your website, don't just say your people provide "hands-on" attention, tell us about the senior VP rolling up his sleeves and working away with the rest of the team.
- During a sales pitch, don't just talk about quality, tell us about the customer who gave you that five-star review.
- In a job interview, don't just say you're dependable, tell us how you worked all night to meet an impossible deadline.

Whether you're selling, interviewing, or just representing yourself in the marketplace, offer people something they can't refuse: a specific story that lends power to your words.

CHAPTER 13: HOW TO TELL YOUR OWN STORY

Sometimes the hardest story to tell is the one we tell about ourselves. Modesty (false or otherwise), lack of objectivity, and insecurity all come into play.

After all, it's one thing to tell a story that bombs — the embarrassment is fleeting. But it's a whole other issue when that story is about *you*. Suddenly you're left wondering, "Did the story suck, or do *I* suck?"

The ability to tell your own story is critical to successfully navigating job interviews, networking events, and first-time meetings with others.

Here's how to prepare for the next time someone says, "So tell me about yourself."

What Not to Do: Alphabet Soup Syndrome

A few years ago I attended a meeting where the first order of business was to go around the table and take turns introducing ourselves.

It was awful. It was like an alphabet soup of job titles, company and department names, dates, dollars, and numbers:

I was a Quality Control Inspector for five-and-a-half years, then in 2011 I was promoted to Lead Quality Manager, then in October 2014 I transferred to the Western Region, where I was Director of Quality Assurance and managed a team of 27 inspectors and an annual budget of \$42.7 million, then ...

They might as well have been reading their LinkedIn profiles aloud. It was all fact with no heart. Data with no context or meaning. In short, there was no narrative. Nothing that would stick or particularly distinguish one person from another.

Worst of all, it was boring! Imagine hearing basically the same thing, just with different data points, from 20 different people.

Turn Your Life Into a Story

That's when I realized there has to be a better way. What if we could capture the events of our careers and our lives in a form that is unique and compelling, full of conflict and drama and human interest and all the other things that make stories so effective?

Framing your career in story terms makes it more entertaining, of course, which makes people more likely to listen to and remember you. A narrative can also give context to, and help you justify, a non-traditional career path or gaps in your timeline or experience.

Finally, storytelling is a way of communicating not just *what* you do, but *why* you do it. It answers questions like:

- What sets you apart?
- What drives you?
- What do you stand for?
- What value do you offer?
- How are you making a difference?

I've worked with a lot of insurance salespeople and they're among the best storytellers I've come across. Which shouldn't be surprising since selling is about appealing to emotion, and insurance involves some pretty high-stakes drama — literally, issues of life and death.

One of my clients told this story:

I went into this business because I heard the money was good, and that's true. By the time I was 25 I was the first among my friends to own a home. But one night I got a phone call. A good friend was in a car accident and died. It was horrible, but what made it even worse was finding out that he had no plan in place to provide for his family. His wife and two young children were left with little in savings, a lot of debt, and a future of uncertainty.

For whatever reason, I had never talked to him about planning for his family's future. We were buddies, and I guess I didn't want to be one of those pushy salesmen that everybody avoids at parties. But since then I've made it my mission to help as many people as possible avoid my friend's fate. So, yes, the paycheck is nice, but for me

nothing beats being able to look a customer in the eye at a time of crisis and say, “Don’t worry, you’re covered.”

Now most of us don’t deal with life-and-death matters in our everyday work. But I believe everyone has a story to tell. It may not be as dramatic as this one, but it’s there, just waiting to be uncovered and shared.

Discover the Implicit Narrative of Your Career

Marketing strategist Dorie Clark talks about finding the “implicit narrative” of your life — the common thread that ties your experiences together.⁴⁷

Whether we’re aware of it or not, something is driving us forward, from job to job, experience to experience. It could be a set of values, a character trait, a skill. Even if the steps in your career path feel random and disconnected, there’s often a pattern that reveals itself over time.

In a commencement address to Stanford University, Steve Jobs likened this emerging pattern to connecting the dots:

You can’t connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something — your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever.⁴⁸

Creating your narrative is about connecting those dots.

Start by Examining Your Career Highlights

As a starting point, make a list of the major successes and challenges of your career and life (Clark calls them your “war stories”). Don’t think too hard about it. What are the first things that come to mind — promotions, awards, rejections, failures?

Now ask yourself some questions:

- Do any themes or patterns emerge?
- What skills did you bring to bear on the problems you faced?
- What traits helped you succeed?
- What did others have to say about your role?
- What did you most enjoy about that work?
- How did it make you feel?

In creating my own story, I discovered that the thing that has driven me, satisfies me, and has been central to my success, is the desire to perform. It was there at nearly every phase of my life:

- I was the baby of the family and the natural center of attention.
- In school I was what’s known as a “show-off.”
- At the office I was often drafted to create Top-10 lists, sketches, and song parodies for major occasions.

- As a speechwriter, I was likely drawn to the performance aspects of the craft: the rhetorical flourishes, the emotional highs and lows, the words designed to provoke an audience reaction.
- And that all led to performing on stage, first as an actor and then as a public speaker.

Yet if you had told me years ago that I'd be standing up in front of audiences for a living, I would have thought you were insane. As Jobs said, it was impossible to predict then, but looking back, the dots were all there, ready to be connected.

Structure Your Story

To create a personal narrative, I recommend a five-part structure:

1. The beginning: the “normal state” of things.
2. Inciting incident: something that disrupts the normal state.
3. Turning point: the path you took in response.
4. Conflict: challenges along the way.
5. The end or resolution: which brings it all full circle.

To revisit our original story formula — “character, goal, challenge, resolution” — all those elements are implicit here. You, obviously, are the character, the inciting incident is the challenge, the turning point is the goal and the end is the resolution. This is just another approach that I believe works better for the personal story.

Let's apply this structure to the insurance salesman's story above:

1. In the beginning, our character is focused on a career based on financial reward.
2. The inciting incident is his friend's death.
3. That leads to the turning point: his mission to help others avoid the same mistake.
4. The conflict is his aversion to coming across as the typical insurance salesman, especially to his friends.
5. In the end, he resolves that challenge by thinking of the bigger picture: the ability to offer comfort and security to a customer in a time of need.

Think of these as guidelines, and don't worry if your particular inciting incident isn't as dramatic, or your turning point isn't as sharp. Just do the best with the experiences life has dealt you.

My Story

In fact, my own story — which I told earlier in a different form — is a little softer around the edges:

For most of my life I pursued a conventional career in business, doing corporate communications and PR. (Beginning/normal state.) While it was satisfying and rewarding, I always felt there was something more creative calling to me. (Inciting incident.) So I scratched a long-time itch and started taking classes at Second City. (Turning point.) That grew into a second career performing on stage and in front of the camera.

For years I struggled to keep my two worlds separate. (Conflict.) I'd do my client work by day and steal away to audition and rehearse and perform at night. But the more I studied and performed, the more I realized these two worlds were not so different. They both require you to connect with audiences, to express yourself in a compelling way, and to tell stories. So I found a way to bring these two worlds together in my books and workshops. Now I'm doing the thing I love — performing on stage — while sharing the business knowledge I've accumulated. And in the process I'm helping people become more skilled, confident communicators, which is very rewarding. (Resolution.)

Now if this were a Hollywood movie the inciting incident might have been getting fired from my job for daydreaming about a show business career. And the turning point could have gone like this:

I left the office and wandered the city alone, head down in the pouring rain. I spotted a reflection in a puddle and looked up — it was the warm glow of the Second City marquee. Like a beacon, it drew me inside, where I discovered the welcoming embrace of a group of like-minded creatives. I was home!

But that's not how it went. There were multiple possible inciting incidents and turning points over a period of years, most of which would take too long to cover and detract from the point of the story.

Again, storytelling is about making choices — and those choices are driven by our goals, the audience, and, in the case of a personal story, our own comfort level with revealing the details of our lives.

Remember Your Audience

Which brings up another important point: as with any other communication, your personal story needs to be finely tuned to your audience's interests and needs. If you're in a job interview, what set of qualities is the hiring manager looking for? If you're selling, what is the buyer interested in?

So you may have slightly different versions of your story — or even completely different stories — for different occasions and audiences. If I'm talking to a potential corporate consulting client, I might downplay the speaking career and emphasize instead how my acting training has made me a more creative partner in helping companies and individuals communicate successfully.

Keep Working at It

Developing your personal narrative may not come naturally at first. If you're having trouble, try getting input from people who know you well.

Depending on the circumstances, it may be useful to bring in elements from your personal life — a cross-country trip that opened your eyes, an illness that lent perspective, a friend who left a mark on you. In fact, mining your personal experience may be necessary if you're at an early point in your career.

To sharpen your narrative, go back to the tips in Chapter 2 on story structure and Chapter 6 on focusing your story. Don't neglect the emotional component discussed in Chapter 4. That's what will make you more relatable.

Remember: the point is not to capture every twist and turn of your life or career. The goal is to give people a glimpse of who you are and pique their interest enough that they'll want to know more.

LIKE WHAT YOU SEE? WANT MORE?

I hope you enjoyed these two preview chapters of my upcoming book.

As a subscriber to my mailing list you will be among **the first to know** when the finished book is available, and you'll even have a chance to **review a FREE advance copy** of the whole thing when it's done.

You'll also receive my monthly email, which is **full of tips** on storytelling, presentation and other communication skills — both from me and from experts I rely on.

You are free to unsubscribe from the email at any time, of course, but don't worry: **I will NOT be flooding your inbox** with promotions and offers. I hate those, too. Except in rare circumstances, you will be hearing from me no more than once a month.

To give you an idea of what else the book covers, **check out the table of contents on the next page.**

WANT TO BECOME A MORE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATOR?



Whether your goal is to advance your career, lead more effectively, build your brand or grow your business, I can help you reach that goal by transforming the way you communicate.

That means:

- Cutting through the clutter to engage meaningfully with customers, employees, and other key audiences.
- Becoming a more powerful, persuasive presenter and communicator.
- Discovering and articulating the story that will set you apart from others.

If you're looking for a practical roadmap to communication success, find out more about my inspiring keynotes, substantive training, one-on-one consulting and fun, popular books:

www.RobBiesenbach.com

CONTENTS

Introduction: Why Storytelling is Essential to Success 1

In an age of information overload, stories rise above the noise and intensify the impact of your ideas.

PART ONE: STORYTELLING ESSENTIALS

Chapter 1: What Makes Stories so Powerful? 11

The brain science behind storytelling and six essential ingredients that give stories their unparalleled power.

Chapter 2: What is a Story? 19

With the right tools, anyone can tell a story. A simple three-part story structure, plus five ways to bullet-proof your stories.

Chapter 3: How to Create a Story 27

A five-step process for crafting your stories, and six ways to ensure they're relevant to your audience.

Chapter 4: Emotion Fuels Stories 37

Winning hearts is the key to changing minds. How to tap into your story's emotional core.

Chapter 5: Stories at Work 47

Real-life examples of different kinds of stories, told for different purposes, to different audiences.

PART TWO: ADVANCED STORYTELLING

Chapter 6: How to Focus Your Story 59

Just as important as what goes *in* to a story is what you *leave out*. Seven ways to cut the clutter.

Chapter 7: How to Preserve the Integrity of Your Stories 69

Storytelling is about making hard choices and trusting that your audience will “get it.” Advice on protecting the power of your stories.

Chapter 8: How and Where to Find Great Stories 77

Don’t settle for telling other people’s stories — great stories are all around us. Here are six ways to discover them.

Chapter 9: Story’s Cousins: Comparison, Analogy, and Metaphor 85

Sometimes mistaken for stories, these figures of speech fire our imagination in much the same way. Use them to boost audience understanding and retention.

Chapter 10: The Dark Side of Storytelling 91

The tyranny of the narrative, blurred reality, and the Brian Williams effect — how to successfully navigate these common hazards.

PART THREE: APPLIED STORYTELLING

Chapter 11: How to Tell Your Company’s Origin Story 101

Every organization needs a story explaining how and why it was founded and communicating its purpose and values. Here’s how seven companies tell theirs.

Chapter 12: How to Use Stories in a Presentation	111
Stories should be the centerpiece of any presentation. Guidelines for weaving them into your content, plus five tips for delivering your stories effectively.	
Chapter 13: How to Tell Your Own Story	121
Don't get caught flat-footed when someone asks, "What's your story?" Constructing your career narrative for meetings and job interviews.	
Chapter 14: How to Tell Your Personal Brand Story	131
Stories can help you communicate your value and stand out from the crowd. How to figure out your brand and capture it in a story.	
Chapter 15: How to Use Story for a Toast, Tribute, or Eulogy	141
The toughest story you'll ever tell. A lesson from Paul McCartney, plus fifteen tips for composing your content — and yourself.	
Conclusion: Stand Up, Stand Out	149
What Ricky Gervais can teach us about six critical storytelling principles.	
<i>Endotes</i>	<i>155</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>159</i>