

INFLUEX

# 44 SECRET STORYTELLING TECHNIQUES

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**Think you've got a good brand story to tell?**

**But how do you refine it enough to make it stick to the minds of your intended audience?**

**How do you turn your story from good to GREAT?**

**What follows are my 44 techniques for making stories great. Each one has the potential to make your story greater. You need not use all of them, but even using one of them will improve your story. Read these techniques, and one at a time, consider how you could apply the technique to your story. Try it out. You should be able to sense if it improved your story. When in doubt, try your story out on a friend, and ask them what they think.**

**Think of these 44 techniques as a checklist of tools that could polish the rough edges off your story and make it truly shine. There are no rules in storytelling, only techniques.**

**Let's begin!**

# THE TOP 10 FUNDAMENTALS OF GREAT STORY

## 1 Tell It in Present Tense

Convert your story to present tense.

Instead of “Three years ago I was standing at an intersection,” change it to “It’s 2104, and I am standing at an intersection.”

This puts an immediacy into the story for both you and the listener. Technique #1 and #2 go hand in hand.

## 2 Set the Setting

Include where and when the story is taking place.

We want to know you’re in Ann Arbor and it’s 2010.

Or we want to know you’re in your kitchen when it happened and you were 26.

## 3 Reveal Your Feelings

Adding emotions makes your story more relatable to your audience and gives them an opening to bond with you.

Consider this: “In 2015 our first child is born.”

Meh.

It’s drab. It’s flat.

Now inject some emotion into it and watch it come alive:

“In 2015 our first child is born, and I feel exuberant, petrified and overwhelmed all at the same time.”

See the difference? The vulnerability demonstrated by the storyteller



## **6 Start on Something Dramatic**

You don't have to tell your story in the order it happened. It's often powerful to look for the moment in your story that is the most dramatic and start there.

It's good to get people engaged and hooked on your story as early as possible.

Ask yourself, "How are we going to get them hooked into this story early?"

After the dramatic hook, you can go backwards in time and fill in what happened first.

## **7 Show Some Vulnerability**

Your origin story doesn't have to make it clear that you're very successful. Listeners would rather hear that you're human and that you have weaknesses, fears, insecurities, and failures that you overcame.

The greatest success stories are about people who either overcame their weaknesses to succeed or who succeeded in spite of their weaknesses. What's not inspiring is a story that basically communicates that you're great and you succeeded – that's boring!

## **8 Keep It Real**

Some people think it's smart to exaggerate their stories. Sure, if you want to be a stand-up comic or someone who sits around a campfire and entertains kids with tall tales.

Otherwise, it's not smart to exaggerate. Great stories don't seek to exaggerate; they seek to tell the truth.

I improve my own stories by continually trying to get my stories closer to the truth. I've seen time and time again that the truth is always a better story.

## **9 Include Your Why**

A great origin story contains your WHY, the deep reason you do what you do. Sometimes you just say what your Why is in your story in a sentence, and sometimes your story just makes it perfectly clear. But if you want people to engage with your business, your origin story has to reveal your Why.

## **10 Keep It Short**

You're striving for an origin story that is a few minutes long. I work with my clients to get their story to 1 to 3 minutes. When someone's origin story is longer than 3 minutes, I get nervous and look for cuts. The trick to keeping your origin story short is being able to discern the key moments in your story, the most essential scene, and the most important plot points – and then cut all the rest. I've cut 15-minute origin stories down to 3 minutes for clients and, by doing so, transformed their story from boring to unforgettable. Less truly IS more.

# **HOW TO AVOID SOUNDING LIKE YOU'RE BRAGGING**

## **11 Impress with Your Journey, Not Your Success**

Your origin story is about how you arrived at starting your business, not about how successful your business is. At the end of your story, you can include some facts about the accomplishments of your business, but keep any bragging short and factual. People want to hear a story about how you got started.

## 12 Stay Humble

Try to tell your story with a good measure of humility. You can let people discover how smart and talented you are later. When telling your origin story, let them experience the part of you that is relatable and down to earth.

## 13 Give Credit Where Credit Is Due

You are likely the hero in your origin story – or at least the central character– but heroes don't succeed without help. So include a little bit in your story about the help you received.

Sometimes that help comes from a mentor.

Sometimes it comes from a book you read or a quote you saw.

In either case, when you give credit to forces or events outside of yourself helping you find your way, it helps you to avoid sounding like you're bragging.

## 14 Express a Little Surprise About Your Own Success

When/if you speak to the great success you've experienced since starting your business (see point #11), follow it with a touch of personal surprise.

For instance, “We’ve sold one million books, which continues to astound me.” A friend of mine would always follow his great accomplishments with this question: “I don’t know, but that’s pretty cool, right?” It was an amazing way to be a touch humble while he told you of his stellar achievements.

### **15 Don’t Speak at All of Your Accomplishments**

This may be the most powerful technique of all to avoid sounding like you’re bragging – simply don’t brag. I have never once heard Howard Schultz tell his origin story and include in it how large Starbucks is. You can let your accomplishments speak for themselves.

## **THE TOP 10 WAYS TO TURN A GREAT STORY INTO AN EPIC STORY (MASTER CLASS STORYTELLING TECHNIQUES)**

### **16 Add a Premise to Your Story**

A premise is a statement that will induce a conclusion. Instead of opening your story on a moment, consider opening your origin story with a premise, a single sentence that hints at, but does not reveal, where your story is headed for at its conclusion. A premise could be a statement as simple as “The electric car business is hard because there is a long history of black hat forces being against electric cars.”

### **17 Tell Your Story out of Order**

The majority of origin stories will be told in the order they happened. But sometimes the most epic way to tell your story is out of order. Movies often make use of this stellar story technique.

For instance, what happens if you tell the end of your story first and then the middle and then the beginning? Perhaps reversing your story makes it more interesting to listen to. Or perhaps you start in the middle of the story and then tell the beginning and then jump to the end. No rule says you have to tell your story in chronological order.

## **18 Make Each Character Memorable**

Chances are that there are other people in your origin story besides you. When there are, it's a tremendous opportunity to make your story better by making these other people memorable. Instead of just mentioning other people by name, tell us something about the person that helps us see and feel like we know them a little.

For instance, instead of "My business partner, Mark, had the money," you can say, "My business partner, Mark, who looks and speaks like a young Robert Deniro, had the money."

## **19 Reveal Your Expectations**

I paid several thousand dollars to learn this tip, and it proved to be worth every penny. I would never have accomplished my greatest stories without it. Most stories lack this epic technique.



The technique is simple. At key moments in your story, share what you expect to happen next. For instance, you're telling about the time you did a big investment pitch. Say, "I walked out the building certain that they would say yes to my proposal." This tells us what you expect will happen. Listeners are always thrilled to see if life went the way you expected or not.

## **20 Make It a Mystery**

Everyone loves a good mystery. Consider how you can tell your story in a way that creates mystery. At the heart of creating mystery is telling your story in a way that makes your audience feel that they don't know how the story is going to end, how it was solved, or even who the good guys and bad guys are. A great mystery keeps you hooked on wanting the answers and questions to be revealed by the end of the story.

## **21 Bookend the Story**

I love this technique when it can be applied. It's masterful to begin a story and end a story on the same moment in time. For instance, your first sentence might be "I'm 18 and I'm being shoved into the back of a police car for stealing. It was the chain of events that got me here." And then you tell the chain of events and end your origin story on "So that's what prompted me to steal a car at 18 and why I'm being shoved into the back seat of this police unit... and when the car door is slammed, I have a revelation that forever changed my life." By doing so, you've bookended the story, and your audience delights in the ingenuity of how you told it.

## **22 Intentionally Misdirect Your Audience**

I use this to great effect in many of my stories. I never lie in a story – I'm absolutely against telling stories that are presented as true but are not. (See point #8.) But I do use misdirection a lot. Misdirection

is when you lead your audience to believe the story is going to end one way, but it actually ends a completely different way. This creates really powerhouse endings. Audiences love to be surprised, and they love to have moments when they guessed wrong.

### **23 Make Your Audience Feel Something**

The greatest stories make listeners feel something, and they have emotional impact. Without emotional impact, you only have a good story...period. This is among the most artful techniques to implement. It is a technique that depends on your ability to feel the emotions in your story and then to share your story in a way that prompts your audience to feel the same thing. Identify the primary feeling or two that your story contains, and then rely on technique #24 to convey that feeling to your listeners.

### **24 Don't Tell Your Story, Relive It**

Most people just tell their origin story. They tell it with an emotional detachment, as a statement of fact almost. Masterful storytellers don't tell their stories, they relive them for their audience. This means you need to emotionally and mentally go



there. Don't simply recite what happened to you in the past. Tell it as if it were happening to you now or as if it happened to you earlier today and this is the first time you're telling it. What a huge difference that makes.

## **25 Show Off a Bit in Your Story**

Yes, it's okay to show off a bit in your origin story, and chances are that you should. And if you adhere to my techniques to avoid sounding like you're bragging, you can show off and still be humble. There are many ways to show off a bit during your origin story, but perhaps the most reliable is to display a little bit of your expertise as it relates to the story you're telling. For instance, if you're in the coffee business, you can include a line in your story such as "I like to push the boundaries of coffee making at every step of the value chain, from tree to cup, from Sumatras to Ethiopians."

# **SIX TECHNIQUES TO ADD HUMOR AND BE FUNNY**

## **26 Be Self-Deprecating**

As a reliable technique, the truth is generally funnier than the fiction. This technique is at the heart of the success of all my funny stories. It works so well when you master it. When we tell our stories, we naturally turn them into little fictions very fast. They become "little fictions" because we gloss over the raw truth that really happened, and we tell stories that make us look more "together" than we actually are. Chances are that your story gets funnier when you surface the real, raw truth about what you did or what you were feeling and thinking. But the trick to it is that you have to first be able to laugh at yourself on these things. If you

don't think what you're sharing about your foibles is funny, neither will your audience.

## **27 Exaggerate**

In Technique #8 (Keep It Real), I told you not to exaggerate, so WTH? Because in #8 I also told you, “Unless you want to be a stand-up comedian.” Exaggeration is a great technique for adding humor to your story. Exaggerate little, inconsequential details when you're trying to make people laugh. For instance, “At this point in my life, I was really broke,” exaggerated might be “At this point in my life, my bank account was like the national debt clock. It was awful, and it just kept getting worse!”

## **28 Use Absurdity**

You can make almost anything funny by making it absurd. Absurd means “wildly unreasonable, illogical, or inappropriate.” Late night talk show hosts use absurdity in their monologues every single night. For instance, I saw Stephen Colbert take the wiretapping issue and then take it to the illogical conclusion that Obama was wiretapping his microwave so therefore he could stick his head into the microwave and talk to Obama. It was absurd...and very funny.

## **29 Leverage Your Fails for Laughs**

Failure is funny. When you share your fails unabashedly, letting your audience in on all the awful, gory details of your loser moment, people laugh. People love a hard fail, but again, on one condition – you have to first be able to laugh at yourself.

## **30 Say What You Were Really Thinking**

I promise you that you think so many funny things because the human mind is a piece of work. Often you will find humor in the crazy things you were actually thinking in any given situation. We're

not used to noticing what we were really thinking, and we're not used to saying those real thoughts out loud. I draw out my clients' real thoughts when I'm looking to make their story funnier, and it often produces a serious laugh.

### **31 When It Makes People Really Laugh, Lock It Down**

For the most part, being funny is a word-for-word thing. So when you achieve a way of telling your story that makes people laugh, lock the exact words down. Comedy is finding the right humorous idea and using the right words, in the right order, to make people laugh. When you discover that magical sequence, you adhere to it – or else the same “funny” part is not as likely to get the same laugh the next time.



## **13 TECHNIQUES FOR PERFORMING YOUR STORY LIKE A BOSS**

### **32 Write Your Story Out so That It's Very Well-Scripted**

The great debate is whether to script your story or improvise it. I've tested both approaches to the max, and I believe in scripting your story. Watch the best comedians in the world, and you'll see they are on a word-for-word script. It just seems like they're saying it off the top of their head. Script your story.

### **33 Get Your Scripted Story Down Stone Cold**

As the saying goes, “Amateurs work till they get it right. Masters work till they can’t get it wrong.” To perform your story like a master, you have to be able to tell it in your sleep, as they say. I tell my clients, when you first script your story, you’re able to read it. When you tell it a few times in public, you’re able to remember it. But only until you can tell it without thinking have you mastered it. My one-man show is a two-hour-long story, and I can tell the entire story without ever thinking about it. Get your story script down stone cold.

### **34 Try Your Story Out on Friends**

When your story is new to you, the best move is to try it out on friends as soon as possible. Phone up a friend, and say, “Can I tell you a quick story that I’m developing for my business?”

Or just slip the story into conversation the next time you’re with someone. I always test new stories out on friends. I do it mostly to help myself memorize the story, and you can memorize a story much faster by telling it to another person than you can by saying it to yourself twenty times. You always learn refinements to your story also when you tell them to someone. It’s good testing ground. So try your new story out on five to ten friends before you take it “public.” (And thank me later).

### **35 Add Visuals to Your Story**

This is a great technique if you’re telling your story on stage or on video. A great story is usually better if it’s accompanied by the right visual(s).

Now, the “right” visual is strictly a matter of design taste, so have fun with it.

Your story is always an expression of you.

One of my clients had a great parachuting story. So he added one visual that served as his background while he told the story – a blue sky. At the end of the story, he showed a couple photos of himself from the day he did the skydive. His visuals made a great story – epic.

### **36 Add a Soundtrack to Your Story**

This is a great technique if you're telling your story on stage or on video.

You can often improve your story by thinking about what sound or song might enhance your story.

You can add a song playing at a volume that ensures you can easily be heard. A sad story enhanced with the right emotional music will make people cry.

Or you can add a sound effect at exactly the right moment.

One of my stories is greatly enhanced by the sound of a racing heartbeat. It adds a lot of tension in an already tense moment.

### **37 Act Your Story Out**

Most stories, especially those told in person or from the stage, are improved by a little acting. You don't need to become an actor or act out your entire origin story of course – that might make you appear very foolish. But look for a moment in your story where you're telling of a moment with a physical action that is important to the story. Then act it out when you come to that part of the story.

One of my clients had a story where locking himself on the wrong side of the gate was central to the story, so I coached him to act out opening the large gate. It catapulted his story

to an entirely new level. That one simple, well-chosen action allowed his audience to go deeper into the story.

### **38** Add in Props

Look over your story and ask yourself if there are any items in your story that are central to the plot.

If there are, could it be a prop that you take on stage with you or that you display when taping it for YouTube or Facebook?

A prop can do a lot for making a story feel more real. I use a prop to great effect when I tell a story about my mother making me move a mountain of dirt to plant a new lawn around our house. When I come to the part of the story where I'm spreading the grass seed, I reach into my pocket and actually bring out a handful of seed that I sprinkle onto the stage. The audience is mesmerized by this unexpected little bit of "reality" that I added to my story.



### **39 Become the Characters**

If there are other people mentioned in your story, sometimes it's a great opportunity to make your story better by pretending a bit to be those other characters.

Act them out a tiny bit. It's easy.

If they say something to you in your story, act out them saying it to you by changing your voice a little and maybe even your posture. You may even naturally do this already when you tell stories. Do it more – people love it. I do 18 different characters in my one-man show, from an angry banker to my weepy mother.

### **40 Record It When You Tell It**

It's good to stick to the script (see points #31 and #32), but it's also important to be ready to capture any “in the moment” changes you make to your story because sometimes they are improvements. So record it when you tell it. If you can, record when you're telling your origin story to an audience (large or small). This way you'll record exactly how you said that part “much better.”

### **41 Vary Your Vocal Tone**

There's no story I've ever heard that deserves the same vocal tone throughout the story. Mix it up when you're telling yours. Think about which parts of your story deserve a different tone and why. Urgency in one part perhaps. Thoughtfulness in another.

### **42 A Well-Timed Long Pause**

The power of a well-timed long pause...

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... cannot be overstated. Use them where appropriate. They cause the audience to hang in suspense or to really take something in.

### **43 Tell It Like You're With Friends**

A masterfully told story is told with just the right touch. It's not overperformed, and it's not underperformed. I'm going to be honest, it can be a very hard skill to learn. I have a secret that I use to achieve what for me is "the right touch." I imagine that I'm at the dinner table at Thanksgiving and someone says, "Patrick, tell that story." And with that imagined scenario in mind, I tell my story. For me, it makes my story start off conversational and warm. Then, from there, I can take the story and its tone wherever I want.

### **44 Love Your Story, and Have Fun With It**

You have to love the story you're telling because the audience can feel how you feel about your story. So fall in love with your story so that your listeners can too. And have fun with it. Storytelling is glorious, and hopefully you can find a way to enjoy each time you're telling yours!



As an influencer, the realization of your mission depends largely on your ability to move hearts and open up minds. So we hope you use the 44 Storytelling Secret Techniques to amplify the strength of your message.

Lastly, if you know Influencers looking to make a bigger impact and need a personal brand site that's a true expression of their essence, feel free to direct them to [Influex.com](http://Influex.com).

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*We'd like to give credit where it's due as these extraordinary Storytelling Secret Techniques come from our dear friend and resident story coach, Patrick Combs.*



**You can find out more about Patrick Combs  
at his site: [PatrickCombs.com](http://PatrickCombs.com)**