



The Too-Much-Too-Soon Problem

One of the most common problems in storytelling can be easily avoided if you present your story just as you would serve a meal.

Imagine that you've been invited to attend a five-course dinner. When you sit down, however, your host places the *entire* meal in front of you - soup, salad, appetizer, entree, and dessert (along with water, wine and coffee). You might not know where to start, seeing all that food at once could make you feel ill, and nobody would blame you if you politely excused yourself and dashed without dining.

All too often, I have seen something similar happen when public interest professionals tell stories. In the first paragraph or two, they serve up a banquet of people and places, garnish with piles of statistics, and toss in some jargon and acronyms for good measure. The result is an overwhelming serving of information that is more likely to gag an audience than leave them hungering for more.

Fortunately, this problem is easily remedied. When storytellers get clear on the points they want to make, they can then map out a traditional structure with a protagonist, goal and barriers in between (see diagram). This framework will allow them to make their point in an engaging fashion and should help them dole out the information the audience needs as they need it. The "Too-Much-Too-Soon" problem is usually an indicator that the storyteller is still unclear on the overall point, the structure has not been entirely worked out, or both.

November 2010

The Too-Much-Too-Soon Problem in Storytelling

It's very common and very easily avoided.

Gather Your Stories with Help from StoryCorps

Learn more about the new "Door-to-Door" service.

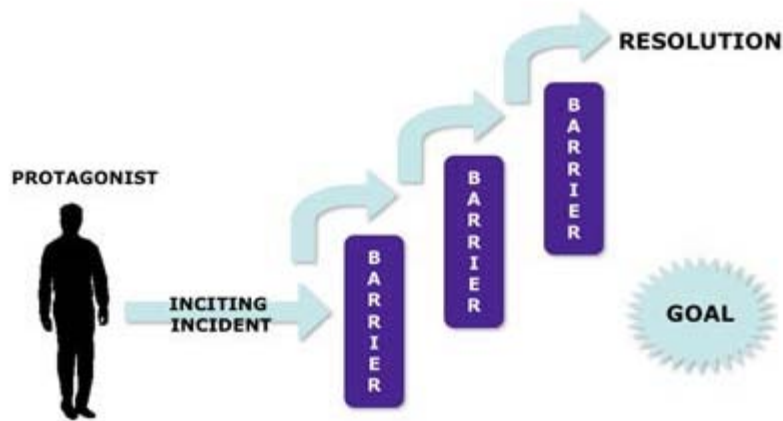
Make Points, Not Bullets!

Our disarming webinar on presentations returns in December.



About Us

free-range thinking is written by Andy Goodman and edited



This problem surfaced most recently in our Master Storytellers Workshop. Stacy Hirsch, a principal of More Voices, Inc. (a company that builds capacity at nonprofits, tribal organizations and government agencies) was working on a story about an apartment building that adopted a new no-smoking policy. Here are the first two paragraphs from her draft:

In September of 2007, Bonnie Simmons was sitting at her desk at the Stenton County Health Department when her phone rang. On the other end was Susan O'Brien. Susan was the manager at the Elmwood Park Apartments, which provided subsidized housing for the elderly and people with disabilities. Susan was calling to get more information as to how to address a tenant complaint.

The tenant was Bob Coughlin. Bob was an energetic, wiry 66-year old former marathon runner. He lived at the Elmwood Park Apartments and was recovering from bladder cancer. Susan told Bonnie that another tenant, Bob's neighbor, was a heavy smoker and the tobacco smoke was entering Bob's apartment through a living room window. He had taken measures to seal the windows but it was summer and the heat was intolerable. Bob was asking Susan for help to create a smoke-free environment. Susan called Bonnie that day to see if Bob was protected under Washington's Smoking in Public Places law. Bonnie told Susan that she would look into a solution. When Bonnie hung up the phone she discussed the conversation with her colleague, Steve Brown.

Consider just how much information Stacy has asked her audience to digest in the first two paragraphs of her story:

- Five characters (Bonnie, Susan, Bob, Bob's unnamed neighbor, and Steve)
- Two locations (Stenton County Health Department, Elmwood Park Apartments)
- Numerous details about the apartment building, Bob's health, his living situation, and local smoking policy

When someone tells you a story, whether you know it or not, there's a little voice inside your head asking, "Who's it about, and what do they want?" If the storyteller answers those questions promptly, you've got what you need and you're ready to hear what comes next. On the other hand, if the answers are buried in a pile of extraneous information, you

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can feel overwhelmed, and your likeliest inclination is to tune out. This was the problem with Stacy's opening.



Stacy Hirsch

So I asked her to identify the protagonist in this narrative - i.e., the person who not only has a clear goal, but who also drives the action of the story. Bob Coughlin wanted a no-smoking policy in his building, but it would be Bonnie and Steve, acting together, who would ultimately make this happen, so they were the protagonists.

With that clear, I suggested that Stacy find a different way to begin the story - one that would answer the audience's questions (who is it about and what do they want) and perhaps even give the audience a reason to root for the protagonists. I offered the following paragraphs as an example:

It was the steady stream of "uh-huhs" coming from the desk next to his that caught Steve Brown's attention. Steve worked in tobacco prevention and control at the Stenton County Health Department, and his co-worker, Bonnie Simmons, was on the phone, talking to someone who clearly wasn't letting her get too many words in edgewise.

Bonnie saw Steve looking her way and shrugged her shoulders, letting him know she was stuck in one of "those conversations." When she finally hung up a few minutes later, Steve didn't even have to ask. "You know the Elmwood Park Apartments," Bonnie said as she scribbled down the last notes from her call. "That was the manager. She's got a heavy smoker living next door to a non-smoker." Steve could fill in the rest: it was summer, closing windows wasn't an option, so the manager had at least one unhappy tenant on her hands and was looking for help. The kind of help that only Bonnie and Steve could offer.

While other people are mentioned, this version introduces only two characters, Bonnie and Steve, and makes it clear that we'll be following them through the story. The scene that plays out creates empathy for the protagonists - i.e., here are dedicated public servants dealing patiently with irate callers - while also making their goal clear. This opening is also 22 words shorter.

Stacy's story still has a long way to go, but it's more likely her audience is still with her, ready for more. So take another look at your stories, and if you see evidence of the too-much-too-soon problem, rework your openings until you've whetted your audience's appetite too.

(Special thanks to Stacy Hirsch and More Voices for generously making their story available to us for this article. Names have been changed to protect privacy.)

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Gather Your Stories with Help from StoryCorps

If you can assemble the storytellers, StoryCorps will record their stories with its new "Door-to-Door" Service.

StoryCorps, the nonprofit that has collected and archived more than 30,000 stories, can help your organization capture its stories, too. Through its new "Door-to-Door" service, StoryCorps is sending teams of trained facilitators to nonprofits, educational and arts institutions, and other places that have great stories to tell but just haven't gotten around to collecting them.



The service is charged on a sliding scale with nonprofit rates running from \$3,500 to \$5,000 per day. (There is also a minimum of a 3-day purchase for clients outside of New York City, San Francisco and Atlanta.) To find out more about StoryCorps' Door-to-Door service, [click here](#) or send email to [businessdevelopment \(at\) storycorps \(dot\) org](mailto:businessdevelopment@storycorps.org).

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Make Points, Not Bullets!

Why Bad Presentations Happen to Good Causes, our most "disarming" webinar, returns in December.

Based on unprecedented research and incorporating the advice of twenty highly regarded public-speaking experts, ***Why Bad Presentations Happen to Good Causes*** is a two-hour online class designed to help presenters at all levels, from newbies to seasoned veterans. Curriculum in this course includes:



- The five most commonly made mistakes in presenting and how to avoid them
- How to structure presentations to ensure your audience learns more
- Why PowerPoint should never be used as a presentation and a handout
- Techniques to help you deliver talks with greater confidence

Classes will be held on December 8th and 10th from 11a-12n Pacific each day (2-3p Eastern), and tuition is \$250 per student. (Group discounts are available.) To learn more and register online, [click here](#).

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