



Telling Tales in Tight Spaces

When you don't have much time (in a presentation) or room (in a letter) you can still tell enough of a story to make a real connection with your audience.

A few years ago, Dr. Jane Goodall came to Los Angeles to meet with film, television and commercial producers who were using chimpanzees as actors. Dr. Goodall had assembled indisputable evidence that these chimpanzees were being cruelly beaten by trainers to make them "more compliant" performers. She had come to Hollywood to plead with the producers to help end the abuse.



Dr. Jane Goodall

Nearly 200 members of the creative community attended Dr. Goodall's briefing, and each received a 25-page report documenting the abuses. Given the notoriously short attention span of Hollywood types, Dr. Goodall didn't expect her audience to

read every word, but she was hopeful they'd open the booklet and at least read the introduction on the inside cover. It was deliberately brief - less than 250 words - but it still packed an emotional punch:

In the late 1960s, Washoe, a female chimpanzee, was taught American Sign Language under the care of Drs. Allen and Beatrix Gardner. The Gardners hired a young researcher named Roger Fouts to work closely with Washoe, and Fouts would later write about his remarkable experience in the book, *Next of Kin: What Chimpanzees Have Taught Me About Who We Are*.

In the following excerpt, Fouts describes an incident involving Washoe and a volunteer researcher named Kat. Capitalized words and phrases are used to indicate the signs exchanged by Washoe and her human friends.

"In the summer of 1982, Kat was newly pregnant, and Washoe doted over her belly, asking about her BABY. Unfortunately, Kat had a miscarriage, and she didn't come in to the lab for several days. When she finally came back, Washoe greeted her warmly

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but then moved away and let Kat know she was upset that she'd been gone. Knowing that Washoe had lost two of her own children, Kat decided to tell the truth. MY BABY DIED Kat signed to her. Washoe looked down to the ground. Then she looked into Kat's eyes and signed CRY, touching her cheek just below her eye. When Kat had to leave that day, Washoe wouldn't let her go. PLEASE PERSON HUG she signed."

This report is dedicated to Washoe and all great apes who, for better or worse, are now reliant on their human cousins for protection and survival.

The third paragraph of the introduction is an excellent example of a "connecting narrative moment," a term coined by Frank Dickerson (a fundraising expert profiled in our [September 2009 issue](#)). In just a few sentences, you are pulled into a scene featuring two characters. You witness an exchange revealing the humanity in the character you wouldn't have identified as human, and when Washoe signs, PLEASE PERSON HUG, you simply *have* to feel something.

The paragraph is not a full-fledged story, but it has enough of a narrative thread to engage us, and it stands as a reminder that even when we think there isn't enough room, we can still tap into the power of storytelling.

On the web, *everyone* reads content like a Hollywood executive, so if you're going to tell a story, keep it brief. The United Ways of California demonstrate this nicely on its site with the [mini-story of the Lopez family](#), one of thousands in America struggling to survive without health insurance.

The Lopez family story runs just 200 words, but it has a beginning, middle and end, and a sympathetic protagonist in Sylvia Lopez. The story is accompanied by a picture of Sylvia and her kids, which helps establish an emotional connection with the reader. And once the connection is made, motivated readers can easily link to another page to learn more about the United Way's efforts to cover more children with health insurance.

"In a complex environment," writes Annette Simmons in *The Story Factor*, "people listen to whomever makes the most sense - whomever tells the best story." Our environment is getting more complex every day, and the time we have to listen (or read) seems to be getting shorter by the minute. So take advantage of every opportunity you have by telling a story, or as much of a story as you can. More often than not, even a little narrative is better than none.

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Learn How to Tell Your Story

Our most popular online class returns May 6th.

Storytelling: Tapping the Power of Narrative returns in May to help you relocate your inner storyteller. In four hours (spread over four successive weeks), we'll focus on the structure and qualities of good stories - which you often use unconsciously - and explain how you can apply them in advocacy, fundraising, recruiting and other aspects of your work.



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