



free-range THINKING™

free-range thinking™ is a monthly journal of best practices, resources and generally useful stuff for public interest communicators who want to reach more people with more impact



You Have the Story, Now Let's Work on the Telling

Having a good story to tell is one thing; *delivering* it effectively in front of a live audience can be quite another. The Goodman Center regularly provides one-on-one coaching for public speakers, and recently we've seen an uptick in requests for advice as more and more gatherings feature TED-like talks, use the Ignite or PechaKucha formats (where a set number of slides advance automatically), hold "Fail Fests," or convene "Fast Pitch" competitions that challenge presenters to tell their stories in precisely three minutes.

As diverse as the stories and their tellers may be, invariably I find myself giving similar advice in almost every coaching session, so I thought I'd share my five most common recommendations. If you have a story to tell - whether you're facing an audience of hundreds or just a handful around a table - these tips can help you deliver it with greater clarity and confidence. [Full story](#). Please note: Apple Mail users may need to scroll down manually.

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As diverse as the stories and their tellers may be, invariably I find myself giving similar advice in almost every coaching session. So I thought I'd share the most common recommendations with you this month. If you have a story to tell - whether you're facing an audience of hundreds or just a handful around a table - these tips can help you deliver it with greater clarity and confidence.

Stories live in the specifics.

A presenter whom I coached recently had this line in her three-minute story: "Our organization brings together existing resources in an innovative, collaborative way." Uh huh. I'll bet they're also *mission-driven*, *committed to diversity*, and *engage with the community* whenever they can. Jargon like this has no place in storytelling because it doesn't help the audience see and feel what you actually do.



When one client told me, "We teach children financial literacy," I stopped him and asked for an example. He said, "We show them exactly how much money they can save if they buy a large bag of potato chips at the supermarket and bring a small baggie of chips to school each day instead of buying the single serving packages at the cafeteria." To which I replied: "Great. Say that." Sure, it's more words, but shorter isn't better if your audience is still wondering what you really do.

Help your audience travel with you.

When an audience is hearing your story for the first time, they don't have all the context and color that's in your brain. And if your storytelling isn't supported by slides or other graphics, all they have are the words coming out of your mouth and the expressiveness of your delivery. So when your story jumps around in time or space, be sure to clearly denote each move.



Recently, I coached a presenter whose story started when he was a teenager and then jumped to his thirties. His transition sentence between the two eras was five words: "When I was thirty-seven..." As you read those words here, they may seem sufficient, but in spoken form the transition is simply too abrupt. I suggested that when he had finished talking about his teen years, he should take a breath - letting a moment of silence signal the end of a chapter - and then say, "It's twenty years later. I was thirty-seven." By just adding two seconds of silence and three more words, he will help his audience makes the two-decade jump with him.

Embrace the power of the pause.

As the previous tip suggests, pausing between distinct thoughts or passages in your story serves a valuable purpose. The silence creates a space in which the audience can reflect on what they have just heard. It can also denote the end of one section of your story and the beginning of another. As TED Talks and Fast Pitch competitions make the clock tick louder in the speaker's mind, the common reaction is to talk faster and deliver a non-stop barrage of words. "The right word may be effective," said Mark Twain, "but no word was ever as effective as a rightly timed pause." It's also worth noting that if you prefer to remain conscious during your talk (which I highly recommend), stopping to take a breath every now and then is a good idea.



When using statistics, cite sources.

Stories and data can coexist peacefully - in fact, a good story can help make data stick - but if you're going to drop in a number or two, be sure to quickly cite the source. In this era of burgeoning fake news, audiences are more skeptical than ever, so saying something such as, "There are over 83,000 places where you can legally buy a gun in America," is more likely to generate the response, "Says who?" than the jaw-drop you were hoping for. But if you add, "According to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms..." you give your data point the authority it deserves.



Your first and last words matter most.

Google "audience attention span graph" and you'll see a series of images that essentially deliver the same message: an audience's attention is highest at the beginning, sags in the middle, and surges upward at the end (but rarely to the same height as the beginning). From my experience, this appears to be true whether your talk is three minutes or thirty.



So whenever I coach public speakers, I always tell them to spend a little extra time polishing their opening and closing. Even the friendliest audience will make a snap judgment about you within the first 10-15 seconds of your talk, so keep rewriting until that opening is clear and compelling, and memorize your first few sentences (at the very least) so you can look them in the eyes.

And pay no less attention to your closing. Audience interest always spikes towards the end of a talk, and you want to take advantage of the fact that they are likely to remember the last thing you say. As with your opening, don't stop rewriting until your final sentences offer a clear summary or a compelling call to action, and memorize here as well so you're looking at the audience (and not your notes) at the finish.

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