



# Secrets of Public Speaking by Laura Lewis-Barr

**TRAINING**  
**BREAKTHROUGHS**

*Ok, maybe these aren't exactly secrets.  
But these pages highlight best practices that  
will transform your presentations.*

## ***The most important element - Stories***

A week into working on the first draft of this book I realized that I needed to start over. There was something wrong, the material felt dry, abstract, and vague. And then I blushed, because I had forgotten the central focus of my work. I had forgotten to tell stories! (That, by the way, is a true story. It's always ideal to tell true stories - they are easier to remember!)

Once we start to look for them, we will see that our lives are composed of long and short stories. With practice we can recognize, craft, and then share them. Our stories will not only entertain, they can inspire, persuade, and build empathy with others - all vital to our presentations.

In my work with thousands of storytellers, I've seen skepticism. Most of us don't think we have worthy stories or that we can tell them well. The fact is we do and we can!

### ***A case for stories.***

I've spent all of my life exploring the power of stories. My earliest memories center on storytelling.

Despite my parents' concerns, I majored in drama and eventually earned my master's degree in drama. For years I studied the great works of literature and what made them so effective.

In addition to teaching drama classes I taught public speaking. I loved helping students claim their ability to influence and persuade others through well-told stories. Eventually I left academia and became a corporate trainer. My specialties emerged: presentation skills and emotional intelligence. Both were central to the work I had been doing for decades. . Both were central to the work I had been doing for decades.

I began studying my own stories and using them in workshops. The challenges and joy of sharing personal stories became very real as I traveled the country and spoke to corporate audiences.

### ***Storytelling in business.***

I continue to help executives around the country hone their own skills to motivate and inspire their audiences through the power of storytelling in business. But first I have to make the case for stories.



I remember a salesman, Jack, who said to me, "I don't have any stories to share during my presentations." Really? Are you sure? We've been so conditioned to discount storytelling as "not appropriate for the workplace" that we don't see the hundreds of stories surrounding us. I asked Jack, "What about your clients?" What about your customers? Don't you have stories about them?" Suddenly Jack saw many stories he could use to build connection with his different audiences. As he practiced these stories in class, his sales pitch became clearer and more powerful. Jack was also funny and more engaging as he told of outrageous adventures with his customers.

Super-smart, accomplished people often have the most trouble accepting the power of storytelling. This is because they've been trained to speak strategically, from a 30,000 feet viewpoint.

Catherine was a well-dressed executive in a recent public speaking workshop. She was smart (as you'd expect of a vice president) but terrified of public speaking. Catherine regularly needed to speak about her products --technology used to keep schools safe. Like many others, when I asked Catherine to give me some stories about her company, she looked at me blankly. "I mainly just give a lot of statistics, Laura. That is what the board expects. That's what the schools expect."



But what are statistics except the compilation of hundreds or thousands of individual stories? The irony is -- we use statistics and abstract generalizations to try to prove our points but a single event lands more effectively in our listener's brain. Just look at this paragraph versus the one below from Catherine? Which sticks with you?

Catherine eventually told our group three stories about single events. One was of a fire that happened at a school and how her company was able to help parents and children keep in touch. Another was about a school bus that got stranded in the snow and how a different technology saved the day. A third was a fun story about an animal that got into a school that didn't have electronic door locks. Six months later, I don't remember much else about Catherine's presentation but fragments of her stories still stick with me. Your stories will also stick in your audience's mind.

### ***Why are stories so powerful?***

According to researchers Prentice and Gerrig, our brains are built to record information from stories. Neurochemist Paul Zak uses brain scans to explain the process. When we listen to the standard business presentation, the language centers of our brain light up. But we often forget this data quickly. When we hear a story, our language centers are activated but other parts of our brain that relate to our senses (sight, sound, taste, touch) also light up. This is one reason why stories are much easier to remember, more sections of our brain are listening.

When we tell stories to others they actually share in the experiences we relate. The brains of a person telling a story and those listening to it can synchronize, says Uri Hasson from Princeton. In one experiment: "when a woman spoke English, the volunteers understood her story, and their brains synchronized. When she had activity in an emotional brain region, the listeners did too. When her frontal cortex lit up, so did theirs. By simply telling a story,



the woman could plant ideas, thoughts and emotions into her listeners' brains."

According to Jonathan Gottschall, author of *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*, "Studies show that when we read nonfiction, we read with our shields up. We are critical and skeptical. But when we are absorbed in a story, we

drop our intellectual guard. We are moved emotionally, and this seems to make us rubbery and easy to shape." Can our stories make audiences "rubbery and easy to shape?"

Yes! But there is a catch. To work its magic a story has to be well-structured and well-told. Unless we are emotionally transported the story doesn't work. Choosing the right details and learning to tell stories well is key.

**Bring us Into Your Story**

**WHEN YOU EXPERIENCE IT, WE WILL TOO.**

**FEEL, SMELL, TASTE, HEAR.**

**SHARE THE INNER STRUGGLES -- WHAT'S GOING ON INSIDE YOUR HEAD IN THIS SCENE?**

**DESCRIBE - HELP US SEE THE OTHER CHARACTERS.**

The graphic features a background image of a large crowd of people with their arms raised, suggesting a concert or a large gathering. The text is overlaid on this image in various colored boxes: orange for the title, white for the first quote, dark blue for the second quote, yellow for the third quote, and dark blue for the fourth quote.



<b>Expand details when</b>	<b>Reduce details when</b>
The listener asks a follow up question and seems happy for more information.	At a networking event or otherwise traveling in a hallway or elevator
There is ample time and the listener is chatty and has responded well to your stories.	The listener's nonverbal show lack of interest. The listener is looking around, looking at a watch or has started to move away.
The listener looks confused or doesn't seem to understand the point of your story.	Time is limited.
You know that previous audiences have responded well to a particular detail. The story is powerful, poignant, funny, or especially relevant.	On the phone.
	On a conference call or online meeting.

## 10 ways to liven up a presentation.

- 1) **Hypothetical story or Example:** When there isn't a personal story available, hypothetical stories can illustrate a process, a discovery, or a procedure.
- 2) **Audience Participation:** Ask open ended questions to illicit numerous answers from your audience to gain "buy in."
- 3) **Pair share and small group discussions:** Another great use of juicy questions -- especially when dealing with dense, wordy slides.
- 4) **Analogy:** Compare your most complicated points to something that the audience will have experience with.
- 5) **Demonstration or Sample:** Show as well as tell about the point you are making. Anything your audience can see, touch, or feel will add clarity.
- 6) **Quote:** A testimonial from an expert or a client at the right time can add credibility.
- 7) **Statistics:** Hard data linked to stories are a great way to build a persuasive argument.

- 8) **Flip Chart or White Board Drawing:** A hand-drawn idea or hand written text can add spontaneity to your presentation.
- 9) **Use Case Studies or Other Challenges.** Participants love tasks that offer enough difficulty while offering a chance to succeed. Frame questions such as: Why is this a better approach?
- 10) **Don't Spend too Much Time on the Obvious:** Move on. State ideas once. Offer time for deeper dives on complex concepts.

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**Want to talk about your public speaking goals? Call  
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