

Tell for the Audience at Hand by Mary Hamilton

One of the most difficult responsibilities of a storyteller is to tell for the audience at hand. While this does sound simple — after all what other audience is there except the one at hand — succeeding can be challenging. Here are some tips for telling for the audience at hand:

Vary your words to suit the audience. I'm not suggesting you talk down to your listeners. Instead I am suggesting you pay attention to your listeners so you will know what words to use to tell the story to the audience at hand. Audiences have varying degrees of knowledge. If you see a quizzical look pass over listeners' faces, you might want to rephrase part of the story before moving on to the next part. When you know the story, as opposed to memorizing the words, you have the freedom to vary your words to suit the listeners.

Vary your timing to suit the audience. Audiences have their own rhythms and personalities. Few things make a storyteller look more foolish than pausing for the laugh, gasp, or sigh that was there with the last audience but doesn't exist with this one. You must love the story enough to enjoy telling it even without your favorite responses. If not, your mind could be occupied with thoughts of, "What's wrong? They aren't acting anything like last week's audience - they loved it," or "Why aren't they laughing?" or "On no, they hate this story. Please God, just let me finish this program and go home," all the while missing delightful twinkles in the eyes of the audience at hand. Meanwhile, you prattle on telling the story on automatic pilot, a storytelling sin if ever one ever existed.

Use space appropriately for the size of the audience. For example, fifty people were expected, but only three showed up. Remember, you are a storyteller, not an actor. There is no rule that says you must remain in the "stage space" and project your voice to the far corners of the room. Leave the performance space, pull up a chair if possible, sit practically knee-to-knee with the three people present and tell them stories. If the situation is such that others may enter during the telling, don't worry. Use eye contact to invite them to join the group. As the audience grows, you may need to stand so all can still be included. If the audience grows rapidly, you may even be in the performance space you abandoned by then end of the story. That's fine. The key to making such changes is to know the story well. Then you can tell the story with its landscape no larger than your lap or with its landscape encompassing an entire stage and beyond.

Make eye contact. If three, fifty, or a thousand people are present, make eye contact with three, fifty, or a thousand. I've seen tellers making eye contact with vast audiences which existed only in the tellers' imaginations while I — present in the audience — was ignored in favor of those who would have been there if all the seats were filled. Storytelling exists between people, not between the teller and the performance space.

Broaden your repertoire so you can abandon your plans when the audience is not who you expected. For example, you were promised ages ten and up, but of sixty people in the audience,

fifty of them are clearly under six and the other ten are the day care directors and chaperones for this outing. Tell for the audience at hand, then learn to be much more involved in the program planning - especially the publicity - the next time you work for that client!

Word of warning: When your audience is a mix of the promised group and others, consult with your client before assuming you will serve your client best by switching stories.

So, why do I think fulfilling this telling responsibility is difficult? It seems so simple. After all, "Who else could I tell for? The audience at hand is the only one here." To achieve, I not only need a varied repertoire, but also whenever I tell a story I must give my full attention to this moment in this story with this audience. Such attention requires concentration, awareness, and flexibility. Do I always succeed? No, but when I catch my attention wandering, I send a gentle mental reminder, "Tell for the audience at hand." Such reminders help me remember my responsibilities.

Brief bio: Mary Hamilton has earned her living telling stories and pondering how the art of storytelling works since 1983. www.maryhamilton.info