

The origins of the phrase “Tell one story at a time” are lost to obscurity, but it is an established precept in storytelling. It essentially means that the narrator has to ensure that every component of his story speaks to the message or the theme that is being expressed by that story.

I learned “Tell one story at a time” in the art world. Please close your eyes, if you can, and imagine for a moment that an artist is painting a pastoral landscape. Everything might be a little bit misty and calm-looking in the early morning light, and the colors are all soft and muted. Starting at the bottom edge of the painting and moving up, first you see a big field of grass, possibly a pasture with cows on it, but they’re in the distance, nothing is close-up or large. Then as your eyes move upward, you get to a line of trees with an old house in the background, and then next, near the top of the painting, there is a simple, still, and quiet sky.

The brown for the trees does not come from a tube. Our artist actually mixes other colors to create that brown by using a very bright Cadmium red and a Viridian green. Those two colors, when they are combined, result in a greyed-down very warm brown. Now imagine that, on the palette, the artist failed to completely combine the two paints. And by accident, she managed to get a little bit of that bright Cadmium red onto the brush, and it left a horizontal line underneath the cows. And all of a sudden, the artist has this streak of bright red in this quiet pastoral landscape.

So, the artist has to look at that and ask herself “Does this little piece of red speak to the story that I am telling?” And if the painting is supposed to be about a calm, peaceful, misty rural morning, then that streak of red has no place. It needs to be removed because it does not support the primary intent of the message that is being told.

We can use “tell one story at a time” as an axiom for personal growth! We do this in the same way. Basically, it means to be concise. The definition of concise is “brief and comprehensive”. And while you do in fact want to keep it short, while also stating the basics of the entire thought, I want to encourage you to take “tell one story at a time” just a little bit further. When you distill your story to its basic essence, you want to also gain clarity from it. In other words, I want you to discover very, very specifically what you really mean. What you are looking for is a short phrase that can become the measure or the standard, by which the rest of the information connected to it becomes usable for you.

What I recommend is that you should be able to state your idea, or goal, or “story”, with 8 to 10 words, without using the qualifying words “or”, “but”, “and”. Preferably eight words or less, ten at the absolute most.

“Tell one story at a time” is a skill that you can practice during the course of your everyday life events. There are seven reasons why you want to learn to do this. You will be able to:

1. State your wants and needs clearly
2. Create a functional agenda for taking action
3. Discover the themes for your life’s purposes
4. Reduce and manage overwhelming information
5. Confidently and easily make decisions
6. Stay on the right track for achieving your goals
7. Generate ideas for solving problems

All will become clear.

Let’s start with the first reason, being able to state your wants and needs clearly. This particular use for telling one story at a time has its roots in self-awareness.

The initial goal of this clarity is to be specific. You simplify the way that you explain whatever it is that you are thinking about. Here, “tell one story at a time” is like a distant cousin to the KISS principle. “Keep it simple stupid” means that simplicity is better than complexity. You want to distill your thoughts and your preferences down to a state of being simple, uncomplicated, concise, and precise in order to help you clarify the situation for your own benefit as well as for the benefit of others.

Let me give you an example: A co-worker comes up to your desk and says “I’m making a donut run. What do you want?” After you thank them profusely, in whatever manner you do that, what do you say? Well, you don’t say “I want a chocolate one”, because that is vague. What you say is “I want a plain cake donut with chocolate frosting and nuts.” Right? Because that ensures you get the donut you actually want.

This takes us into the second reason. That is being able to create an agenda that is both functional and proactive. The more specific you become at defining your wants and needs, the more you start refining your objectives. When you can state clear intentions, you discover your goals and define your proposed actions. That’s how you know where you are going and telling one story at a time gives you precise information for moving forward. The work involved in finding the right words and concepts to specifically express everything you are trying to say in any given situation, clearly and concisely, helps you define your intent. And the simpler it is, the easier it is to use. It gets you from where you're at now to where you want to be, more efficiently.

If you can state your concept or your premise, with no extraneous stuff attached to it, the story that you’re telling becomes proactive. It’s about directing your attention toward the actual purpose that you need the “story” for.

Here is an example:

We all end up facing issues with other people, such as an ongoing argument with a friend or a family member. We go into the next disagreement with the intention of getting what we need and wanting to make some headway at solving the problem once and for all. Unfortunately, if we fail to refine our purpose and “tell one story at a time”, once we are in the process of the argument itself, other issues start getting dragged in even though they may not be relevant to the current situation. These issues might include previous disagreements, or unspoken resentments, or whatever. And as time progresses, we reach a point where it is no longer about the meaning of the words that are being said. The argument changes to being about the inflammatory tones of voice, winning at all costs, and other destructive patterns of interaction. Eventually, both sides are dragging in everything but the kitchen sink.

To illustrate, let's use the real-life scenario of Flo and Jack, whose names have been changed for privacy. When Flo stops at the store on her way home from work, she occasionally forgets to get the milk, and then Jack ends up having to make a special trip to the store. When Jack tries to talk with her about this, he's not able to isolate his intent. He brings up the old history of how many times this has happened and his assumption that Flo forgets the milk because she herself doesn't drink it. That leads to Jack's hurt over her lack of concern for his welfare. Then Flo responds with the fact that she has to deal with the socks that Jack leaves on the floor and forgets to pick up, which then leads to accusations about Flo's nagging. They fail to identify a method for ensuring that Flo will try to remember the milk the next time, not because Jack is upset, but because she wants to remember it.

When you can stick with telling one story at a time, if you know in a few words exactly what your current point of agenda is, you can focus every single word and interaction to that one purpose, and you can gain cooperation from the other person. You do not easily get distracted by the other person's efforts, however unintentional, to use confusion as a way to control the outcome of the argument.

The third reason for using this axiom is to be able to discover the purposes and themes for your life. Now the first two reasons that I gave you, clarifying what you want or need, and also refining your objectives into an agenda, these result in proactive intentions as you gain more experience. They create an honest and well-considered personal connection between yourself and your goals and dreams. Over time, we all get better at knowing ourselves and ensuring that our real self is in alignment with our overall plans. When you tell one story at a time and are intentionally refining your focus in conjunction with your overriding purpose, you actually create that personal connection for yourself. Then, the choices that you make all speak to one purpose: you, yourself, who you are now and who you're becoming. In the process you find the answer to the question: “Why am I choosing to do ‘this’ with my life, whatever ‘this’ that may be?”

Let's return to the two examples I used previously. Being able to state precisely which donut you want, also over time, means that you discover themes in your own preferences. You don't want a chocolate donut because you don't like chocolate-flavored things. You just like chocolate, chocolate. Or you always want nuts because that protein works better in your own body to metabolize the carbs.

When you are refining your objectives, and you use telling one story at a time during an argument, you learn to fight fair. You also learn to make yourself clearly heard by assessing the other person's feedback to your attempts at clarity. Additionally, you discover the degree to which that person has an important role in your life story, and that alters your future stories. Personal connections to our choices are a guiding principle in life, they ensure that we continue to grow as a person in the direction we truly want to move in.

Now we're going to regroup a little. These first three benefits of telling one story at a time that I have been talking about, take us from the current place of our wants and needs to a wider, more encompassing, bigger picture of making personal connections to our intentions for future actions.

By contrast, the next three reasons are because we want to define and manage our focus. In other words, we want to also be able to take a bigger picture and narrow it down so that we can use it. This gives us more control over our progress and facilitates our decision-making.

So, the fourth reason to use our axiom is to be able to reduce and manage too much information. When we start with deciding what one story we are telling in a current project or a situation where there are a lot of aspects or variables to it, it helps if we simplify the tasks into smaller parts. We want to narrow our focus further and we want to start finding sub-stories. Again, there is another saying that's a distant cousin, called "baby steps". But there is a difference between that and telling one story at a time. In baby steps, you identify small actions and simplify specific tasks, but you don't necessarily clarify the purpose for each of those steps. When we tell one story at a time and take our major, larger story, and break it down into smaller and smaller parts, and at the same time identify and state the sub-stories, we gain insight into our motivations. It reminds us of our reasons for acting on those steps. And sometimes it helps us to realize when we're accidentally operating under a faulty assumption within our larger story, possibly a premise that needs to be fixed or re-evaluated. In baby step breakdowns, our only goal is simplifying and organizing. What I am suggesting is stating the sub-story instead and let that reinforcement pull you back into your motive for doing smaller units. The big advantage here is to get control, so you don't get bogged down in the feeling of being overwhelmed. Narrowing to a sub-story fights off the feeling of drowning in too much "stuff".

A to-do list is a good example here. I keep one to-do list. Right now, the items that are on it include my work projects, my household stuff, financial and legal things, my own self-care, my mother's care, relationship stuff, phone calls, emails, errands, my future goals, unfinished projects, and a bunch of other things that I usually lump into "problems with a capital P". And the list IS longer than my arm. Does that sound familiar?

Now there are several ways to break down this list into smaller units. I actually just did one of them when I told you what the categories were. I can also put them in order of priority or deadline, such as going to the grocery store yesterday was more important than filling out a legal form that's due next week. I can clump them together by effort or use of time, such as putting all the phone calls together, or handling three widely different items at once because they all require being on the computer. It's actually quite easy to break a lot of information down into manageable steps.

But, in that process, my intent changes and it starts being about the criteria necessary to organize and prioritize that list. But that's not my story. Right now, my primary story is to launch my new book. The two sub-stories are first, promoting the book and second, launching the speaking career that comes with it. When I looked at my to-do list this last week, these sub-stories clarify and prioritize this list differently. The imperative becomes identifying the items that will move me forward toward those goals rather than choosing items because of their deadlines or the efficiency of grouping them. Yes, I had to pay a credit card bill yesterday, but I can put off anything else that is not relevant to being here at the tele-summit today. I choose to prioritize the items that speak to those sub-stories.

The fifth reason why we want to tell one story at a time is so that we become able to easily and confidently make decisions. As we break our projects down into more manageable sub-stories, we have to make choices. Any time that we are looking at too much information, especially if it's conflicting, we can bring ourselves back to solid ground by reinforcing our storyline. And then we make successful decisions.

Here's something that happened a few weeks ago. I was finishing up the author's bio for the last page of the inside of my book. I chose a photograph of myself that was fairly good and seemed to be what I wanted. It is a casual picture of myself, full-body pose, in black and white. I'm standing in front of rainforest-type foliage, leaning against a fence, and gesturing to the larger space around me. It reminded me of personal growth and an eclectic lifestyle, which are the foundations of my book.

But later I found out that I needed a photo for this tele-summit's promotional webpage. The tele-summit page requires a vertical image in color, not a horizontal black and white. So, I couldn't use the one from the book. I found and edited a different picture, which now looks actually more professional-looking. But, in the process of doing the new picture, I got to thinking "well maybe this one should be in the back of my book instead of what I previously chose". Because it seems more professional, or more approachable, or because I spent all this time on it, or because I'm indecisive. I couldn't choose which one should be inside the book. I talked it over with my better half, John,

he's also my proofreader so he knows the book's content. But we didn't have a consensus, so I reached out to my WriteSpeak mini group. And the first answers that came back were something like "The original one is a better match for what your book is about". The book is called *Thinking with a Bigger Box* and the original photo says, "do the unexpected, expand the walls of your box, be yourself". That choice supports my story. It was such a simple resolution, and it leads me back to why I chose it in the first place. But I had forgotten that, and I needed someone to remind me to "tell one story at a time".

We all face indecisiveness, and we start second-guessing ourselves. Keeping this axiom in the forefront of our minds, and making our decisions from that place, really does simplify what for some of us is a very difficult issue.

And that brings us to our sixth reason. On the big projects that we do over the course of our lives, "tell one story at a time" helps us stay on track. Too often, when we are in the midst of our situations, we simply need to refocus our attention on what is important. And this leads to growth and change.

For instance, using that last experience about author's photo, helped me to better write this presentation that I am doing for you now. I let "tell one story at a time" run through my mind like a mantra to keep bringing myself back to the point, and to ensure that everything I'm talking to you about right now is essential to helping you understand it.

During the last seven days, I also used it to prioritize my other to-do items. If they did not get me to my goal for being here today, they're on hold.

Many people, and businesses, use this axiom as a basic operating principle. Marty Sklar, who was with the Disney Imagineering team, used the phrase "tell one story at a time" as the opening for one of Mickey's Ten Commandments, which he wrote. In that quote, he is referring to the breaking down of a large amount of information into smaller organized parts. And that was an underlying philosophy for designing the Disney theme parks. They used this motto, or adage, to ensure that they were really staying on track. It helped them to continually verify that every choice they made spoke specifically, clearly, and precisely to the story they were telling, whether it was a single ride like Peter Pan, or if it was an entire section of the park.

The seventh and last, reason why we want to practice telling one story at a time is to generate ideas for solving problems.

We all have life goals that require us to generate ideas. Sometimes ideas are needed simply to figure out what steps to take, so we have to identify all the little parts of the goal while we also refine our understanding of the overall purpose. More often though, we have to generate ideas in order to solve problems because obstacles crop up.

The biggest issue that we face, when there are barriers to our goals, is that we each have a go-to method for solving problems of a similar nature. Unfortunately, those habitual solutions tend to fail us when we try to move into uncharted territory, such as

major life changes. It's one of the reasons why we get stuck. This is why we give up or why we settle for less on the way to our dreams. Certain issues seem insurmountable, but that is only true on the surface. The underlying problem is usually that we need to grow out of our old thinking patterns and make new behavioral choices.

When we learn to generate more ideas, we tend to push beyond the obvious solutions that we've previously tried, and that have failed us. We need to do this deliberately, especially when we're faced with these unusual circumstances. We increase our chances of finding viable and uniquely personal solutions that will work instead.

This is a life skill that is a focus of my book *Thinking with a Bigger Box*. In Part 3 of the book, I explain and offer practice exercises for learning to create innovative ideas. And there is a list of guidelines. Notably, one of them is "tell one story at a time" meaning that when you are generating ideas, you need to keep those thoughts simple, not complex. You need to notice the nuances. And the purpose is this: if you start clumping ideas by their general trends, then you accidentally overlook options. Even if those options turn out to be choices you don't act on, bringing your attention to them consciously enables you to discover a different option that might be perfect. But you won't have it if you don't go through the process.

Brilliant ideas do come from complex abstracted thinking. But you cannot ignore the simple solution. Try to find those, because you don't want to overlook a seemingly small, yet very essential, component.

I gave you a directive at the beginning of my talk today and I am going to repeat it: in order to clearly tell one story at a time, you must state your idea in 8-10 words as a maximum and avoid the qualifiers but/and/or if you can.

This is a good place for another example. I wanted to be able to share ways for you to remember to tell one story at a time. So, I started generating ideas.

At some point, one idea was: "say it to yourself", meaning for you to speak the words. But that is not a single story. It needs to be broken down. And my process went something like this:

"Say it to yourself. Use it as an affirmation. Use it as a mantra. Repeat it as a mantra when you're walking. Repeat it as a mantra when you shower. Or as a song in the shower. Sing it. Write it as a song. Or a jingle." And so on, and so on.

The advantage to constantly stating ideas as they surface in their simplest story form leads to ideas you would not discover any other way. If I had only written down "say it to yourself", I would not have gotten to the specifics of "repeat it as a mantra when you're walking", and then I would never have gotten to the possibility of using a musical jingle to remind you to "tell one story at a time".

Here is another sequence:

Make a reminder sign. Hang it in your office. Hang it on the refrigerator. Write it at the top of your to-do list. Make it into a meme. Write that saying on top of a photo. Put that onto your phone's home screen. And so on...

Please try this as a practice, later today. It's a great exercise. See how many different ways you can solve this issue: you want to remind yourself to use this axiom. How are you going to do that?

Then, the next exercise for you to try, is to generate ideas for how you can use "tell one story at a time" within the next week. This practice is worth the effort, I promise.

Last, I would like to give you a bonus eighth reason why you should use "tell one story at a time":

You will be able to avoid the perils of multi-tasking. By engaging in the story that we're telling at a sub-story level, it is easier to single task. And people accomplish more when they can achieve that kind of focus. We become more efficient, and we make fewer errors. That's a normal result.

Just to recap: my goal with this mini workshop today was, and here are my ten words, "teach my audience to 'tell one story at a time'." My 'story' resulted in using all seven of the reasons that I gave you at beginning, as to why we want to do this. Here they are:

1. It states what I wanted to do precisely and clearly.
2. It created an agenda, basically an outline that I could work from.
3. It kept me on track to my current goal of speaking to you today.
4. It helped me narrow down the content into seven manageable steps.
5. It simplified my decision-making about which examples to use.
6. All of which gave me an organized and easy-to-follow sequence that ensured I would meet my goal.
7. It allowed me to easily generate ideas for prioritizing the end content so that I would finish speaking on time.

I encourage you to use this tool. Telling one story at a time will help you move forward toward living your best life.