

## Once upon a time, someone told a story...and something happened.

Dr. David Pelton, PetroSkills; Dr. Leon Robinson, CER

Copyright 2007, AADE

This paper was prepared for presentation at the 2007 AADE National Technical Conference and Exhibition held at the Wyndam Greenspoint Hotel, Houston, Texas, April 10-12, 2007. This conference was sponsored by the American Association of Drilling Engineers. The information presented in this paper does not reflect any position, claim or endorsement made or implied by the American Association of Drilling Engineers, their officers or members. Questions concerning the content of this paper should be directed to the individuals listed as author(s) of this work.

### Abstract

Communication is a shared process between speaker and listener. This paper will discuss how you, as drilling engineers, can craft - and deliver - stories to motivate your colleagues and associates to reach certain goals, perform certain tasks, take certain risks, or transfer technology. The paper will focus on what stories are, what they can do, and how they can affect and influence people, and it will show you, in brief, how to build them effectively and how to tell them convincingly.

### Introduction

Stories have a mysterious power to attract and captivate. They use “hooks” to grab and hold the audience’s attention, and their storylines, when well constructed, are most suspenseful and riveting. We, as listeners don’t know exactly why and how we’re affected by them, but we instinctively know that we are. For centuries, narratives have mixed intellect and emotion, depicted valuable exchanges of human experiences that are immediately recognizable, and played on the needs, wants, and desires basic to the human condition - greed, love, ambition, redemption, hate, reconciliation (to name but six). They still do.

Storytellers, too, attract and captivate. They are adept at establishing and maintaining rapport with their audiences, and they use rhythm, silence, their voices, language, movement and gesture, props (if appropriate), the stage, (wherever and whatever that may be) and their wits to keep listeners engaged, often enthralled, and, always, entertained.

As for audiences, they’re, certainly, attracted to and captivated by storytellers, but they’re also active partners in the storytelling dance. Their role, and it’s an important one, is to give storytellers guidance, direction, and focus. Quite frankly, without audiences there’d be no stories – and, hence, no storytellers. Through verbal and non-verbal communication, listeners approve of – and validate – what storytellers are doing; how they’re doing it; whether or not they should change doing what they’re doing; and whether or not they should stop doing what they’re doing! They, consequently, wield a considerable amount of power.

In his *Art of Rhetoric, Book I*, written sometime in the mid 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, Aristotle outlines three “proofs” that show how an audience wittingly - and unwittingly - gives its

approval and validation to the storyteller and, by extension, to the story he or she is telling. The first is Ethos, defined as the degree to which an audience perceives the storyteller to be credible. This perception is based on the storyteller’s competence and character. The second is Pathos – the emotional states in an audience that a storyteller can arouse and use to achieve persuasive goals. Among the emotions most often tapped are anger, fear, kindness, shame, pity, and envy. Pathos is, also, the storyteller’s ability to use emotion to affect his or her audience. The third “proof” is Logos – the validity of the storyteller’s tale as evidenced by how the audience responds to the words and the order of the words used in his or her story. Essential to logos is organization, clarity, and structure – in a word, logic. Imagine a story being told that is emotionless, colorless, lifeless, structure”less,” and, above all, credible”less.” It will engage no one.

### Constructing Stories

Regardless of purpose or intent, stories contain a variety of ingredients that, when mixed, give them form and substance. When storytellers build stories, they’ll choose a setting, they’ll develop a cast of characters (from lead to role players), they’ll create a challenge or set of challenges that involve these characters (in one way or another), and they’ll resolve the challenges or problems they set forth. To paraphrase the story writing guru, Robert McKee, a story expresses how and why life changes. It begins with a situation in which life is relatively in balance. You come to work day after day, week after week, and everything’s fine. You expect it will go on that way. But then there’s an event- an ‘inciting incident’ – that throws life out of balance. You get a new job, or the boss dies of a heart attack, or a big customer threatens to leave. The story goes on to describe how, in an effort to restore balance, the protagonist’s subjective expectations crash into an uncooperative objective reality. A good story teller describes what it’s like to deal with these opposing forces, calling on the protagonist to dig deeper, work with scarce resources, make difficult decisions, take action despite risks, and, ultimately, discover the truth.

As for structure, stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end. To use a musical analogy, they’re broken into three distinct sections: first, an exposition (where the setting, characters, and challenges are laid out), second, a development (where all “the action” takes place), and third, a recapitulation

(where challenges are resolved, balance is restored, or a new balance is created.)

### **Telling Stories**

Storytellers know a lot! When spinning yarns, they pay considerable attention to how they speak, move, and gesture. They know their “stage” intimately and they know how to use it; they, certainly, know something or things about the audience to whom they’re speaking so that they use appropriate language; they’re willing to take risks to make their stories “come alive”; and they trust their instincts and intuition to keep their stories moving smoothly if – and when – something unexpected happens (which is almost always!).

To tell stories expressively and creatively, storytellers rely heavily on a rich mixture of sights and sounds. First, and foremost, they “play” their voices with consummate skill. They effortlessly vary vocal color, speed (fasts and slows) dynamics (louds and softs), and range (highs, and lows) to keep their listeners mesmerized. They never allow their instruments to become monotonous, boring, or bland, except for effect. Second, they use words and phrases that are descriptive, evocative, colorful, and that readily spark the audience’s imagination. “The dark, mournful moan of the wind as it such and such and so and so” will always attract more attention than “the wind (merely) blowing through the trees.” They don’t litter stories with “clutter” language like ‘ok,’ ‘um,’ ‘uh,’ ‘ya,’ ‘like,’ ‘you know,’ etc. These impediments seriously affect the flow of a tale and are most distracting to the storyteller’s audience. Third, they use gesture and choreography to visually enhance their stories – movement which is most eloquent and expressive when used wisely. Fourth, they are entirely at-ease with who they are and what they look like. They are relaxed and self-assured; they make eye contact frequently and confidently; and they don’t mind being scrutinized – no easy feat! Fifth, they use rhythm. To be successful, stories need to flow smoothly and effortlessly, so storytellers are always conscious of timing and pacing. Sixth, they never shy away from silence – if sound is the storyteller’s “best friend,” then silence is the storyteller’s “best friend’s” friend – it is a storytelling must. Keep in mind what people say in Texas, “never, ever pass up an opportunity to shut up.” Seven, storytellers practice, practice, practice! In terms of telling evocative and memorable stories, this well-worn phrase speaks volumes. Through trial and error, storytellers, work out kinks and chinks in their storylines, experiment with – and ultimately decide on – the language they’re going to use; play with vocal nuance, subtlety, rhythm, and color until they’re satisfied with the results; and choose which gestures and movements will help them tell their stories in as visually vivid a fashion as possible.

### **Conclusions**

Stories are tales of life - they are attempts to change one’s life by affecting the lives of others. As you now know, they have a tripartite structure consisting of a beginning, a middle,

and an end, and contain four inviolable “haves:” 1) a main character or characters – hero(ine)s who, in the end, overcome some obstacle, solve some challenge or problem, or win some victory; 2) a setting – the place(s) where the plot unfolds; 3) a problem to be solved or a challenge to be overcome; 4) resolution, (the hero(ine)s finding a way, often by using a weakness as a strength, to ultimately succeed.

Finally, to be successful and worthwhile, stories pin their hopes on how they’re being told and, most important, on how they’re being received. When audiences listen to a narrative of any kind they’re always asking themselves one or more of the following questions. Did the storyteller appear honest, genuine, and trustworthy? Was his/her manner open, friendly, and engaging or was it overbearing, aloof, and off-putting? Did the story flow well? Was it well shaped? Was the storyteller passionate and believable? Did the storyteller tell his or her story eloquently and persuasively? Did he or she appear comfortable, relaxed, and in command or ill-at-ease, nervous, or unsure? Did he or she move well and stay involved with the audience? Did the storyteller speak with a clear, confident, and expressive voice and use descriptive and imaginative language? If they answer ‘yes,’ then the storyteller and the story have caught them, if they answer ‘no,’ then the teller and the tale have not.

The End.

### **Acknowledgments**

To Paul Richardson for his storytelling cartoons drawn for PetroSkills in 2003 and 2007.

To Dr. Leon Robinson for his admirable assistance in writing and reciting The Tale of The 534.