



THE 109 RULES* OF STORYTELLING

JEREMY
CONNELL-WAITE

* They're more like guidelines really...

← The Rules →

Over the last few years, I've given a lot of presentations on the art and science of storytelling, and I've hosted dozens of "ask-me-anything" Q&A sessions.

I kept notes of all the advice I gave out during those sessions. Some of it was good. Some a little questionable...

So, for a bit of fun, I thought I'd compile them all into a handy list for you. In no particular order.

I've called it *The 109** Rules of Storytelling - but they're more like guidelines, really.

As with all "rules", it's important to know them before you break them. Enjoy.

Jeremy 😊



* Because 110 is too many.

~ ONE ~

Great stories make an audience **FEEL** something.

The best stories make an audience **DO** something.



*The other 108 rules are important, but this is Rule number 1 for a reason.
#JustSayin*

~ TWO ~

Great stories are about
transformation.

Somebody (or something) needs to be transformed by the end of the story.

If there's no transformation, or if it's just a list of things that happened, it's not a story.

It's journalism.

Paraphrasing Aaron Sorkin.

A misty forest scene with tall trees and dense undergrowth. The lighting is soft and diffused, creating a serene and slightly mysterious atmosphere. The text is overlaid in the upper left quadrant.

Storytelling is about two things;
It's about character and plot.

GEORGE LUCAS

~ THREE ~

When you tell transformational stories, hormones like **dopamine**, **endorphins** and **oxytocin** are released into your brain.

They help to connect with your audience by building trust & empathy.

When you don't tell transformational stories, they don't.

This is useful information because these hormones make Rules 1 & 2 work.

~ FOUR ~

Great storytellers are obsessed with *Aristotle's Poetics*. This little pamphlet explains the underlying foundations of all great stories.

And just because it was written thousands of years ago in 335BC, don't think it isn't relevant today...

If you want to influence and move an audience, it is.

~ FIVE ~

Great stories are about
intention and **obstacle**.

That's it.

Somebody wants something really badly, and something formidable is standing in their way; an obstacle so big that it looks like they've got no chance of overcoming it.



An aerial photograph of a dense forest of evergreen trees, likely spruce or fir, with varying shades of green and some bare branches visible. The trees are packed closely together, creating a textured canopy. The lighting is natural, highlighting the tops of the trees and casting shadows in the lower parts of the forest.

Story is intention
and obstacle.

AARON SORKIN

~ SIX ~

Great stories create drama and contrast by using words like **“but”**, **“except”**, **“and then”**.



Become evangelistic about using them.

~ SEVEN ~

If someone gives me a story they need to improve, and we don't have much time, one of the first things I do is to count how many times the word “**but**” is used.

Chances are, that's where the peaks and troughs of the story are going to be. It's one quick way to know where to look, to gauge condition of the story, and what needs to be done.

As a guide, one “but” every 60-90 seconds (125-200 words) is a good ratio.

~ EIGHT ~

Great stories have 3 acts.

A beginning...

A middle...

And an end.

But not necessarily in that order.



Jean-Luc Godard

~ NINE ~

Great storytellers don't care about how many people they **reached**.

They're more concerned with – of the people they reached, how many did they **move**?



Jacob Collier

Storytelling on stage is a
collaboration with the audience;
you ride the ebb and flow of
the crowd's energy.

JON BATISTE

~ TEN ~

The quickest way to get an audience to remember something is to make them laugh*.

There's a good reason why *Sir Ken Robinson's* 2006 talk is still the top TED talk by a considerable distance.

He made the audience laugh, on average, every 29 seconds.

* *Endorphins.*

~ ELEVEN ~

Great storytellers write their scripts out in full. Longhand*.

Word-for-word.

And they know how fast they speak.

That allows them to rehearse better, analyse their scripts, and make sure that their talk never runs over their allotted time.

** Bullet points are lazy. (The best presenters speak 100-140 words per minute).*

~ TWELVE ~

Tony Blair's speech writer *Philip Collins* insisted that on the morning of a talk, they trimmed their word count by 10%*.

No matter how much preparation had gone into the speech, this exercise always made it even sharper than it already was.

** Because adrenalin kicks in on the day and you always speak for longer than you expect. But you can only do this if you take Rule 11 seriously.*

~ THIRTEEN ~

Good storytellers love Joseph Campbell's "*Hero's Journey*" story structure - but *great* storytellers know that while it's a good format for dramatic stories, it doesn't often work for business stories.

One thing you *do* need to remember is:
The audience is always the hero.

The Hero With a Thousand Faces is essential reading for every storyteller.



If you're going to have a story,
have a big story, or none at all

JOSEPH CAMPBELL

~ FOURTEEN ~

The.

Audience.



Is.

Always.

The.

Hero.

A gentle reminder in case you skipped over the previous rule without realising how important this is.

~ FIFTEEN ~

Great storytellers know that people are not persuaded by what you say, but by what they *understand*.



Dr. John C. Maxwell

A dense forest of evergreen trees, likely spruce or fir, filling the frame. The trees are dark green and appear to be on a hillside. In the upper portion of the image, there is a layer of mist or fog, which softens the background and creates a sense of depth and atmosphere. The lighting is somewhat dim, suggesting an overcast day or early morning/late afternoon.

Stories constitute the single
most powerful weapon
in a leader's arsenal.

DR. HOWARD GARDENER

~ SIXTEEN ~

Great storytellers care about readability scores. They know what “*lexical density*” means. And they know the *Gunning Fog Index* score of their talks.

This is because they care more about helping their audience understand their message, than just having something impressive to say.

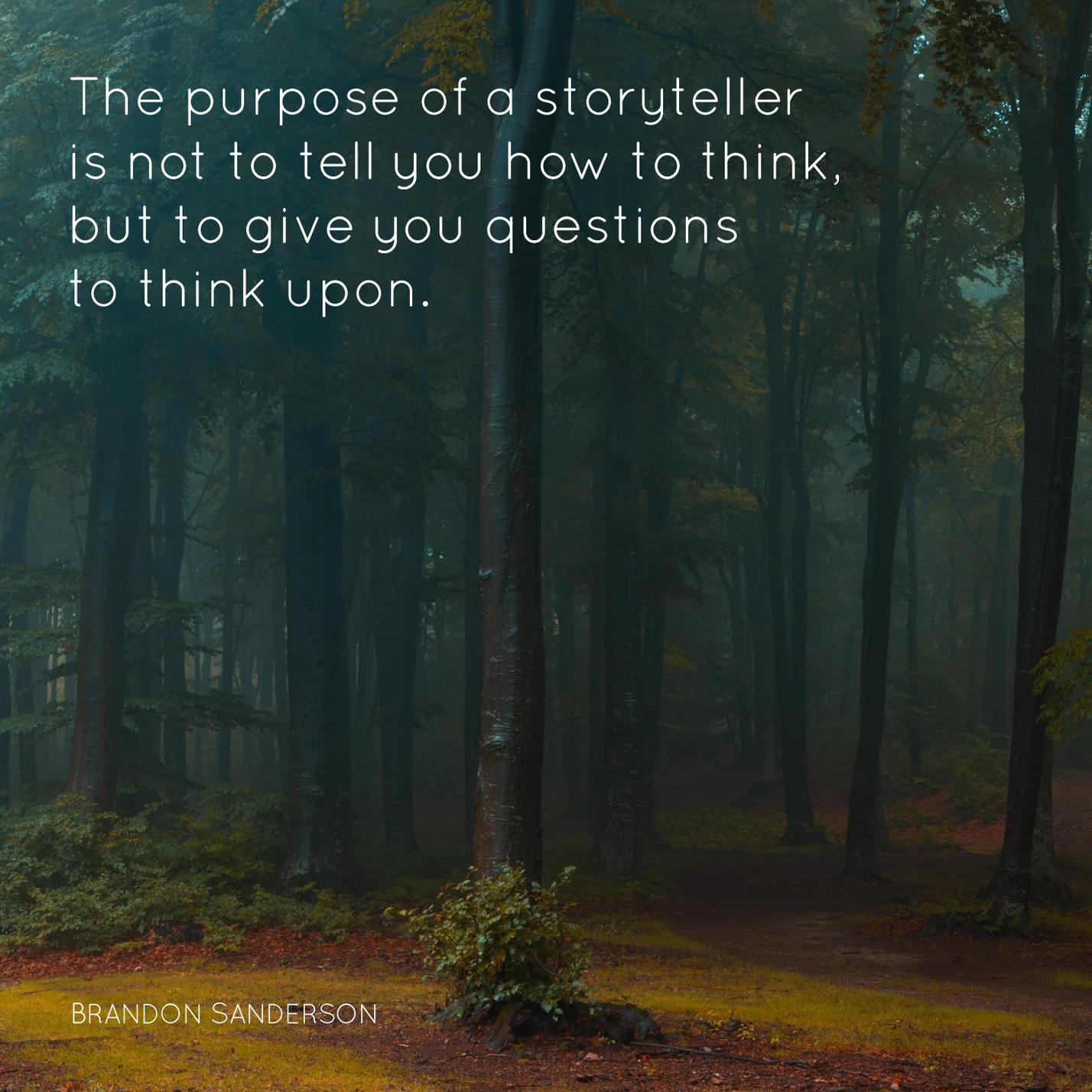
*This is why Rule 11 matters. No script. No score.
Great storytellers test their scripts in advance.*

~ SEVENTEEN ~

Great storytellers love AI, but they don't get it to write their stories for them.

They use AI more like an “IA” – an *Intelligent Assistant* - which helps them to research their audience, ask the right questions, and not let their own cognitive bias get in the way of telling the audience what they need to hear.

*AI is great as a research assistant, or to help you with critical thinking?
AI helps you ask better questions. It's not there to write your stories for you.*

A misty forest scene with tall trees and a path. The trees are dark and slender, with some foliage showing autumnal colors. The ground is covered in fallen leaves and a path leads through the forest. The overall atmosphere is quiet and contemplative.

The purpose of a storyteller
is not to tell you how to think,
but to give you questions
to think upon.

BRANDON SANDERSON

~ EIGHTEEN ~

Great presenters don't practice their story until they get it right, they practice until they can **never get it wrong.**

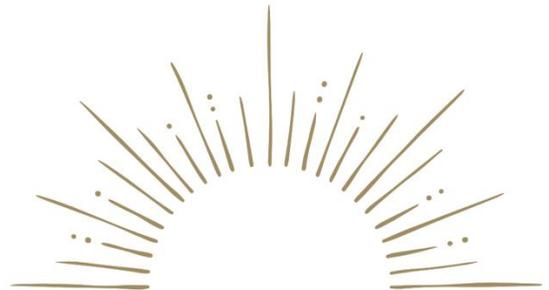
Having it written down in full is what makes this work.



*If you really care about your audience – practice well.
Doing a quick run through the day before isn't going to cut it.*

~ NINETEEN ~

Great storytellers understand that if they know their script off-by-heart, when they're presenting - they'll spend more time focusing on how their audience is responding - and less time worrying about messing up their lines.



A photograph of a cobblestone path curving through a forest. The path is made of dark, rounded stones and curves from the bottom left towards the top right. To the right of the path, there is a dense growth of green ferns. The background is a dark, textured surface, possibly a tree trunk or a wall, with some small plants growing on it.

The more you leave out,
the more you highlight
what you leave in.

HENRY GREEN

~ TWENTY ~

Great storytellers know that what you leave out, is often more important than what you put in.

Don't treat your audience like idiots.

Sometimes it helps to make them do some work and join the dots themselves.



~ TWENTY ONE ~

“And then what happened?”

are four of the most powerful words in storytelling.

If your audience is thinking that at any point in your story – you know you’re winning.

That means the dopamine is kicking in and your story is working.

An aerial photograph of a dense forest of evergreen trees, likely spruce or fir, with varying shades of green and some bare branches visible. The trees are packed closely together, creating a textured canopy. The lighting is natural, highlighting the tops of the trees and casting soft shadows in the lower parts of the forest.

Stories are important not
because they tell us that
dragons exist, but because
they tell us that dragons
can be defeated.

NEIL GAIMAN

~ TWENTY TWO ~

Great storytellers know their personality type, but I've noticed that people can be *very* opinionated about which personality model works best!

I don't think it matters as much as some people think it does; but whichever model you prefer - using one will always make you a better storyteller, *and* a better communicator.

I like Myers-Briggs. I'm an INFJ. It has many flaws but it's simple. It's very helpful when you want to analyse the personality type of your audience.

~ TWENTY THREE ~

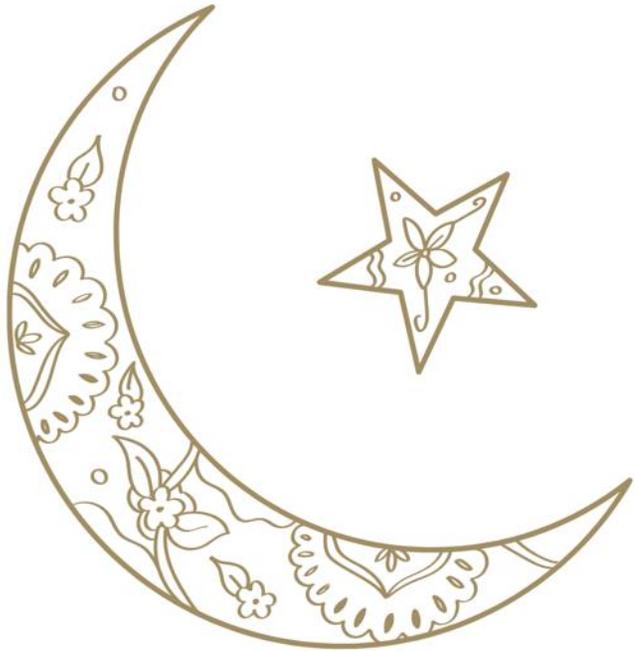
Use whatever technology you have at your disposal to research your audience. Even *Deep Research*. You can never do enough audience research.

And if you know the name of the person who you want your story to influence - working out their personality type can be particularly helpful. Especially when you're preparing to present to them.

If in doubt refer to Rules 14 & 22.

~ TWENTY FOUR ~

Whoever tells the best stories
goes home with the most marbles.



Always.



The best stories are those
that leave a lasting impact
on the audience.

DAVID MAMET

~ TWENTY FIVE ~

Got a few hours to tell some stories?
A conference? A workshop?
Try reimagining yourself as a *movie director* or a *TV showrunner*.

90 minutes? Script the flow like a movie.
4 hours? Try approaching the agenda like 4 x 1-hour Netflix episodes, each structured to make your audience want to binge-watch them all at once.

Books like Blake Snyder's "Save the Cat" will help you do this.

~ TWENTY SIX ~

At CES in 2025, Nvidia CEO, *Jensen Huang*, kept the audience engaged for 90-minutes. That's a long time for any keynote speaker. (Even *Bono* at Davos!)

Jensen approached his keynote like a movie. He managed the attention span of his audience by splitting his narrative into 7 x mini-keynotes of around 11 minutes each.

Steve Jobs was the master of long presentations because he used a similar approach. Marc Benioff too.

~ TWENTY SEVEN ~

If you've only got a short story to tell, (an informal introduction, or a presentation, with no time to prepare), try this simple 3-act structure.

- ~ What's a few things to *Excite* them?
- ~ A few things to *Disturb* them?
- ~ And a few things to *Assure* them?

Sounds simple. But it works.
And if it was good enough for Aristotle...

See Rule 4.



Stories are how we learn best.
We absorb numbers and facts
and details, but we keep them
all glued into our heads
with stories.

CHRIS BROGAN

~ TWENTY EIGHT ~

The most powerful emotion in storytelling is **surprise**. When you surprise an audience, their emotions intensify by up to 400%*.

And now that you know that Rule 1 is the golden rule of storytelling, great storytellers like you will constantly ask themselves: *“How can I surprise my audience with this story - by giving them something they don’t expect?”*

**Read “Neuroscience for Leadership” by Tara Swart et al*

~ TWENTY NINE ~

Sometimes you need to kill the hero first and explain who they are later.

That's why Quentin Tarantino is one of the best storytellers out there.



QT understands Rule 28 better than anyone.

~ THIRTY ~

Great stories do 6 things:

- ~ **Inspire & Inform.**
- ~ **Entertain & Educate.**
- ~ **Challenge & Solve Problems.**

Your story doesn't need to do all 6 at the same time. And not in equal measure. But if you need to connect with a diverse audience, make sure your story hits each mark at least once.

3 Right brain (for the heart) + 3 Left brain (for the head).

We are all storytellers.
We all live in a network of stories.
There isn't a stronger connection
between people than storytelling.



JIMMY NEIL SMITH

~ THIRTY ONE ~

Not every story needs to contain a conflict. We love villains and obstacles in the Western world, but great storytellers in Japan sometimes use a story structure called **Kishōtenketsu**.

Conflict is replaced with *Contrast*.

Makes the story FEEL totally different.

*Goodness knows we have enough conflicts in the world already.
Maybe your story might benefit from a little Eastern inspiration?*

~ THIRTY TWO ~

Great storytellers make even the most boring stories interesting.

When they're bored of their subject, or of telling the same story too many times, they make their story about why they're bored of telling it.

This is more profound than it sounds.



~ THIRTY THREE ~

Great stories have a musicality to them.

Words, when presented properly, can sound more like music than dialogue.

Great storytellers worry about things like rhythm and cadence.

Another nod to my screenwriting hero Aaron Sorkin. I sometimes write my speeches and stories on manuscript paper, as a reminder to make my story sing.

~ THIRTY FOUR ~

Great storytellers like to emphasise important points with dramatic pauses.

Sometimes...
for...
an...
uncomfortably...
long...
period...
of time.



This is because they reap the benefits of Rule 21 when they do it.

~ THIRTY FIVE ~

Great storytellers love a black screen when they're presenting live.

They know that eyes are always drawn to big, shiny, white objects.

And sometimes a black screen not only gives the audience's brain a rest, but it shifts the focus away from the screen and back onto the storyteller.

Right?

~ THIRTY SIX ~

“People remember stories more than statistics”.

Yes, this is true. Research backs it up.

But if statistics play an important role in your story - and the numbers aren't compelling enough - it doesn't matter if they remember your story...

You won't get the job done.

Read “Narrative & Numbers” by Aswath Damodaran

A large, gnarled tree trunk is the central focus, wrapped in a dense net of warm white string lights. The lights are small and numerous, creating a soft, glowing effect against the dark, textured bark. The background is a dense forest of trees, with a strong teal or cyan color overlay that gives the scene a dreamlike, ethereal quality. The lighting is low, suggesting dusk or dawn, with the primary light source being the string lights themselves. The overall mood is nostalgic and evocative.

People forget facts,
but they remember stories.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL

~ THIRTY SEVEN ~

Good storytellers in business like to quote Pixar's rules of storytelling.

Great presenters know them, but they don't talk about them *all the time*.

That's because they understand that the framework for *Finding Nemo* is rarely going to help them influence a commercial audience.

~ THIRTY EIGHT ~

Despite Rule 37 (!), there is sometimes a place for a well told playful story. Pixar have 22 “rules”. This is #4:

Once upon a time _____ [The Problem] .
And every day _____ [Current solutions & why they suck] .
Until one day _____ [Your solution] .
And because of this _____ [Why it's SO much better] .
And because of this _____ [How it's SO much better] .
Until finally _____ [Benefits of the market you're capturing] .

It's always a good idea to know the “rules” before you break them.

~ THIRTY NINE ~

In fact, come to think of it,
Pixar's rule #7 is pretty good as well...

*"Come up with your ending before you
figure out your middle.*

*Seriously. Endings are hard, get yours
working up front."*

Pixar's "Storytelling in a Box" course on Khan Academy is excellent. And it's FREE!

~ FORTY ~

And maybe Pixar's rule #14 too?

"Why must you tell THIS story?"

*What's the belief burning within you
that your story feeds off of?*

That's the heart of it".



A dark, moody forest scene with tall, thin trees and a rocky shoreline. The lighting is low, creating a sense of mystery and depth. The text is overlaid in white, providing a stark contrast against the dark background.

That's what we storytellers do.
We restore order with imagination.
We instill hope.
Again and again and again.

WALT DISNEY

~ FORTY ONE ~

Let's talk about "*client success stories*". Why don't we think about them more like adventure stories?

Too often they're just a problem, a few actions, a product or service we want to sell, and a testimonial quote. That's not a story. That's a *pitch*.

Adventure stories only begin when something goes *wrong*. Try starting there instead?

~ FORTY TWO ~

Good storytellers and communications coaches like to throw around rules like “*The 7-38-55 Rule*”.* (It sounds fancy).

We like rules.

But *great* storytellers know that if the 7% (your words) are not good enough, then the other 93% don't matter.

* Google “Albert Mehrabian”. He's someone you should know.

~ FORTY THREE ~

Great business storytellers study keynotes from conferences like *WEF* at *Davos*, *COP*, *CES*, *THINK* & *Dreamforce*.

Especially the bad ones.

Great storytelling is not just about knowing what works – it's about knowing what doesn't (*and why*).

Copy & paste some keynote transcripts from YouTube, and feed them into an LLM and ask how they'd improve it. There's a good conversation starter...

~ FORTY FOUR ~

If you want to know what it *FEELS* like to write a masterpiece - get a nice pen, a new notebook, and copy your favourite [classic novel / film script / song lyric / speech / comedy set], word-for-word.

It's an exercise called *Copywork*.

It works.

I've "written" Lin-Manuel's Hamilton, Jane Austen, and Thoreau's Walden.

~ FORTY FIVE ~

Great storytellers are passionate about the art of rhetoric, and the neuroscience of decision making.

That's because they measure the value of their stories by what their audience did *afterwards*. Great storytellers want to understand *how* people make decisions, and *why* they respond to certain words and phrases.

Studying rhetoric can seem boring and really hard work at first. Try reading "You Talkin' To Me?" by Sam Leith. It's well written and a lot of fun.

~ FORTY SIX ~

Whether you have a long time to write a story or speech, or very little time to prepare – apply *The 50:25:25 Rule* at all times.

If you spend **50%** of your time researching, **25%** writing, and **25%** rehearsing and rewriting – then you won't go far wrong.

*Much love to Obama's former-speechwriter Terry Szuplat.
His book "Say It Well" is the best book on public speaking I've ever read.*

A dense forest of evergreen trees, likely spruce or fir, filling the frame. The trees are dark green and appear to be on a hillside. In the upper portion of the image, there is a layer of mist or fog, which softens the background and creates a sense of depth and atmosphere. The lighting is somewhat dim, suggesting an overcast day or early morning/late afternoon.

You can change the world
just by sharing your story.

BARACK OBAMA

~ FORTY SEVEN ~

Read everything Nancy Duarte has written.

Resonate will help you structure your story.

Illuminate will give it more purpose.

DataStory will help you to tell it better at work.

She gave a pretty impressive TED talk too.

~ FORTY EIGHT ~

While we're on books, pick up a few by *Carmin Gallo* while you're at it.

Great storytellers have these four on their bookshelf.

~ *Five Stars*

~ *Talk Like Ted*

~ *The Storytellers Secret*

~ *The Presentation Secrets of Steve Jobs*

Check out Will Storr too. He's a very good egg.

~ FORTY NINE ~

Great storytellers love **silences**.

I know you want your presentation to be brilliant, but if you try too hard - it will be at “10” ALL the time - and your audience might feel overwhelmed.

Sometimes your story needs to be at a “7”, so weave “some silences” into your story.

Read Grace by Cody Keenan. Listening to Miles Davis while you write helps too.

~ FIFTY ~

Great storytellers obsess over the 3 V's.

Vocabulary:

Study the position of every word on the page of your scripts.

Verbal:

Record yourself on camera, but only listen to the audio when you play it back. Close your eyes and listen out for awkward filler words, monotone and speed.

Visual:

Watch the video back a 3rd time but this time with no sound. Focus on your expressions, background & body language.

*This is a brilliant exercise I learned from performance coach **Vinh Giang** to help you coach yourself, self-assess and really improve your performance.*

~ FIFTY ONE ~

Great storytellers are not afraid to read their scripts in certain circumstances.

If it was good enough for Steve Jobs, when he gave the best commencement speech of all time, then it's good enough for you.

Stanford Commencement (2005). 15 minutes well spent.



A misty forest scene with tall trees and dense undergrowth. The text is overlaid on the upper left portion of the image.

The most powerful person
in the world is the storyteller.

The storyteller sets the vision,
values, and agenda of an
entire generation
that is to come.

STEVE JOBS

~ FIFTY TWO ~

Great storytellers don't wing it.

They don't rely on a few bullet points, thinking they can get by without writing their story in full - "*because it will sound stiff or rehearsed*".

Because they know that if they applied Rule 18 properly, then it *will* feel natural, authentic and conversational.

~ FIFTY THREE ~

Great storytellers appreciate the wisdom of JFK's speechwriter **Ted Sorensen** – author of many of the world's most memorable speeches.

He said that all great storytelling just comes down to four words & five lines:

“An outline, headline, frontline, sideline and a bottom line. And brevity, levity, clarity and charity”.

This advice is so powerful I built a whole website around it at BetterStories.org

~ FIFTY FOUR ~

Great storytellers who need to write a “*thought leadership*” piece are aware that success in professional writing boils down to this one important truth:

“Thought leadership is not about conveying YOUR ideas to your readers.

It’s about helping them to change THEIR ideas.”

Watch Larry McEnerney’s lectures on YouTube. Thank me later.

~ FIFTY FIVE ~

Great storytellers avoid PowerPoint whenever possible.

For many presentations, slides are essential, but for some of the most important ones – a live demo, a whiteboard, a flipchart or a napkin will make a far greater impression.

Anyone can click through slides on a screen, but a drawing or a demo shows how well you know your stuff. In 1:1 C-suite meetings, opening your laptop is one of the quickest ways to kill your story, and lose their attention.



The stories we tell literally
make the world.

If you want to change the world,
you need to change your story.

This truth applies both to
individuals and institutions.

MICHAEL MARGOLIS

~ FIFTY SIX ~

The average attention span of a B2B audience is about 6 minutes.

Act accordingly.



*There's a good reason TED Talks are 18 minutes long.
3 x "Acts" of 6 minutes.*

~ FIFTY SEVEN ~

Great storytellers understand the psychological concept of “*thin slicing*”.

And they’ve read *Blink* By Malcolm Gladwell.

They know how important it is to make a strong first impression in the first few seconds.

This is especially important when presenting virtually.

~ FIFTY EIGHT ~

Storytellers have about **75 seconds** to capture the attention of your audience when they start talking.

TV writers call this the “*cold open*”.

If you want your stories to have better “*cold opens*”, watch some Toastmasters world champions, or popular TED Talks, and make detailed notes about what they do in their first 75 seconds.

~ FIFTY NINE ~

Great storytellers know the story before the story. They research well.

What was going on in the world, the business, or the audience's life before your story began?

Context creates meaning. Having a relevant anecdote, or even something from that day's news up your sleeve, could make all the difference.

A photograph of a brick wall with ferns growing on it. The wall is made of dark, weathered bricks, and the ferns are a vibrant green color. The text is overlaid on the top left of the image.

After nourishment, shelter and
companionship, stories are the
thing we need most in the world.

SALMAN RUSHDIE

~ SIXTY ~

What about the place where you're telling your story? Is there anything historically significant about the venue, which you could weave into your story?

Better still, could you choose to tell your story in a location which is relevant or meaningful to it?

I recently gave a keynote on the same stage that JFK and Churchill once stood. I dropped a reference to the Moon Speech and my favourite Churchill quote, "The only statistics you can trust, are the ones you falsified yourself."

Great storytellers know how to
“*show the monster!*”

If your story is about solving a problem, make sure the audience feels how bad the problem is before you start solving it. Emphasise the “*bad*”.

No pain, no gain.

If there's an “elephant in the room” which may influence the outcome of your story – an “event”, or something provocative which everyone knows but no one is mentioning - make sure you at least acknowledge it.

A photograph of a forest stream flowing over mossy rocks. The water is clear and creates small cascades. A large, moss-covered log lies across the stream in the background. The forest is dense with green trees and foliage. The text "Storytelling offers the opportunity to talk with your audience, not at them." is overlaid in white at the top left.

Storytelling offers the opportunity
to talk with your audience,
not at them.

LAURA HOLLOWAY

~ SIXTY TWO ~

A story without specificity is a story without soul.

Don't say "*a leader.*"

Say "*Jessica, the new CMO of a \$4 billion shoe company, who's quietly terrified of AI.*"

Precision is persuasion.

~ SIXTY THREE ~

Never forget the rule of the “Last Line”.

A story’s ending is the beginning of what the audience remembers.

A good ending feels earned, inevitable, and ideally includes a twist, insight, or invitation.

Remind yourself about Rule 28.

~ SIXTY FOUR ~

Are you the only person who can tell this story (in this way)?

I mean the *ONLY* person?

If not, you've got some work to do.

Start by revisiting Rule 22.

You are the perfect person
to tell your story.



LIN-MANUEL MIRANDA

~ SIXTY FIVE ~

If you have a competitive story to tell in a business environment, how much of it could your competitor say (and get away with)?

Look at your slides.

Could your biggest competitor put their logo in the corner, and tell *exactly* the same story with the same slides?

If so, *remove and rewrite.*

~ SIXTY SIX ~

Great storytellers plant ideas early and harvest them later. Stand-up comedians are great at this.

They call them “*Nested Loops*”.

Set up a phrase, image, or line of dialogue in the beginning – and bring it back at the end.

That callback makes the story feel more satisfying, well crafted, and complete.

~ SIXTY SEVEN ~

Great purpose-driven storytellers want to get things done. They want their audience to act.

They love the word “***Kairos***”.

They ask themselves, “***How could I create even more urgency in this story, which might motivate my audience to act even faster?***”

Kai-ros [Greek]: “A supreme moment when one simply must act; no matter how implausible or inconvenient”.

~ SIXTY EIGHT ~

If a Hollywood “*script doctor*” was to look at your story – searching for ways to improve it – one thing they’d do is something we can all try...

Show why the *hero* is *desperate* to achieve their goals. Increase their *desire*. Next, show why the *obstacle* is even more insurmountable than it already was. Then introduce a *guide* to help...

The greater the delta between “intention & obstacle” the better the story. Rule 5. Read Chris “Script Doctor” Vogler’s excellent book The Writers Journey.

~ SIXTY NINE ~

If you've got an emotional story to share - and you need your audience to take *action* – consider that your audience has a finite “*hope budget*”. Erode too much of that hope, and they might not do what you need them to do.

That's because it's easy to feel overwhelmed and assume that one person can't make a difference.

I've seen this happen many times. The reverse is also true. If your story isn't compelling enough, they might care, but not enough to act.



Stories too frequently fail
because of the lack of a
strong female storyteller.

ANTHONY BOURDAIN

~ SEVENTY ~

Stories don't need to have a complicated structure.

I like *Donald Miller's StoryBrand*:

- ~ A character...
- ~ Has a problem...
- ~ Who meets a guide...
- ~ Who gives them a plan...
- ~ And calls them to action...
- ~ Which ends in success.

This is like a "hero's Journey" for business stories. I've used it many times and it really works. JFK's unforgettable "Moon Speech" follows this exact structure.

~ SEVENTY ONE ~

Use metaphor like a scalpel, not a sledgehammer.

A single, sharp metaphor can make a complex idea unforgettable. Too many will make you sound like you swallowed a TED talk generator.

“In today’s business landscape, we’re all just astronauts on a rocket ship of innovation, orbiting the moon of disruption, sipping kombucha from the zero-gravity cup of agile transformation. We must pivot like ballerinas on a blockchain-powered dance floor, surfing the tsunami of synergy with our purpose-driven paddleboards pointed toward the North Star of stakeholder capitalism.” << Don’t do this.

~ SEVENTY TWO ~

If your story has no stakes,
it has no pulse.

Great storytellers ask:
“What happens if we fail?”

Great business stories
make the cost of inaction
emotionally clear.



A misty forest scene with tall, slender trees. The ground is covered in fallen leaves, and a large, textured tree trunk is prominent in the foreground on the right. The atmosphere is soft and ethereal.

You don't learn to walk
by following rules.

You learn to walk
by falling over.

SIR RICHARD BRANSON

~ SEVENTY THREE ~

Great storytellers embrace constraints.
Only got 90 seconds? Good.*

- ~ 30 seconds to *Excite*.
- ~ 30 seconds to *Disturb*.
- ~ 30 seconds to *Assure*.

Tight timeframes force creativity, clarity, and focus. Most storytellers get better when they're not allowed to ramble.

* Search "Good – Jocko Willink" on YouTube. See also Rule 27.

~ SEVENTY FOUR ~

Great stories are *felt* before they're *understood*.

You don't need to explain everything.

Sometimes the best stories are like good poetry.

Clarity comes second to resonance.

*"Don't treat your audience like an idiot."
- Aaron Sorkin (Again).*

~ SEVENTY FIVE ~

Great storytellers treat “*filler words*”
like weeds.

Notice them. Name them.

And pull them out by the root.

*Um, like, you know... they dilute your...
erm... impact...*

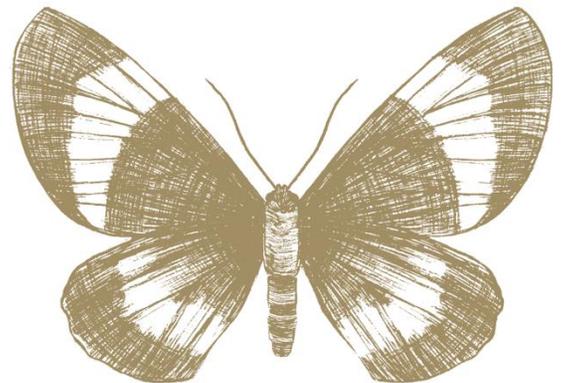
*This is also why Rule 50 matters so much. When you listen to your
recording and don't watch it - your brain is only focused on your words.
You'll be surprised how many filler words you use!*

~ SEVENTY SIX ~

Speak to the room, not your slides.

Your deck is the backup dancer.
You're the headliner.

Make eye contact.
Not slide contact!





Marketing is no longer about
the stuff that you make,
but about the stories you tell.

SETH GODIN

~ SEVENTY SEVEN ~

Think of your hands as punctuation.

Don't lock them at your sides or overuse them like semaphore signals!

Use open gestures to emphasise key points and invite trust.

*Follow body language experts. I love **Martin Brooks, Caroline Goyder & Simon Lancaster**. Martin's card box set "Body Language Decoder" is excellent.*

~ SEVENTY EIGHT ~

Eliminate your “verbal crutches.”

Record yourself.

Notice your go-to filler, whether it’s
“so,” “*basically*,” “*like*,” or “*right?*”

Replace it with a pause.

Silence is stronger than fluff.

When in doubt, turn back to Rules 49 & 50.

~ SEVENTY NINE ~

You have one superpower that AI never will: your voice.

Vary your pace, pitch, and pauses like a jazz musician.

Don't speak in monotone.

Speak in melody.

We're really doubling down on the musical & jazz references in these rules, aren't we?!



~ EIGHTY ~

Eye contact is your emotional glue.

Speaking in-person?

Find three audience members: left, centre, right - and cycle naturally.

On Zoom or Teams?

Look straight into the camera when making your key points, not the screen.

Want to read some good stuff on virtual presenting? Try "Virtual EI" from Harvard Business School & "Can You Hear Me?" by Nick Morgan

A large, gnarled tree trunk is the central focus, wrapped in a dense net of warm white string lights. The lights are small and numerous, creating a soft, glowing effect against the dark, textured bark. The background is a dense forest of trees, with a strong teal or cyan color cast over the entire scene, suggesting a night or twilight setting. The ground is dark and appears to be covered in leaves or twigs. The overall mood is serene and magical.

Stories are a communal
currency of humanity.

TAHIR SHAH

~ EIGHTY ONE ~

Virtual presenters are cinematographers.

Frame yourself well. Use good light, eye-level camera, and clean audio.

This isn't vanity. It's clarity.

If they can't see or hear you well enough, they can't feel you.

Get yourself a good lav mic. I use a Rode. It will be 10X better than your laptop mic and isn't too expensive. Use key lights to show off your best side too!

~ EIGHTY TWO ~

Avoid screen-sharing by default.

Nothing kills connection faster.

Share your screen only when it serves your story*.

The moment you click “Share Screen”, your audience’s attention drops by half.

** When you’ve stopped sharing the story on your slides stop sharing your screen. We want that oxytocin hit! And we won’t get it from your slides.*

~ EIGHTY THREE ~

Treat every virtual presentation as if you're on live TV.

Everything counts: Your opening. Your expression. Your background. Your pacing. Your clothes.

You're not "on a call."

You're on camera.

Smile. More than you think you should.

~ EIGHTY FOUR ~

Never end on Q&A.

Your final note should
be your final message.

Take questions, but
always come back for a
closing remark that
lands the story.



This advice is more important than it sounds. Try it.

A photograph of a forest scene. In the foreground, a large, weathered tree trunk stands on the left, with its roots exposed. A large, moss-covered log lies horizontally across the middle ground. The background is filled with dense green foliage and other trees. The lighting is soft and natural, creating a serene atmosphere.

Communication is the
most important skill any
entrepreneur can possess.

SIR RICHARD BRANSON

~ EIGHTY FIVE ~

Stop apologising.

Never say, “*Sorry, I’m nervous,*” or
“*I hope this makes sense.*”

Confidence is contagious.

Let the story do the convincing -
not your disclaimers.

*There’s a time and place for showing vulnerability. It can be very powerful.
But far too often it’s an excuse because you didn’t practice enough. **Rule 18!!!***

~ EIGHTY SIX ~

Polite reminder:

We are all storytellers.

No matter what your job title says.

No matter how left-brain, non-creative
or technical you think you are.

You're a storyteller. And your job is to
tell meaningful stories as fast and as
compellingly as possible.

~ EIGHTY SEVEN ~

You should be able to explain your mission (or the mission of the hero in your story) in ONE sentence.

Try this for size:

*I want to _____ ,
in order to _____ ,
because if I don't _____ .*

What's at stake? What's the opportunity? What's the cost of doing nothing?

~ EIGHTY EIGHT ~

John F. Kennedy told his speechwriter
“Don’t make me sound like a windbag”.

He believed that if he spoke for longer than 10-12 minutes, the audience would just start thinking about food or sex.

Probably true.

Good advice. 

A photograph of a forest scene. In the foreground, a dirt path leads up a slight incline, with several large, flat wooden logs laid across it to form steps. To the left, a large, weathered tree trunk stands upright. A massive, moss-covered log lies diagonally across the middle ground, leaning against the standing tree. The background is filled with dense green foliage and more trees, creating a sense of a deep, lush forest. The lighting is soft and natural, highlighting the textures of the wood and the vibrant greens of the plants.

Life is too short for a long story.

MARY WORTLEY MONTAGU

~ EIGHTY NINE ~

The best stories contain
big ideas, small words
and short sentences.



This is why I love Ernest Hemingway so much. He was the master.

~ NINETY ~

Every great story should
contain a **S.T.A.R** moment.

*Something
They'll
Always
Remember.*



Thanks Nancy.

~ NINETY ONE ~

In business it feels like the question
“What keeps you up at night?”
is the premise of a great story.

But if you want to inspire an
audience, a far more engaging
question to ask, is ~

*“What gets you out of bed
in the morning?”*



Simon Sinek.

~ NINETY TWO ~

During Sir Ken's excellent TED talk, he told 8 stories. The average length of each story was 2 minutes 5 seconds.

One of the greatest speeches* of all-time was 2-minutes long as well.

Why take 20 minutes to tell a story if you can get the job done in 2?

**Abraham Lincoln's Gettysberg Address. 2-minutes. 272 words. Edward Everett spoke for 2 hours after Lincoln. No one remembered what he said.*

Sorry I gave such
a long presentation.

I didn't have time to
create a shorter one...



~ NINETY THREE ~

Sir Winston Churchill used to memorise his speeches by rehearsing them over and over again. Sometimes fifty times.

He even wrote them in Psalm format to make them easier to remember, but he deliberately included a few mistakes.

This was so he could appear to correct himself on the day, making his speech feel spontaneous and unrehearsed.

Clever.

~ NINETY FOUR ~

1 hour per minute is a good rule of thumb when preparing a talk.

15 mins = 15 hours.

AI can help to speed up the development time, but don't fool yourself into thinking you can knock out a short story, quickly.

You can't. Not if you want it to be great.

*Some of the top TED talks worked out around 10 hours per minute!
18 mins = 180 hours prep.*

~ NINETY FIVE ~

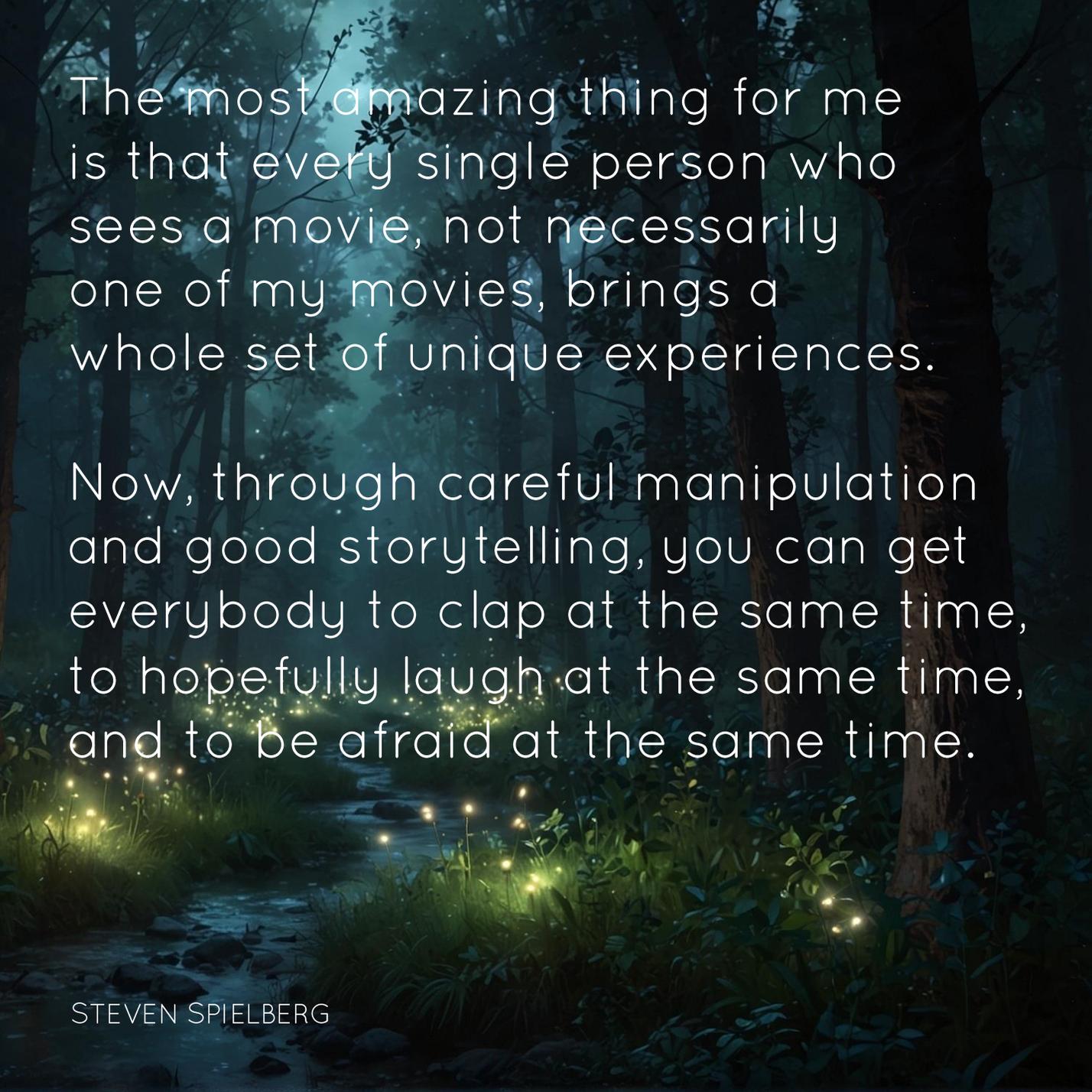
Think about a presentation like a
'present'.

Present-ation.

(Especially if you get nervous.)

Remind yourself how much you like
giving people presents ~ and how
much people like to receive them.

Chris Anderson.

A dark, misty forest at night. A stream flows through the center, surrounded by lush greenery and tall trees. Numerous glowing fireflies are scattered throughout the scene, creating a magical atmosphere. The text is overlaid in white, sans-serif font.

The most amazing thing for me is that every single person who sees a movie, not necessarily one of my movies, brings a whole set of unique experiences.

Now, through careful manipulation and good storytelling, you can get everybody to clap at the same time, to hopefully laugh at the same time, and to be afraid at the same time.

STEVEN SPIELBERG

~ NINETY SIX ~

If you have a really important business presentation to give, and the agenda looks pretty full, make sure you turn up armed with two versions of your story.

Prepare one version as normal.

But have a second ready, which you've practiced well in advance, and can deliver in half the time if you need to.

In business meetings, you've never got as much time as you think you'll have. There's nothing worse than rushing your presentation and diluting its impact.

~ NINETY SEVEN ~

When you've only got one shot to speak to an executive audience, and you need them to remember your message, remember the 3 "*tells*"...

Tell them what you're about to tell them.
Tell them.

Then **tell them** what you told them.

Structure your story accordingly.

Reinforcement & repetition always works.

~ NINETY EIGHT ~

Guy Kawasaki was *Steve Jobs* evangelist when they worked together at Apple.

Guy religiously followed a **10:20:30 Rule**.

Never have more than **10** slides.

Never speak for more than **20** minutes.

Avoid using any text smaller than **TS30**.

Steve Jobs approved.

This is a good way to avoid "Death by PowerPoint".

~ NINETY EIGHT ~

The quickest way to win over a B2B audience is only to show them one slide.

ONE. KILLER. SLIDE.

It could be a very clever animated build, but if you design it well enough, and tell your story clearly enough, yours will be the one presentation they remember.

I was once in a full day meeting. Everyone was given print outs of the 300 slides. Seriously. I built an intro slide which told the story of every slide on one page. It didn't just prepare them for what they were about to see, but it demonstrated that we really knew what we were talking about.



If you can't explain
it simply enough,
you don't know
it well enough.

ALBERT EINSTEIN

~ NINETY NINE ~

Strategist *David Axelrod* shapes the messaging for large political campaigns. He always focuses on 3 questions:

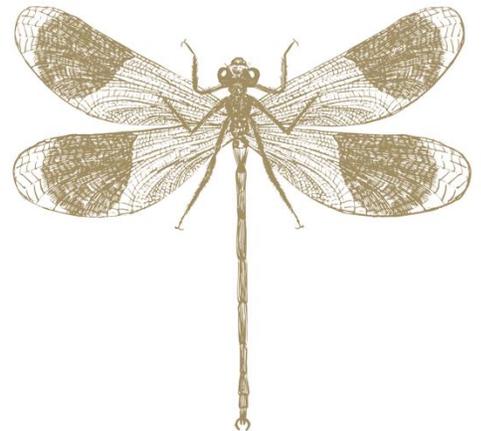
- ~ Is it relevant?
- ~ Is it important?
- ~ Is it true?

These questions don't just work for presidential "stump speeches". They'll help you edit your own stories.

~ ONE HUNDRED ~

No one will ever criticise you for giving a shorter talk than they expected.

Apply 'a minimum of sound to a maximum of sense'.



Mark Twain.

~ ONE HUNDRED & ONE

Presidential & executive speechwriter *William Safire* once said that a great speech consists of just 3 elements:

1. *An occasion of turmoil.*
2. *A setting which provides the speaker with a momentous forum.*
3. *Content and phrasing.*

Read "Lend Me Your Ears". (Saffire wrote for Nixon & The New York Times).

~ ONE HUNDRED & TWO ~

Cellist *Yo-Yo Ma* tells stories without words. He says great communicators do 3 things well:

1. *Seek truth.* [In your music or your message]
2. *Build trust.* [With your audience]
3. *Perform a service.* [Turn every presentation into a performance]



A photograph of a small stream flowing through a dense forest. The water is clear and white with foam as it cascades over moss-covered rocks. The surrounding trees are tall and thin, with green and yellow leaves, suggesting an autumn setting. The ground is covered in moss and fallen leaves. The overall atmosphere is serene and natural.

As long as we are engaged
in storytelling that moves
the culture forward, it doesn't
matter what format it is.

LEVAR BURTON

~ ONE HUNDRED & THREE ~

Three-times Pulitzer prize winning journalist *Tom Friedman* is the most successful opinion writer *The New York Times* has ever had.

~

During a Q&A I saw him at recently, he was asked why readers respond so well to his writing. He explained how he only appeals to the two most basic human emotions – “***Dignity*** and ***Humiliation***. *Those two emotions always drive the most action”.*

~ ONE HUNDRED & FOUR ~

Tom Friedman also says that, as storytellers, “*We’re all just in the Heating and Lighting business.*”

We’re either stoking up an emotion in the hearts of out our audience... (*Heat*)

Or we’re illuminating something, in a way they hadn’t seen before, to help them think differently about it. (*Light*)

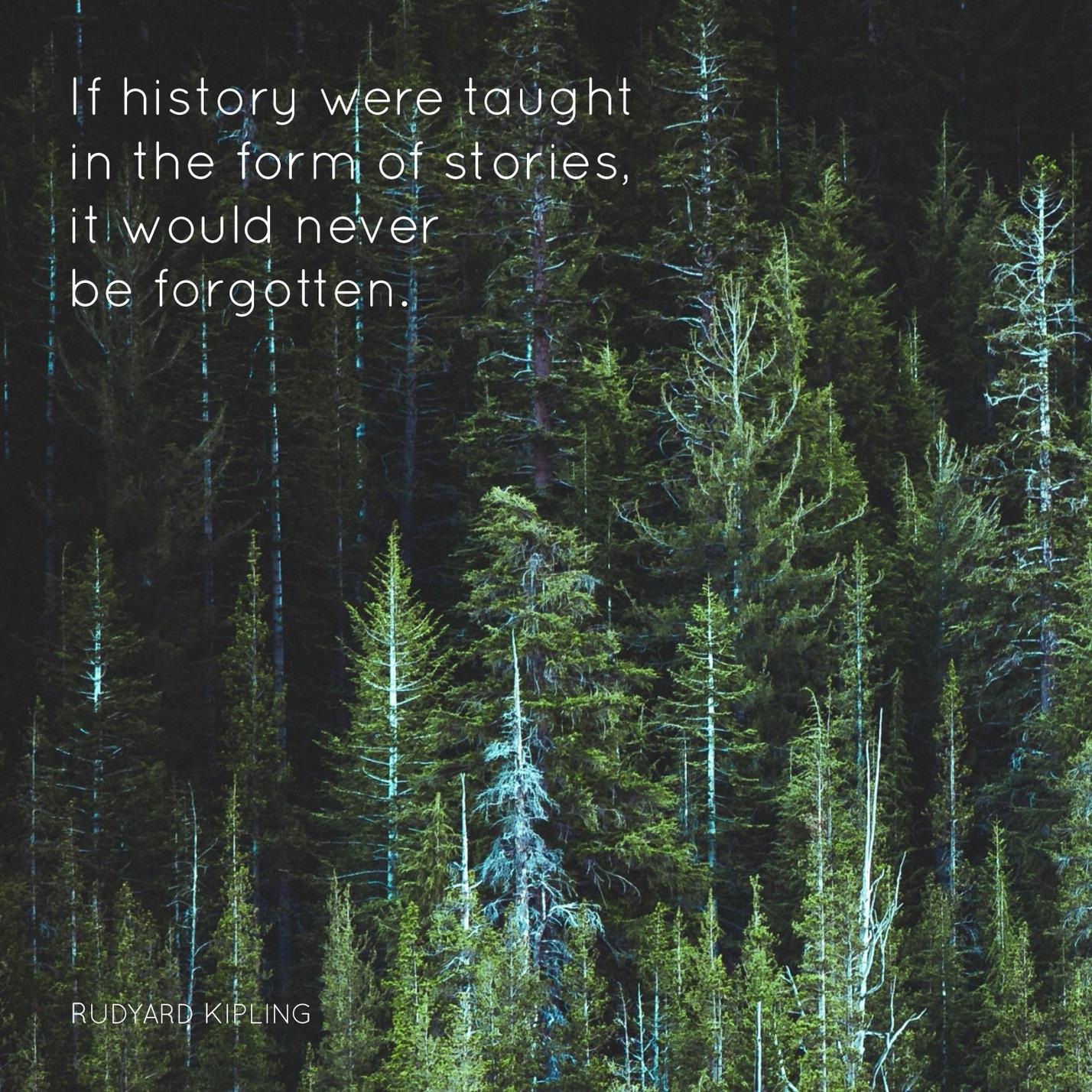
The job title on Tom’s business card says, “Heating & Lighting”. True story.

~ ONE HUNDRED & FIVE ~

The award for the longest standing ovation at a TED talk goes to human rights lawyer *Bryan Stevenson*.

He used no slides and told 3 short stories. 7-minutes each. His foundation received over **\$1M** donations* before the applause had even finished.

** That's "Kairos" for you. (Rule 67). He also split his presentation into the 6 elements of storytelling (Rule 30). I recorded a podcast about how he did it: <https://truthintention.com/podcasts/the-arc-of-justice>*



If history were taught
in the form of stories,
it would never
be forgotten.

RUDYARD KIPLING

~ ONE HUNDRED & SIX ~

Da Vinci Code author *Dan Brown* says that all great stories have **3 “C”s**.

A ***Contract***. The ***Clock***. And the ***Crucible***.

Keep these *C*'s in the back of your mind and many of our other rules will naturally fall into place.

- ~ *Make a CONTRACT with your reader to take them on a rewarding journey.*
- ~ *Introduce a CLOCK (or a deadline) which creates urgency, drama & excitement.*
- ~ *Stories take place inside a CRUCIBLE. Remove anything unnecessary outside it.*

~ ONE HUNDRED & SEVEN ~

Taylor Swift once said, “Confidence and happiness are the prettiest things you can wear”.

Be yourself*.
(Everyone else is already taken).

Great storytellers were born to stand out, not to fit in. So, you do you.
And we'll love you for it.

**If you love hats, wear your most impressive hat when you present. (If you can!)
Always wear shoes that make you feel amazing. Let your light shine.*

~ ONE HUNDRED & EIGHT ~

At the heart of all well told stories is a deeply personal connection to the person telling it.

I love the Japanese process “**IKIGAI**”

- ~ *What are you good at?*
- ~ *What do you get paid for?*
- ~ *What do you love?*
- ~ *What do you think the world needs?*

Two for the head. Two for the heart. Great storytellers know their IKIGAI – their “reason for being” - and they weave it into every story they tell.

~ ONE HUNDRED & NINE ~

That was a *lot* of rules!

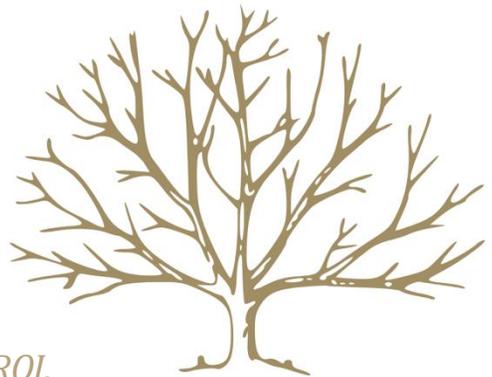
Truth is, great storytellers don't care about rules, they care about *results**.

So, let's go tell stories that matter.

Thanks for reading.

This was fun.

**Results don't always need to be financial.
But every great story needs some form of an ROI.*





The universe is made of stories,
not of atoms.

MURIEL RUKEYSER

~ The Energy of Storytelling ~

There's a simple truth about stories when I think about all these "rules". Stories don't just share information, tell tales, and take you on interesting journeys...

Stories move energy.

The storyteller's job is to be a *transformer*. Just like the ones in a national power grid, which convert raw energy into usable electricity, and then distribute it via their network across towns and cities.

Great storytellers are transformers.

They distribute their own energy across their network (to their audience), in the form of transformational stories; by converting their *potential* energy into the three *kinetic* energies which make up all great stories...

This is not about being a better "presenter"...

Heat, Light, and Sound.

Our job as storytellers is to *transform* those energies into something our audience's can feel, carry, and act upon. We transport our *words* and *ideas* into the minds of our audience.

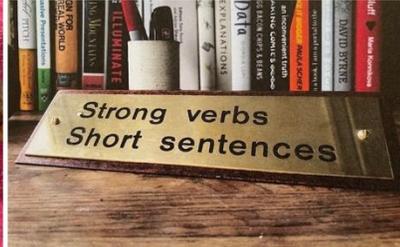
- ~ We don't just tell stories.
- ~ We light up minds.
- ~ We ignite hearts.

When we send *words and ideas* vibrating through screens and stages, if we do it right, we can impact companies, our colleagues, and sometimes even entire communities.

That's the kind of energy the world needs now.



... maybe it's about being a transformer of audiences?



Now it's over to you. Go tell better stories. You got this! ~ Jeremy

A dark, misty forest at night. The scene is filled with tall, slender trees and dense foliage. In the foreground and middle ground, numerous small, glowing fireflies illuminate the undergrowth, creating a magical atmosphere. The lighting is dim, with the primary light source being the fireflies and a soft, ambient light filtering through the trees.

No matter what anybody
tells you, words and ideas
can change the world.

JOHN KEATING (DEAD POETS SOCIETY)

A magical forest scene at night. The forest is dark, with tall, slender trees and dense foliage. A path of light, possibly a stream or a path of fireflies, leads through the center of the forest. The ground is covered in grass and small plants, many of which are glowing with a soft, yellow light. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and enchanting.

If you obey all the rules,
You miss all the fun.

KATHARINE HEPBURN



TELL
BETTER
STORIES.