

# What's Your Story? Train Your Next Audience by Painting a Picture with Words

A good story makes your safety message more memorable than any facts and figures you present during training, and it's best when stories are woven in with data. **By Charles J. Douros**



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**S**tories are not facts, figures, or raw data. A good story can do something raw data cannot: It can elicit an emotional response and provoke you to think differently, even if only for a moment. A great story helps persuade, influence, and move people to action. The strongest stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end—even if that timeline is implied and mostly left to the imagination.

Data, facts, figures, and lists simply don't have that kind of influence and power over an audience. On its best day, a bar graph, a pivot table, or an executive summary is just not as compelling as a good story. Raw data leave little fodder for the imagination; it's hard to have a genuine emotional response staring at an Excel spreadsheet.

Professional trainers leverage storytelling by weaving stories into the curriculum. This gives the audience a choice: They can connect academically (with the data) or feel something emotionally (with the story). Either way, a good story triggers a cognitive pause. It gives learners a reason to listen; that is the goal after all, isn't it? *As your trainer, I want to impart the knowledge I have—the knowledge you need—to trigger a new or different set of behaviors that are best suited for the work we're asking you to do.* Through storytelling, the trainer may invite you on a journey that takes place over years and years or punch you in the gut with an anecdote that takes place in a matter of minutes.

Take, for example, this story written by Ernest Hemingway. Some say this is the shortest story ever written ... and it's brilliant.

## STRATEGY

“For sale, baby shoes, never worn.”

While it's unreasonable to expect any mortal human to be as clever, as brilliant, or as efficient with the written word as the late Hemingway, could you incorporate some of your own stories into your next training class? Do you have one essential story to tell in bitesize parts throughout the duration of the session, or could you select one or two from a bank of several shorter stories?

### Captivate Your Audience in Thirty Seconds ... Or Else

I get it. There's nothing sexy about 29 CFR 1910.146, Permit-Required Confined Spaces, or any of the ensuing 15 pages of the standard. The same can be said for pretty much any other OSHA standard ever written. The material is boring! Valuable, but boring. Not too long ago, I had the pleasure of spending my Saturday morning with a group of maintenance

and a certain safety acumen. I knew if I started with, “Today, we're going to learn about 29 CFR 1910.146, Permit-Required ...,” I'd lose them before I even finished my sentence. They would be shifting in their seats, folding their arms, and thinking about something—anything—other than confined space entry right out of the gate. I knew what I had to do.

I started with a story. By “started,” I mean it in the most literal sense of the word. I approached the stage with a measured, thoughtful gait. *Slow your roll. Don't take it by storm*, I thought to myself. Once I squared off with the audience, I gave everyone a pensive glance—not a smile—that best emphasized the next words out of my mouth; then I began.

“I wish you all could have known my friend Max House. Max was a giant among men. He looked like Shaquille O'Neal. All 6 feet, 11 inches of him still wasn't tall enough to

### Set the Pace

It took less than 30 seconds to paint a picture that everyone in the audience could relate to. In that brief opening, I told a story with a distinct beginning (an introduction to Max), a middle (he fell 20 feet into a hole), and an end (in an instant, his life changed forever). The story was easy to relate to, and there was something in it for everyone. Then, the final thought established relevance to the training topic. Let's deconstruct it and see why this works.

The story began before I even took the stage. Knowing the opening was going to be a shocker, somewhat ominous, I walked deliberately, pensively, to the microphone. Then, a quick glance matched the tone and tenor of the first words to be spoken. I did not confuse the audience with an overly enthusiastic, inauthentic smile or a cheerful greeting.

It was important to make it personal right out of the gate, and I let the audience know it. I made a pact with the audience and imparted trust in them. *You're going to get to know a friend of mine, and I trust you enough to tell you his name* (and the name itself will be memorable and catchy—one the audience will not soon forget). To seal the deal, I provided a visual reference, *a giant among men*, and purposely implanted an image of one of the most famous pop-culture examples of big, giant men: Shaquille O'Neal.

The story immediately took a dark turn—catching the audience off guard—and established relevance to the subject matter with the visual imagery of a huge man falling through an open manhole into a stinky sewer on Main Street. Here, I carefully selected two words to help tell the story: *Stinky* incited the sense of smell and gave the listeners something to relate to. Everyone knows what a stinky sewer smells like. Similarly, I chose to use the imagery of *Main Street* because everybody knows what his or her version of Main Street looks like.

## “PROFESSIONAL TRAINERS LEVERAGE STORYTELLING BY WEAVING STORIES INTO THE CURRICULUM. THIS GIVES THE AUDIENCE A CHOICE: THEY CAN CONNECT ACADEMICALLY (WITH THE DATA) OR FEEL SOMETHING EMOTIONALLY (WITH THE STORY).”

technicians at a garlic and onion processing plant. As they settled in, I unpacked my materials, preparing to spend the next 4 hours teaching permit-required confined space entry. I anticipated an uphill battle, trying to present the information in a way that could captivate this hardened maintenance team. *It's going to be a tough sell*, I said to myself. The permit-required confined space standard (and its 177 subparts) is complicated, and it requires calculations

help the day he fell nearly 20 feet into a stinky sewer through an open manhole on Main Street. There were no physical barriers, no signs or permits, and no attendants to warn him. One second, he was fine, and in an instant, his life changed forever as he lay unconscious at the bottom of the sewer. Today, we're here to talk about the confined space standard and how to prevent something like this from ever happening again.”

Now that's an opening!

Finally, I made the case for topic relevance by referencing the absence of barriers, permits, signs, and attendants. The audience makes an immediate connection to the reason they are in the class, and they can now connect the dots. They're even given a preview of what will be taught for the remainder of the class. To be sure the audience gets it, I tell them what will be discussed today: *the confined space standard*.

Now the stage is set; the training can begin.

### Putting Your Story to Work in a Training Setting

It's one thing to nail the opening but another to keep the rest of the class just as interesting. A great story, or collection of stories, told at just the right time can help. But there's a catch. Before considering *where* to place a story in your training session, consider *whether* it even belongs. What are you trying to achieve by telling the story? It's not good enough to tell a story *just* because it's a great story. Even the most riveting tales can be time wasted if they're not strategically placed to emphasize or support the material surrounding it.

Once, while instructing a safety leadership and coaching workshop, I told a funny (and self-deprecating) story that had always garnered lots of laughs from other audiences but fell on deaf ears this time. Puzzled with the poor reception, I listened to the session recording later that evening and realized I had inadvertently told the story at the wrong point in the presentation, and they took it completely out of context. Right story, wrong time, and ... thud!

### Engage the Audience

Whether you choose to weave your essential story through your entire training session one segment at a time or you decide to tell several shorter stories to emphasize certain points, the audience is craving—even anticipating—a chance to invest in the

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outcome. Motivational speakers who have overcome tremendous tragedy and life-altering misfortune against all odds use this skill masterfully. They leverage an essential story, drawing the audience in. Usually, the stage is set quickly, and the audience members know, or think they know, what is to come. Then, the presenter drops a story here and a story there. Safety trainers can use this same strategy to engage an audience. It doesn't have to be *your* story, but it does have to be relevant to the course material.

I encounter hundreds of safety leaders in my work each year. Inevitably, whether we are crafting a safety strategy together, teaching leaders to be better safety coaches, or assessing a company's safety culture, there comes a moment of truth when they admit to gaps in their training systems. Eventually, they ask, “How can I improve my training sessions?”

Here are some tips for doing just that.

- Develop an essential story nobody can tell as well as you.
- Be prepared to tell the story in its entirety, or break it into smaller bits to leverage during your training sessions.
- Develop a story inventory with different stories of varying lengths and intended impact (wistful, funny, provocative, etc.).

- Cultivate, preen, and populate existing stories with new details.
- Plan adequate time for stories in future training sessions.
- Practice. Tell the same story to different audiences, and gauge their response; what is working and what isn't?

If you or your organization wants to learn more about how to improve your safety culture, develop leaders to become safety coaches, or create an effective long-term safety strategy, visit us at [proactsafety.com](http://proactsafety.com). **SD**



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**Reprint: SD\_0320-4**