A few years ago, I began a journey.

Becoming Your Association’s Storyteller-in-Chief
Scott Steen
Executive Director
American Physiological Society
ssteen@the-aps.org
@scottsteen

Effective associations tell stories to: promote their profession or industry; attract new members; trumpet their accomplishments; honor their members; sell their experiences and products; and more. But few leaders take the time to hone their storytelling skills. A few years ago, I went on a quest to become a better storyteller so that I could represent my organization with greater impact, both in my writing and speaking. Here are a few highlights of what I learned:

Stories Win Over Facts

- Stories engage far more of a listener’s brain than fact-based presentations. While fact-based presentations turn on the cognitive parts of the brain that process language, stories can activate cognitive, sensory, and emotional parts of the brain.

- Because of this, stories act as mnemonic devices, making your written and spoken communications far more memorable. Professors at Stanford University and The Ohio State University have conducted separate experiments that show that people are significantly more likely to remember the details of story-based presentations than presentations that focus primarily on facts.
Great stories don’t just happen. Neither do great storytellers.

- While there are naturally gifted storytellers, storytelling is a skill. As such, storytelling can be learned and improved with practice.

- Before you become a storyteller, it is natural to think you don’t have any stories to tell. Ask yourself story prompts. What is the worst trouble you ever got in as a kid? What was the best journey you ever took? Who do you admire most and why? What is the most daring thing you ever did? Believe me. You have stories.

- Find the story first and the meaning (or moral) later.

- Want a good story? Write it down. And then cut it in half. And then refine it and refine it again.

- Want to tell a good story? Practice it out loud until you can tell it in your sleep.

Stories are Not Merely Collections of Facts

A lot of people think they are telling stories when they are merely reciting facts. “Let me tell you the story of our organization. Over the past twenty years, we have fact, fact, fact, fact, and fact. As a result of these facts, several remarkable facts have occurred, including fact, fact, and fact.” This is not a story. Actual stories have recognizable structures and attributes. Specifically, they have:

A Protagonist
The story needs to be about someone (or something) who will be changed by what happens in the story.

A Journey
The protagonist needs to start in one place, experience conflict and challenges, and arrive at the end of the story someplace different than where they began. Preferably, they learn something or grow as a result of their experiences.

Details
Stories have details that do not merely convey information but allow the listener or reader to experience the story. Sensory details (smells, sights, sounds, tastes, feel) are especially powerful.

A Narrative Thread
The journey needs to have a point. The details should all work together to lead you to a meaningful conclusion. What doesn’t further the story, either narratively or emotionally, should be eliminated.
5 Principles for Telling a Great Story

Stanford Business School Professor JD Schramm has developed a set of principles for telling great stories in business presentations and talks, which he summarized in an October 2014 *Harvard Business Review* article, “A Refresher on Storytelling 101.” My version of five of his principles is below.

**Becoming Your Association’s Storyteller-in-Chief**

Scott Steen  
American Physiological Society  
ssteen@the-aps.org

**Parachute In.** You have seconds to capture your audience’s attention. Don’t waste them on thanking the sponsor. Don’t comment on the venue. Forget “Tell them what you’re going to tell them.” Captivate your audience from the very beginning by jumping right into a story.

**First & Last.** Pay particular attention to the first and last sentences of a story. People tend to remember the first things you say and your concluding thought. Make sure they are as powerful and memorable as possible. I don’t necessarily use the same words when I am telling a story, but I typically know what the first and last words will be.

**Goldilocks Principle.** Not too hot, not too cold, just right. Use too few details and you’ll prevent your audience from truly experiencing your story and lose emotional connection. Use too many and your story will become confusing and (worse) boring. Make your details count. Describe enough to help people put themselves in the action and carry the story forward. Get rid of the rest.

**Poetic Language.** Poetry uses carefully chosen and powerful words to communicate both information and emotion. It also uses language economically, conveying tremendous meaning with the fewest words possible. The best presentations and speeches do, too. Give yourself permission to use poetic language and perhaps include some poetry in your talk.

**The Sound of Silence.** Silence tends to make Americans nervous, but it can be an incredibly powerful tool when you are telling a story. It gives people time to “get the joke” when you say something funny. It intensifies the moment when the point is profound or poignant. Give yourself permission to use poetic language and, perhaps, poetry itself.

Questions? Contact me at ssteen@the-aps.org.