IN 2005, THE UNIVERSITY of Chicago Graduate School of Business (now known as the Booth School of Business) decided to do something unusual: offer feedback to the thousands of MBA applicants who had been denied admission. As one of six admissions officers in the full-time MBA program, I was on the hook to deliver the feedback, via fifteen-minute phone calls, to denied candidates.

I understood that top-tier business schools didn’t usually share “deny feedback,” and that departing from that trend was a way of offsetting the University of Chicago’s reputation for being more aloof than many of our peer programs. Still, I dreaded making the calls. I didn’t realize how much I would learn from the experience—or how it would set me on an entirely new professional course.

As I prepared to make my first feedback call, a scene from Seinfeld came to mind: George, upon hearing that yet another girlfriend was breaking up with him, exclaimed “You’re giving me the it’s-not-you-it’s-me routine?!” That’s what I expected from the candidates I called. In reality, most were receptive and gracious, and many expressed interest in using the feedback to apply the following year. I
dreaded the calls less with each one completed—except for those with a specific type of candidate.

The calls I was most reluctant to make were with applicants who fit this profile: They had a GMAT score of at least 730 (out of 800; or about the 97th percentile or better), a 3.5 GPA or better in some kind of engineering from a prestigious university, strong career experience at a well-known technology firm, and recommendations that sounded genuinely praiseful. The applicants also seemed to say the right things, overall, in their essays and interviews. “Why did we deny this person?” I asked myself, slightly panicked, before those calls.

Understanding our earlier rejection decisions meant understanding the broader context in which we had made them. Specifically, while we only had to read eight or ten applications per week during the slower summer months when we made the feedback calls, during peak admissions we were reading a hundred or even more applications weekly. Like all top schools, the University of Chicago’s MBA program had far more well-qualified applicants than available seats. So all the qualifications I mentioned in the previous paragraph—730 GMAT, high GPA, good work experience—didn’t stand out significantly in the broader pool.

But I empathized with the applicants, many of whom seemed to believe that if they merely reiterated their resumes, regurgitating basic facts about their lives and achievements, they would cross our bar. After all, don’t facts speak for themselves?

They don’t, I realized, as I reviewed all those files. They don’t at all. In a competitive environment, almost everyone has strong qualifications. Almost everyone has facts in their favor. But how valuable are facts alone? Think back to the most recent lecture or presentation you attended. How many facts do you remember from it? If you’re like most people, you can’t recall many, if any. Chances are good, however, that you remember stories, anecdotes, and examples from the event, even if you can’t think of their exact context. The average person today is inundated with facts and data, and we let most of this pass through our brains with minimal retention or reaction—unless something makes the information stand out in a meaningful way. That’s where story comes in.¹
But back in my office at the University of Chicago in the summer of 2005, I didn’t yet understand that fully. What I did understand, however, was that I could appease even the most frustrated denied applicants, including those from that dreaded subset, with one simple word: “fit.” As in “You are highly qualified, but you just didn’t demonstrate your fit with the program as well as other applicants did.”

Surprisingly, not a single one bothered to ask what exactly I meant by “fit.” Maybe it was because we only had fifteen minutes. But I decided to ask the question of myself: What does “fit” mean? How do you demonstrate it? And how do you ensure that you are demonstrating your fit in ways that resonate with decision-makers?

It took me a few more years of active searching to answer these questions to my own satisfaction. But in the process, I discovered three important insights that apply far beyond the domain of business-school admissions. These insights will help you demonstrate the value you, your products, services, organizations, or causes bring, or even help you launch a new career. Most importantly, these insights will help you articulate your authenticity and value to others with unprecedented effectiveness.

THREE POWERFUL INSIGHTS

Taken together, the three insights in this section will help you understand the power of story and begin to see how to use it to your advantage in multiple arenas.

INSIGHT 1:
A Story Is Worth More than Strong Qualifications Alone

Eventually, I left my admissions position to get my own MBA (across town from the University of Chicago, but that’s another story!). Going through the process and meeting my diverse classmates helped me understand something that seemed obvious in retrospect: the applicants who stand out from the crowd of fellow smart, accomplished professionals are the ones who tell the most compelling stories. More
specifically, a story that connects an applicant’s values, accomplishments, and future plans with the institution they are targeting will set that candidate apart in the right way. The admitted students at the University of Chicago stood out because they revealed elements of their authentic selves in a meaningful way.

I still remember the stories of several applicants we admitted to the University of Chicago. One student stood out by describing how his grandfather had bravely resisted the rule of Hitler in World War II Germany, taking great risks to protect those in danger. The applicant’s vivid descriptions, and how he linked his grandfather’s courage to his own values, ethics, and accomplishments, placed him in our “clear admit” group.

Another candidate told us how her large family ate dinner together every night, no matter how busy everyone was. The meals were meaningful to her not only because of the family time, but also because her parents routinely engaged their children in thoughtful discussion and debate. In her essays, she talked about how, during her campus visit, watching students and faculty discuss important business, social, and ethical issues made her feel as if she was back home, sitting at the dinner table with her family. The story went a very long way to establishing her fit with the school, and we were pleased to offer her admission.

With far fewer seats available in each class than the number of applicants, we admissions officers had to be sure that we offered admission only to applicants who truly demonstrated fit. Each of us may have had different words to describe “fit,” but we all knew it when we saw it.

But competitive admissions is far from the only arena in which storytelling is the best way to integrate your values, qualifications, and aspirations.

**INSIGHT 2:**
**We Are All in a Perpetual “Competitive Admissions” Game**

Have you gone through a year-end evaluation where you had to contribute, at least in part, to assessing your own performance? Have you
ever had to pitch your great idea to colleagues who weren’t sure of the value you could bring? Have you had to ask friends and neighbors to donate to your breast cancer walk and found yourself wondering why people have to be asked to give to breast cancer awareness in the first place—aren’t their mothers, sisters, aunts, and wives reason enough?

Hardly a day goes by when you aren’t trying to inspire others to join you in some effort. But we live in an increasingly commoditized world, where even the things you hold most dearly—your ideas, projects, and causes—are commodities in someone else’s eyes. The true luxury good is your audience’s attention, and everyone is clamoring for it.

At the heart of leadership lies persuasion. At the heart of persuasion lies storytelling. Whether you know it or not, you engage in both daily. Competitive admission is only one example where you have to stand out however you can. Whether you are competing for a great job, seeking funding for a start-up or nonprofit, building a professional practice, or selling goods, ideas, and services, you must stand out in a strategic, authentic way. You can even think of these efforts as “lifelong mini-admissions applications.” The parallels are striking: you have a lot of “competitors” in any such contest; your competitors may not even be people, but other companies, funding priorities, or endless perfect substitutions to what you’re offering; you’re also competing constantly for attention with other things that demand people’s attention, mostly their phone screens!

Here are several examples of mini-admissions applications from different domains.

- In 2010, an investment firm was vying to be one of the first Western players to manage assets for a mainland Chinese sovereign wealth fund. But its performance record ranked it only in the middle of eight finalists. How should this firm have approached its 15-minute final presentation in Beijing?
- In 2012, a numbers-driven executive was preparing her speech to accept a lifetime contribution award from a charity at its annual gala in Chicago. She was used to giving only dry financial presentations, not heartfelt speeches aimed at
moving and inspiring audiences. How should she have prepared?

- In 2014, the owner of a fund-management firm and major sponsor of an important industry conference was told that he would have only five minutes to discuss his company’s approach at the conference’s main luncheon in Palo Alto, California. In the past, he’d always had at least an hour for such presentations. How should he have made use of those precious minutes?

All of these are examples of people going through mini-admissions applications, facing off against numerous competitors for the hard-to-get attention of important decision-makers.

You may have guessed that these were all situations in which I had the opportunity to consult and coach. In each, I showed the executives how to use the power of story to stand out and succeed: the investment firm won the mandate; the executive awardee received a standing ovation at her gala speech; the fund administrator had a long line of potential clients waiting to talk to him after his presentation.

How can you harness the power of storytelling in your own mini-admissions applications?

**INSIGHT 3:**
**You Don’t Need to Be a Super Hero to Tell Great Stories**

Though not a screenwriter myself, I’ve benefited from the wisdom of story and screenwriting guru Robert McKee, whose former students have included more than sixty Academy Award winners. “Given the choice between trivial material brilliantly told versus profound material badly told,” McKee wrote in his acclaimed book, _Story_, “an audience will always choose the trivial told brilliantly.”

This insight resonated with me immediately, and since I read it several years ago I’ve shared it with as many clients as possible. Most people, including me, aren’t born master storytellers or destined to be world-renowned super heroes and never will be. But that doesn’t mean we can’t tell great stories. To convince yourself further, think about the mountains of social science research showing that making
even subtle changes in the way we communicate can create disproportionate impact when we attempt to persuade. For example, psychologist Robert Cialdini’s 35-year-long research on social influence demonstrates that “liking” is one of the six major levers of persuasion: We tend to like those whom we perceive as being like us, and we are more likely to say yes to them. How do we make people perceive us as being like them? By telling stories that accentuate our similarities in a strategic, authentic way.

In the following chapters, I will help you learn how to stand out in the same way I’ve helped countless others differentiate themselves: by combining the art of storytelling and the science of persuasion. With the right frameworks, tools, and practice, you can be the author of your future success.

Here’s an overview of each chapter:

**PART ONE: ANATOMY OF A STORY**

1. **Master the Principle Elements of Storytelling**
   
   Whether making a financial presentation or telling a personal story in front of a crowd, the anatomies of the communication are the same. How do you know if you are saying enough or telling so much that you’re boring people to tears? Master these fundamental elements and you are off to a great start. The length and form of stories vary a great deal. However, the structure, elements, characters, and anatomy don’t.

2. **The Five Basic Plots in Business Communication**
   
   There are millions of stories, as varied as storytellers’ individual experiences. The most universal plots in business, however, boil down to five. You may be practicing law or medicine, starting up a technology firm or social entrepreneurial movement, pioneering a sales channel or the next big fundraising campaign. Learn these five basic
plots in business communication; you can save time and tap into the universal human experience.

**PART TWO:**

**BRINGING STORIES TO LIFE**

3. **Look Who’s Listening**
This chapter shows you how to become persuasive when you tell your story through the audience’s point of view—exercising an “out-of-body” technique—that showcases the storyteller’s own intelligence and empathy.

4. **Telling Stories with Data**
Everyone is talking about Big Data and good story—separately. This chapter combines these two widely popular and essential ideas and shows you how to become an expert in both areas—seamlessly, multiplying the impact exponentially.

5. **Making the Complex Clear**
One of the biggest challenges of storytelling is turning very complex material into engaging narratives. Examples from the finance industry illustrate the techniques in this chapter that can simplify the most bewildering complexity.

6. **Combing the Power of Story and Simple Visuals**
Can you draw a line and a dot? If you say “yes,” then you can tell your story much more effectively with a few simple visual elements. A picture is worth a thousand words, they say, and this chapter proves it. It will also show you multiple examples and the process of integrating storytelling and buttressing the message of the stories with simple visuals.
7. Collecting Stories from Everywhere

A Jesuit priest once said “The most sacred gift we have is our story. The second most sacred gift we have is creating a safe space for others to tell their stories.” This chapter shows you how to be aggressive listeners and ask questions that will encourage your audience to share their stories. Meanings emerge and deep connections are built when we are intentional about creating intersecting stories.

PART THREE:
STORIES IN ACTION

8. Using Your Own Story to Build Credibility and Connection

When placed on the spot to say something nice about ourselves, we tend to default to vague life histories or regurgitation of our resumes. Audiences hate this! Not only is this approach redundant and offers no value (anyone can pull your information online), but it’s sleep-inducing and uninspiring. This chapter teaches you how to combine the science of social influence and the art of storytelling to set an inspiring, engaging tone for every conversation and presentation.

9. Successful Networking Starts with a Good Story Hook

Many people don’t get very excited by the prospect of attending a networking event. The very word “networking” conjures up images of forced smiles, instantly forgotten names, and awkward delivery of the dreaded elevator pitch. Using storytelling elements, this chapter encourages you to ditch the one-way monologue (the elevator pitch) for a high-impact pre-crafted dialogue called the elevator conversation.
10. Selling the Social Impact of Nonprofit Organizations with Story

In 2015, Americans gave $373 billion to charities. The upward trending charitable giving continues even through recession years. The largest portion came from individuals. Yet nonprofit leaders, their board members, and committed volunteers still struggle to make a case for their causes. Imagine how much more donors will give if (and when) they can make a strong case! This chapter will show you how to turn the often unwieldy and random facts and anecdotes into coherent and donor-centric stories.

11. Case Study: The Healthcare Industry

Healthcare is a highly specialized industry, in which explanations are often filled with incomprehensible jargon. Meet five healthcare executives who, through the use of story, are able to motivate and inspire their employees and reassure patients through clear and empathetic explanations.

I’ve written this book specifically with you in mind. You, the people in the ranks of leadership in corporate, academic, and nonprofit organizations, have been promoted (perhaps again!) to lead. You might actually be oh-so-close to joining the C-suite or top management team. You have gotten to where you are through ambition, analytical prowess, and hard work. You have been schooled in the “just the facts, ma’am” approach and are more comfortable working with Microsoft Excel’s ribbon than tying a ribbon to a birthday gift.

But wait! You may very well be at the cusp of what the well-known Peter Principle describes as “reaching the point of your incompetence.” The ground has shifted. Your junior team members are now handling the quantitative and analytical work. You now are in charge of communicating, guiding, coaching, explaining, defending, influencing, and persuading. Your career now hinges upon your ability to tell stories—about yourself, your team, and your organization—in the
most compelling way to a wide range of audiences: teammates, superiors, other colleagues, customers, prospects, partners, investors, regulators, and the general public. Note that using story more effectively will also deepen your relationship with people outside of work, from family to friends.

As I mentioned earlier, you don’t need to be a super hero to tell great stories. All you need are tools, frameworks, examples, and practice. In the following chapters, you will find everything you need to shine when you find yourself in the spotlight. I believe that the classical approach to storytelling can elevate everyday business communication from autopilot exchanges to authentic, persuasive, and action-prone conversations. I invite you to discover the transformational power of this time-honored approach with me!

YOU’RE ON!
“Tell me about yourself.”

That simple request comes up frequently in business environments, whether you’re interviewing for a job, speaking as part of an expert panel, or just getting to know a colleague or potential client. As innocuous as it sounds, the question strikes fear in the heart of many, as they’re unsure of what to say or how it will be perceived.

But it doesn’t need to be so scary.

As an introduction to this chapter, let me give you one example of how I approach this question, by telling the story of my early experience as an MBA student at Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of Management. In the first weeks of the program, I noticed many classmates smiling and waving at me in the hallways; “Hi, Esther!”

The problem was that I had no idea who they were—not their names, not even their faces! I’m not a drinker and I don’t have prosopagnosia (the condition where you can’t recognize faces), so I figured I’d never met them. Then how did they know me?

A few conversations with my greeters cleared things up: the majority were the people who sat behind me in class (I admit it: I sat in the first row!), and they knew me because I asked a lot of questions.
“Thanks so much for asking that question about calculating net present value the other day,” one classmate said. The more people who thanked me for my questions, the more I understood that a lot of people didn’t understand the lectures.

Ironically, to that point, I’d felt very alone, as if I was the only one drowning in a sea of finance, accounting, and marketing terms—an imposter among people who deserved to be there. At one point, I thought I must be an “admission mistake!”

I was so glad I didn’t continue to doubt myself! It turned out so many of my classmates felt just like I did, even though most of them chose not to ask questions. It takes just one person to say, “I don’t get it. Could you explain again?” And I was, and still am, that person.

This chapter is about how to respond to “Tell me about yourself” with a story that will help you connect with your audience, so that the next time someone says “Tell me about yourself,” you can reply first with “I’m glad you asked!”

THE INEVITABLE QUESTION AND THE LIKABILITY METER

In business settings, hearing “Tell me about yourself” is inevitable, and your answer to it matters. Offering a compelling answer will set the right tone with your audience, establish trust and credibility, and increase your persuasiveness.

This is where likability comes in. Psychologist Robert Cialdini’s research on social influence shows that not only do we tend to like those whom we perceive as being like us, but we’re also more likely to form a stronger connection with them and find their ideas persuasive. Because of this, the “Tell me about yourself” question is actually a great opportunity for you to present ways that you might be like the person asking the question. (My Kellogg story often works in this way, as many people want to ask questions but don’t, and appreciate those who do ask questions [within reason!]). I’m not saying you’ll always hit common ground, but a strategically crafted answer is more likely to resonate than not.
According to research by Lauren Rivera, an associate professor at the Kellogg School, interviewers give top rankings to applicants who remind them of themselves. So when the interviewer says “Tell me about yourself,” what they really mean is “Tell me something about yourself that reminds me of me.” And if you can do that, you’ll be moving the likability needle closer to “I really like this candidate!”

“Reminding me of me” encompasses a wide range of possibilities. For example, aspects of your personality or background, or even your own business-related struggles could remind the interviewer of herself. Say you know from their bio that your interviewer has a colorful, non-linear career history, for instance; you could forge a stronger connection by referring to your own professional twists and turns, presuming you have these and that they still represent a logical path to the job you’re interviewing for. Similarly, Rivera talks about how a candidate for an elite law firm formed a deeper bond with her interviewer when she became aware that the interviewer was a single mother and shared her own experience—and gratitude—as a child of a single mother. And it’s not only the shared experience but also the shared story that creates the bond. When we tell stories in a way that aligns them with narratives familiar to or experienced by the listener, we automatically move higher on the likability scale. The five business-story plots outlined in chapter 2 are a great way to use well-known narrative frameworks as the vehicles for your story, increasing understanding and likability.

Of course likability will serve you well far beyond job interviews. The same principle applies to being chosen as, say, an investment manager, or winning a bid as the one new vendor. In such scenarios, again, “Tell me about yourself” is your chance to tell a story that highlights shared experiences and stories. And whether you’re looking for a new job, fundraising for a new business, or meeting a new prospective client, telling a compelling story when asked about yourself will help you make a meaningful human connection.
HOW CAN MY STORY MAKE ME SIMILAR TO MY AUDIENCE?

To increase the odds that someone will find you similar to him- or herself, naturally it helps to find out all you can about that person before you meet. Unfortunately, even with information so readily available online, that’s not always possible—especially in situations where you won’t even know the name of the person with whom you’ll be speaking ahead of time.

So how do you choose a story that you know the person will be able to relate to when there’s no way to learn anything about that person in advance? First, think about what’s universal—that is, things that provoke a “Me too!” response. At the same time, bear in mind that your potential employers, clients, or funders are not interested in merely seeing a mirror image of themselves. So, for example, it’s not about finding out, for instance, that the person loves spelunking and bringing up that you love spelunking. That might just strike them as a bit stalker-ish. Instead, tell a story about yourself that’s universal enough to make them think about how it harmonizes with their own story. For example, if the job involves travel, you might share a story of a recent cross-cultural experience—such as working abroad—and what you learned from it, as a way of finding a theme of mutual interest.

Use any information you can about the person you’re talking to—interests they mention, pictures in their office, cultural background, taste in clothing—to determine the best story to deploy. For example, if your interviewer has lots of pictures of sports (or cats), try to tell a sports-related (or pet-related) story. Sometimes the simplest approaches are the most powerful.

For me, raising my hand in classes eventually led me to realize that I was not alone. I had thought my experiences were unique (I’m the only one who feels out of my depth and doesn’t understand all the complex concepts in our lectures), and I felt isolated and inferior because of that imagined uniqueness. But the thing is, once we voice the experiences we imagine are ours alone, we typically find that our stories are part of a shared thread of human experience—a thread that, once identified, can bond us much more closely to others.
THINK IN THREE ACTS

Now let’s think a bit more about how exactly to construct your personal story, once you’ve chosen a specific topic that you think will resonate with your audience. Because one of the great, essential shared-experience narratives involves overcoming adversity or solving a problem, we’ll use this story type as our example. Most of us can identify with overcoming some form of adversity to get where we are, and so we love to hear how others have done the same.

To make your story compelling, it’s vital to demonstrate that you have surmounted significant hurdles or solved tricky problems on the road to success.

A story with no obstacle isn’t much of a story: “I had a problem and I figured it out easily. The end.” Boring!

Once you’ve selected a story that involves significant obstacles or hurdles you had to clear, think about the best way to construct the story to resonate most with your audience. The good news is that you don’t have to figure out a basic story structure. Remember the Three-Act Formula in chapter 1? You can use this very same structure for your story, taking advantage of all the thinking that has already gone into it. Remember, also, another lesson from chapter 1: the importance of an effective hook. In your “Tell Me About Yourself” story, that well-crafted hook turns the audience members into active listeners because they want to hear the story and figure out its message. (See chapter 1 for more on using conflict, contrast, and contradiction to hook your listeners.) A good Act I hook will make your audience anxious to find out what happens in Act II—the middle section and, often, the most complicated part of the journey.

While all three acts are critical, Act III has a lot of work to do. It’s your chance to lead your listener to your final point, as related to the specific context you’re in. That means you should wrap up your story with: “So that’s why I am here. And this is why we’re having this conversation.” For example, “So that’s why I think investing in my venture would be a great opportunity for you” (after you’ve explained in detail all the obstacles you’ve overcome to build your venture, and why it’s something your audience cares about). In short, your listener
needs to understand why you are telling this story. Act III is not just a resolution of your story—it puts your story in context and illustrates for your listeners the value that you bring to their situation.

As you construct your story, remember that “less is more,” and thus more is often less. Aggressively exclude irrelevant information. How will you know what’s irrelevant? You start by finding the narrative theme that weaves throughout your three acts. Without a theme, your story will have no backbone. But once you discover that theme, you can be disciplined in weeding out information that doesn’t relate to it. In my Kellogg story, for example, the theme was having the courage to admit I don’t understand something, and ask for help so everyone benefits.

Now let’s consider a few more specific examples of story-based responses to “Tell Me About Yourself”—stories that exemplify the effective use of the three-act structure.

After each of the “Tell Me About Yourself” stories below, I’ll offer a critique to show what works well and what could be strengthened.

**WAS IT REALLY THAT SIMPLE?**

This story was written by Andy Hick, an asset-management veteran based in Chicago. Andy and I had the opportunity to work on his response to “Tell Me About Yourself” when he was in job transition and preparing for interviews. After crafting a solid “Tell Me About Yourself” story, he was able to transition to becoming a managing director at another firm.

I was raised in Oak Park, Illinois, and as a high school kid I had a lawn-service business and did odd jobs around our neighborhood. One of my customers was an executive at Kidder Peabody, a Wall Street brokerage firm. He was also the president of the Chicago area Yale University Alumni Club. It was well known that each year, he would offer a deserving Yale stu-
dent a job at the Chicago Board Options Exchange (CBOE). I wanted that job!

So, a few months before graduating from high school, I called him and asked for the job—despite the fact that I was not a Yale student but was going to the University of Illinois. I got the job and had similar jobs with Kidder Peabody all throughout college—that was my entrée to trading.

My senior year at Illinois, I was interviewing for all types of jobs, but I was really interested in one company: O’Connor & Associates. I had come to know about O’Connor from my summers on the CBOE and Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT), where they were viewed as the “best of the best.” O’Connor & Associates was a very successful proprietary option trading firm and was among the first to utilize the Black-Scholes option-pricing model to value options.

I was able to trade interview slots with a close friend who had no interest in trading. I went through an intensive interviewing process and received an offer to join the firm. I was thrilled. I accepted the offer and so began my trading career.

I spent thirteen years at O’Connor & Associates and rose from a “runner” on the floor of the CBOE to a managing director running a multi-billion-dollar over-the-counter equity derivatives trading book.

As I consider my current situation, I think back to those days, and what sticks with me most is the importance of recognizing an opportunity and pursuing it. People generally want to help; but if you fail to ask, the opportunity is not going to come knocking at your door.

Critique of Example 1:

Act I: The opening paragraph is brilliant! This storyteller sets the scene in simple but effective ways, all in eighty-one words!

Act II: In his second paragraph, the storyteller makes it sound like all he did was ask the gentleman for the job and he got it.
My hunch—and maybe yours too—is that the actual process wasn’t so simple. Maybe it felt simple now with the benefit of hindsight. But your audience doesn’t yet have that benefit. So, bring back the fog. Giving the audience even a slight glimpse of what he actually did would indicate to the listener what obstacles he overcame, giving the audience a deeper appreciation of Andy’s character.

**Act III:** The last paragraph is beautifully done. I can’t think of a better way to end. My only recommendation to this storyteller is that he should be sure to link back to *why* he is telling this story—“so that’s why I’m here and why I’m well-suited for . . .”—providing closure and moving toward the heart of what he wants to accomplish in the meeting.

Andy could also consider choosing his details differently, depending on his audience. For his target audience when we crafted this story, for instance, mentioning “the Black-Scholes option-pricing model” worked well to establish the speaker’s authority. If he were to speak to an audience of laypeople, or a cross-departmental team, he might use other details to establish his authority. It is important to remember that the story is ultimately about your audience, not about you.

**WHEN THERE ISN’T AN ACT III**

This example is a story told by Stephen J. Dubner, bestselling author of many books, including *Freakonomics*, and host of the award-winning podcast *Freakonomics Radio*. Dubner shared this family-related story as an introduction to a live show he hosted in St. Paul, Minnesota, with his co-author, University of Chicago professor Steven D. Levitt.

I grew up in kind of a strange family in upstate New York . . . [on a] little farm outside of Schenectady, New York. We were poor. My dad was a newspaper man. We had this little farm with
chickens and a large garden. We were poor, but everybody was poor, so it wasn’t something you thought about.

Money, even though it was scarce, was not our prime scarcity. Our primary scarcity . . . in a big family, especially me because I was at the bottom of the family [the youngest of eight children], is time alone with a parent. For me, particularly time alone with my father was extremely rare.

I remember one time . . . [my dad] took me into town to a place called Gibby’s Diner. . . . [W]e walk in and we sit down at the counter, and I don’t remember what I ate, but I remember well what my dad had. He had a cup of coffee with a scoop of ice cream in it. I didn’t really think about it as a kid, but now I think that’s very clever. You got the coffee; you got the dairy, sweetener, and vanilla all in one pot. My dad was a Starbucks imaginer before Starbucks existed.

So, we’re at this counter and we’re looking at this mirror. You know the ones diners have. So you can see the whole diner in back of us. He says, “I want to teach you something called the ‘power of observation.’ It’s this game I have.

“What I want you to do is to spend the next five minutes or so just looking around and tak[ing] it all in. I want you to look and listen and smell and just take it all in.” I have no idea where my dad is going with this, but it’s this wonderful, precious thing and I’m going to do anything he tells me to do. So I do it.

Then after a few minutes he says, “Okay. I want you to close your eyes now.” So I close my eyes, and he says, “Okay, the waitress, Ann: what color apron is Ann wearing?” And I say, “White?” And he says, “Aw, come on, you’re just guessing.” So I say, “White!” And he says, “You’re right.

“Since we started this,” he continues, “how many cars have pulled into the parking lot? The guy over there, what color shirt is he wearing?” On and on and on. And I am terrible. I have no powers of observation whatsoever. And we do this for a while and it is just grueling and terrible.

So he says, “Open your eyes and we’ll start it again.” And we do it again and I’m still terrible. We do it over and over and over
again. After about twenty minutes, it turned out that I had developed some powers of observation. I learned on that day that memory, or at least observation, is a muscle. You can build it and you can turn it into something. What I do have, by now, is not a talent. But after doing it for so long, [I have] the ability to look around the world and try to see what’s happening and try to explain it and write it down. That’s all I have, and that’s what I do. And the good thing is I love to do it.

Critique of Example 2:

The Likability Meter: Spending quality one-on-one time with parents probably makes it into most adults’ top ten favorite childhood memories. That makes Dubner’s story here extremely relatable. He also brings us into the intimate conversation he had with his father, which helped him learn the power of observation.

Speaking Context: The context is paramount. Since Dubner is best known for his co-authored books *Freakonomics* and *Super Freakonomics*, thrilling explorations into the “hidden sides of everything” based on economic research, his audience wants to know “How did he come to be so good at what he does?” And this story explains a great deal.

Act I: Dubner opens the scene with the hook of not having much alone time with his parents. He starts with scarcity, an obstacle to be overcome.

Act II: He takes us on this journey of his learning the power of observation, which his father shared with him.

Act III: And then in Act III . . . well, there is no Act III here, other than the general idea that Dubner has benefited greatly from using the power of observation. But in this context, the absence of Act III is okay because the audience deliberately came to see Dubner, as they were already fans. For that reason, reiterating why he and his audience are together in this context
isn’t necessary. The audience already knows they’re there because Dubner has “the ability to look around the world and try to see what’s happening and try to explain it...” And since the audience knows why they’re attending, he doesn’t need to state it explicitly.

In a different context though, one in which Dubner’s work was unfamiliar, he might need a brief Act III to make the “So, that’s why I’m here and this is why we are having this conversation” connection clearer.

THE BRIDGE FROM PERSONAL TO PERSUASIVE

Kelly Standing is an author, motivational speaker, and speechwriter, among other things. Kelly and I co-chaired the Speaking Society at the University Club of Chicago, where we collaborated on creating opportunities for anyone who wanted to hone their speaking skills, whether in a formal or informal setting. Although as an entrepreneur she doesn’t need to interview for jobs, she is often asked by prospective clients to say something about herself. Here is how she responds.

Life has knocked me around . . . a LOT . . . but I’m one of the happiest, most resilient people you’ll ever meet. The bumps and bruises started early. When I was six years old, the neighborhood bully used my own jump rope to hang me from a tree by my neck! He left me there to die . . . just dangling, with my little red Keds barely off the ground.

Fortunately, my dad came along and saved me just in time.

I’m sure, at the time, all the typical questions crossed my dad’s mind... “Who DID this??!” ... “Where IS he?” ... “Where’s my baseball bat?!” ... “How quickly can I clobber the kid and hide the evidence?”

But my dad, the Eagle Scout, asked an even better question . . .
a question that would SAVE the day instead of his beating up the bully and making matters worse. My dad asked himself, “How will my daughter remember this?” . . . He forced himself to focus on what REALLY mattered to him in that moment: me. “Will Kelly see herself as a victim, with a bully hiding behind every tree, waiting to string her up by her neck . . . or will she see herself as strong, resilient, able to handle anything that comes her way?”

That series of questions changed EVERYthing. On that day, my dad convinced me I was the “luckiest little girl on our block.” He convinced me that “Your scars make you MORE beautiful, not less so. Your scars tell your story.” And over time, in multiple situations, he asked me the same questions he had asked himself that day—“Would I see myself as a victim or a strong, resilient person? What could I learn from challenging or painful events?”—helping me understand that posing the right queries at the right time can literally change people's lives.

From that one episode I learned to ask good questions. Later, I went on to the University of Missouri School of Journalism, where they taught me even more about asking good questions. That’s what I do for my clients today . . . I bring a journalist’s curiosity and an Eagle Scout’s ingenuity to their business problems. I help them tell new stories about themselves. I help them see possibilities where they might see only pain. I help them ask better questions, just like my father did when he found me strung up in the tree that day.

Critique of Example 3:

The Hook: Every parent’s worst nightmare is their child being put in harm’s way. Here, Kelly brings us directly into a truly horrible incident that happened to her. Yet it was the noble, calm, and superior judgment of her father—and his questions—that turned the plot around. Kelly showed her audience how this frightful event has changed her for the better under her father’s guidance.
"That’s why I am here and why we are having this conversation": Most importantly, Kelly makes clear at the end of her story how this experience can ultimately benefit her clients. The bridge from a personal event to the value that this storyteller would bring her audience—by asking the right questions—is what makes this story so brilliant and memorable. Thus, the audience will clearly see the link between Act I and Act III.

THE LOWEST NUMBER ISN’T NECESSARILY THE BEST

Near-death at a bully’s hands isn’t the only way to make your story compelling. Here, a senior energy industry executive named Danny Carlisle and I had a chance to tinker with how he would respond to “Tell Me About Yourself” if he were to meet a new colleague.

I am the third of three boys, and I’m the only one in my family to have completed higher education. My eldest brother didn’t apply, and my middle brother dropped out. My parents were really keen that I make it all the way. I was, in their eyes, their last chance. My dad would regularly say, “You need to study and succeed, so you don’t end up doing blue-collar work like me.”

This made me both driven and competitive. I wanted to be top of the class. I wanted to win, in exam results and then later, in my career. When I took a role in procurement, I got to run my first global bid, which pitted suppliers against each other. It was a buyer’s market and I was able to drive the prices right down. But during the negotiation, my boss gave me some advice. The lowest number isn’t necessarily the best for the long term. In any deal, both parties need to feel they won something for it to be sustainable.
This lesson has stayed with me ever since and has become part of my DNA. We negotiate every day in both our personal and professional lives. I want to find the win-win in the situation. By stepping into the other person’s shoes, I look to see what success might look like through their eyes. This makes relationships sustainable. Even with my brothers!

Critique of Example 4:

The Hook: In Danny’s story we, the listeners, can hear our own. He begins with his birth order and his two older brothers, along with his wish to make his father proud. We immediately think of our own childhood, our siblings (or lack thereof), and how our family life affected us. He effectively and seamlessly sets the stage for why he became competitive and hints at how it isn’t necessarily going to be a good thing.

What He Overcame: Although there was no imminent actual danger in Danny’s story, we can relate to him because we all owe our start—good or bad—to our family. But he didn’t stop there. In his journey of how he eventually course-corrects his competitive attitude, his audience can see a genuine change in his outlook and sense the maturing of a business executive. This ties in well with Danny’s introduction because he receives advice from two father figures: his actual father and, later, his manager. If conflict is the nerve center of story, change is the soul of it. Without change, a story feels lifeless and aimless.

That’s Why We’re Here: We can all appreciate a colleague, a manager, a client, a supplier, a teammate, or a friend who looks for the win-win. How can anyone not look forward to working with Danny?
NOW IT’S YOUR TURN!

It’s daunting to stare at a blank screen or sheet of paper in hopes of coming up with a story, so the outline below breaks up what can seem like an overwhelmingly large task into much more manageable chunks. Don’t handcuff yourself to the order of Act I, then II, then III. Just fill in whatever parts come to you first. The wonderful thing about mining your story is that when you start with one idea or even just an image, related ideas or memories often follow easily. So the most important thing is to get started, whether you feel inspired or not.

Truth be told, the ending—the take-away—is most important. This is the part where you’d ask yourself this question: “If my audience remembers nothing else about my story, what would I hope he or she takes away?” If you already know what that takeaway is, start with the end. Knowing the takeaway will be hugely helpful when it’s time to trim story details, a task most people, even experienced storytellers, find challenging.

Remember: Crafting your story is a process, not a destination. So follow the process that works for you, write a draft, test it with your trusted friends and colleagues to act as your mock audience. Ask them to put themselves in the shoes of your actual audience. Ask for feedback and then refine. Repeat the process until you run out of ideas to improve your story, or out of time, or both.

STORYTELLING OUTLINE: TELL ME ABOUT YOURSELF

Act I: Setting the Scene. Begin with a shared experience and end with a hook.

- For an interview, when it’s likely that you will not be told all the interviewers’ names or backgrounds in advance, you may want to favor a positive shared experience over a negative one, while still making it clear that there was an obstacle to overcome.
When you’re pitching an idea, select your shared experience based on a character trait you think will highlight your ability to bring the idea to fruition.

When you’re fundraising, you may want to focus on a shared experience that can easily be broadened to underscore the importance of giving to your cause, company, or project.

When you’re meeting a potential client, choose a story that can move from personal to persuasive (like motivational speaker and writer Kelly Standing’s story), illustrating the value you would bring to this client.

End this act with a hook that has the central challenge embedded in it—like Dubner does when he mentions time with his parents being scarce.

**Act II:** Describe the journey through which you overcame the main challenge.

When you’re meeting a potential client, choose a story that can move from personal to persuasive (like motivational speaker and writer Kelly Standing’s story), illustrating the value you would bring to this client. What went through your mind? How did the challenge make you feel? Danny Carlisle tells us that the challenge of having his parents see him as their last chance for one of their children to complete college “made me both driven and competitive.”

Shaping this section for each audience will have to do with what you want to persuade them of at the end. For instance, Danny wants to show that he is driven, but he also wants to show us that he is fair. So he sets up the initial character-quality drive, and then he shows how he learned to temper it to create win-wins.

What action did you take? Danny, for instance, applied himself, aimed to be the top of the class, and then started a career that would allow him to use his drive and sense of competition.
- Was there anyone who helped you along or hindered you? How did you interact with them? Let’s look at Danny again. His boss gives him good advice at just the right time!
- Your action taken and your choice of mentioning people who helped you should flow naturally from the shared experience you have chosen, and should also tie back to what you want to persuade your audience to do or think.

**Act III: Deliver the resolution and takeaway: why your audience should care.**

- What does this journey mean to you and your audience? Danny realized that it’s not about the “win” but the “win-win.” What this means for the audience is that he negotiates fairly, and this makes him a good leader.
- For an interview, you can now highlight how this makes you a good fit for the position.
- When you’re pitching an idea, you can now show how this story illustrates your ability to deliver on the idea you’re there to present.
- When you’re fundraising, here’s where you broaden your story and apply it to the importance of supporting your venture.
- When you’re seeking new clients, this section is your chance to talk about the value you bring them (take another look at how skillfully Kelly Standing does this in the earlier example).
- What are the main takeaways for your audiences? Danny’s takeaway is subtle: he’s shared a life lesson that influences what he is like to work with. He wants his audience—his new colleagues—to know that he will work for the “win-win.” What do you want your audience to know? What do you want to leave them thinking about?
TEST YOUR STORY

Once you have crafted your story, give it a test drive before you take it out on the road. Tell your story to a friend or colleague and ask them the following questions:

- **What info do you recall from my story?** This question is important, as most of us are inundated with information daily. It’s tempting to include as much data in our response as possible. But then, what good will it do if your audience doesn’t remember what you just shared with them? On the other hand, people sometimes remember the most random information. So there’s no way to find out except going to the sources directly and finding out what has stuck with them, and what hasn’t. Once you’ve collected the feedback, you’re much better informed and positioned to refine your stories so people remember the parts you want them to remember.

- **How does my story make you feel?** Remember Maya Angelou’s advice, “people will never forget how you make them feel.” How has your story made your audience feel? The emotion evoked will probably have a much longer-lasting impact on your audience than anything you’ve actually said. Does your test audience member feel inspired? Maybe your story reminded her of an experience of her own? Does your friend or colleague feel confused after your test run? Maybe he has already started glancing at his watch and wondering when the conversation with you will be over. Or, does your colleague feel curious? Perhaps he can’t wait to follow up with questions that your story has inspired. In fact, encouraging your audience to ask questions is an ideal place to start the post-story conversation, whether in the context of a formal job interview or casual networking. You can ask for this directly, as noted in the next bullet.

- **After listening to my story, what questions do you have for me?** This is the target at which we should all aim: inspiring the right questions in our audience. Maybe the first or second
draft of your story hasn’t inspired many questions. But shaping it to the point where your audience begins to have questions is a sure sign that you’re on the right track. Once you get your audience to wonder more about who you are, it’s time to gauge whether the types of questions you prompted lead to the type of topics that you hope to discuss after the initial exchange. For instance, after hearing Kelly’s story, potential clients might want to know, “What are some examples of times you brought a journalist’s curiosity and an Eagle Scout’s ingenuity to a business problem?” Or “This is a current problem we’re looking for someone to solve—can you tell us how you might do so?”

The stories shared in the examples section above lead the proverbial horse—the audience, in this case—to water, but they don’t force the horse to drink. They don’t lay out five points telling the listeners why they should contract with them, hire them, or invest in their idea. Instead, the tellers have told their story in order to inform and influence, with a clear underlying idea of what they want the audience to take away from their stories.

And even though stories are not the same as arguments, you are still telling your story in order to persuade. So, based on your colleagues’ feedback, refine your story until it communicates the exact message you want to convey, as indicated by their reactions to the story and questions related to it.

When someone has taken an interest in you and asks you the question “Tell Me About Yourself,” you now have all the tools you need to create an enticing and connecting story. What happens, however, before someone is genuinely interested in you and asks you to say more about yourself? Though “tell-me-about-yourself” may not be your favorite question, “what-do-you-do” can be even more challenging. Yet, at networking events most people should have something smart about that. Unfortunately, most don’t. The next chapter, which will tell us what to do with “What Do You Do?” will show you how.