

TOASTMASTER®

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THE GLORY OF THE STORY

Lessons from
storytellers

**The Better
You Write It,
the Better
You Say It**

**A Curmudgeon's
History of the
Academy Awards**



THE GILDORRY OF THE STORY

How storytellers and Toastmasters can learn from each other.

Toastmasters and storytellers have much in common. Each group entertains, informs and inspires listeners, and receives applause in return. In fact, many Toastmasters clubs are dedicated to the art of storytelling, and Toastmasters conferences and conventions often offer sessions dedicated to this topic. Conversely, many professional storytellers belong to Toastmasters clubs and use club meetings to polish their craft and develop new material.

As an active member of both communities, I've come to believe each group has valuable lessons to teach the other.

Five things Toastmasters can learn from storytellers:

1 Vocal Variety – Stories often feature characters, each with a unique voice. Tellers develop the ability to make different characters distinct by using vocal variety, inflections and nuances, as well as pitch, volume and accents. *In your next speech, instead of describing dialogue, actually deliver it using different voices for each participant.*

2 Stage Presence – Many Toastmasters find themselves tethered to a lectern, planted in front of a microphone or glued behind a table. They rarely make full use of the stage or podium. Storytellers take advantage

of their space, moving upstage, downstage, to the left or right – to say nothing of kneeling, teetering and more. *Expand your speaking platform. Own the stage area and use it to further your presentation. Inhabit your environment.*

3 The Power of the Pause – Storytellers understand that the pause is a valuable mechanism for building drama, adding suspense and imbuing key words and sentences with added meaning. Pauses signify to audiences that something profound, important or special has been – or is about to be – said.

Professional speaker and storyteller Lou Heckler is known as a master of the pause. He expressed its poignancy well: “The main reason I love to use pauses is that they turn the monologue of the speech into a dialogue with the audience.” He says a pause draws the audience in. “While the audience is not really



such as metaphors and strong adjectives, to convey color and detail. So should Toastmasters. Sometimes Toastmasters give the facts and little else. Storytellers excel at all the particulars that build dramatic effect: the sights, smells and sounds of scenes; the nuances and subtleties of situations; the specifics of settings. Each adds to the power of a piece. *Use imagery evocatively to enrich your speech, Table Topic or opening and closing thought.*

5 Setting the Stage – Every story is different. Like Toastmasters, storytellers “paint” through body language, gestures, facial expressions and vocal variety. While Toastmasters are often given guidelines and manuals to help them structure their speeches, it’s important not to be too rote in using speaking techniques or too rigid in following strategies and suggestions. Each time a storyteller takes the stage or begins a story, he or she has a blank canvas on which to paint.

“Since we are not in a theater that provides lights, sets and music, setting the stage is 100 percent up to us,” says veteran storyteller Judith Black of Marblehead, Massachusetts. “We must create the environment we want to share our work in.” Black, a Circle of Excellence inductee of the National Story-

speaking, the pause allows them time to consider what’s going on in the story and makes them guess what comes next. Right or wrong, they’ve had a feeling of being on stage with you and it really links them to the rest of the presentation.”

You can do this, too. *Review your speech script or outline and look for key spots to introduce pauses for heightened effect.*

4 Imagery – Storytellers paint vivid verbal images of scenes and settings. They use literary techniques,

telling Network, says the most important aspect of your performance is engaging the audience: “Rather than hard-and-fast rules whose rigidity could cause a caustic response from hosts or participants, it works best to ask [yourself] a question: What will best help participants become completely invested in the work? Your answer determines the setting you try to create.”

Toastmasters can begin each presentation by setting the stage appropriately – through posture, voice and gestures, as well as employing elements such as surprise, shock, mystery or suspense.

Five things storytellers can learn from Toastmasters:

1 Speaking “In the Moment” – Toastmasters regularly participate in Table Topics, where we are asked to speak “off the cuff” for one to two minutes on a random topic, without any warning or preparation time. As a result, we become adept at thinking, listening and speaking on our feet and reacting to whatever comes our way. *This skill can help storytellers with their pre-, post- and between-story interactions with audiences, as well as when the unexpected occurs: A cell phone rings or, say, a train passes nearby and toots its horn.*

2 The Value of the Introduction – As Toastmasters, we pride ourselves on mastering the art of the introduction. We delight in introducing each other in ways that draw in audiences, predispose them to listen, build credibility in the presenter and foreshadow the presentation to come. *Audiences are naturally curious about tellers, too. Your introduction can help audiences get to know, appreciate and admire you (or the teller you’re introducing), and deepen their connection to you and your stories.*

3 Developing One’s Internal Time Clock – Toastmasters time all aspects of their meetings, with special attention to speeches. Whether we give a six-minute speech, a two-minute evaluation or a one-minute Table Topics response, the result is an excellent ability to measure presentation time. Toastmasters contests are won (or lost) in part through adherence to prescribed time limits.

Professional speaker Patricia Fripp, whose career began in Toastmasters, offers this advice for sticking to time limits: “Use a big kitchen clock to prepare, always prepare your piece to be shorter than the limit and always prepare in advance.”

Fripp is a meeting planner’s best friend. When a conference or convention is running late, she will generously allow the planner to choose whether to receive the full Fripp program they booked or to cut a piece of her program to get the event back on schedule. That shows mastery of her material, to say nothing of great customer service. It derives from her ability to speak within prescribed time limits – a skill honed in Toastmasters.

Storytellers, too, can develop a feel for how to tell a two-minute tale, a seven-minute story or something in between.

4 Live Audiences – Toastmasters clubs provide members with a ready-made audience. Tellers can benefit from an audience of poised listeners who laugh, sigh and cry in response to what they hear. How wonderful for tellers! Oh, did I mention Toastmasters’ proclivity for clapping? Tellers can only practice so much in isolation.

Storyteller and Toastmaster Penny Post, DTM, explains it well: “One of the hardest things for storytellers to invent for themselves is how an audience will react to a presentation. Club after club of Toastmasters will welcome a guest speaker and be riveted by the emotional content a story provides. The attention alone is inspiring!”

Tellers can use audiences to refine their material, fine-tune their timing and gauge comprehension, appreciation and reaction.

5 Immediate Feedback – Toastmasters evaluate all presentations. We are skilled at acknowledging strengths and recommending areas for improvement. Our blend of motivation and specific recommendations provides tellers with immediate feedback on what is perceived to be effective and where improvement can occur. Post says the valuable feedback storytellers get from Toastmasters is often quite different from the kind of feedback storytellers hear from each other. A veteran coach to other storytellers, Post counsels them to use Toastmasters speaking opportunities to gather evaluations – written and oral – from which to improve their stories.

Tellers can gather many data points about their stories through the written and verbal evaluations Toastmasters provide at each meeting.

Untold Stories – Misnomers on Both Sides

Just as many presume storytelling is only for children, so too, do many people regard Toastmasters as only for those who are afraid to speak. In fact, storytelling is for everyone, and Toastmasters holds value for both novice and advanced presenters alike. Storytelling fits well with the Toastmasters meeting format. Whether in prepared speeches, Table Topics or opening and closing thoughts, stories are appropriate.

This Story is to Be Continued ...

So what are you waiting for? The story doesn’t end here. You’re the central character in this tale. It’s your move. Find a specialty club in your district that emphasizes storytelling. If there isn’t one, e-mail me and I’ll help you build one! A large storytelling community is out there, just waiting to connect with you. 

Craig Harrison, DTM, is co-founder of LaughLovers club in Oakland, California, and the founding chairman of the NSA’s Storytellers Professional Emphasis Group. In 2006, he visited the People’s Republic of China with three dozen professional storytellers as part of a cultural exchange. Tell Craig about your experiences with Toastmasters storytelling clubs at Craig@ExpressionsOfExcellence.com.