

THE MAGAZINE FOR COMMUNICATORS & LEADERS | AUGUST 2026

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We empower individuals to become more effective communicators and leaders.



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The Stories We Choose to Tell

We all have a story. In fact, we have many stories.

Stories about how we were raised, the people who shaped us, the challenges we faced, and the moments that changed us. These stories help us understand one another. They build bridges of connection and give us insight into what matters most to each of us.

But perhaps the most intriguing part of any story is the *why* behind it.

Why did you choose to tell that story?

Out of all the experiences in your life, why share that one?

The answer tells us something important. It gives context. It helps us understand your passion, your values, and your purpose. Stories are never just about the events themselves—they reveal what we care about.

One of the stories I share often is that of my nomadic childhood. My father's job took our family from city to city and continent to continent. At a young age, I repeatedly found myself standing in classrooms full of strangers, trying to figure out how to fit in.

I learned to listen carefully. *What made this group laugh? What did they value? Where could I find common ground to begin a conversation?*

Without realizing it at the time, that was the beginning of my communication journey. My goal was simple: to

speak in a way that resonated with others so I could belong in a new community.

Storytelling plays the same role in leadership and business today. Whether we are sharing our own story, our team's story, or our organization's story, we are helping others

understand who we are, what we stand for, and why it matters.

A well-told story creates trust. It helps people connect emotionally to ideas, values, and purpose.

Toastmasters gives us countless opportunities to discover and share our stories. Think of why you want to tell yours. Every speech is an opportunity to build understanding, inspire others, and pass wisdom forward.

Your story is unique. Only you can tell it.

And our world is richer when you do.

A well-told story creates trust. It helps people connect emotionally to ideas, values, and purpose.

Aletta Rochat, DTM
International President

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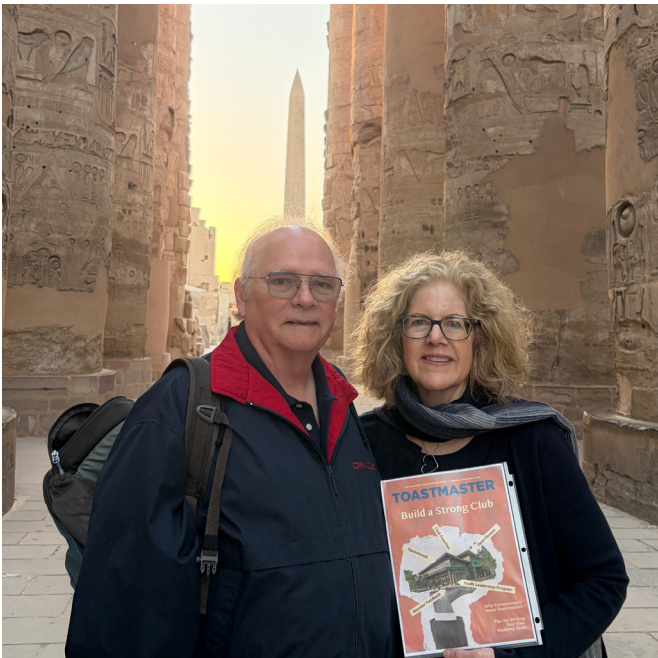
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Snapshot



Members of the **Moratuwa Toastmasters** club in Moratuwa, Sri Lanka, enjoy the *Toastmaster* magazine at the Galle Fort in Galle, Sri Lanka, during a trip to the southern region of the country. During their trip, the club members also visited Coconut Tree Hill in Mirissa and the coastal town of Unawatuna.

Traveling Toastmaster



Katrina Shawver of Phoenix, Arizona, and her husband, Rick, pose for a photo at the Karnak Temple Complex in Luxor, Egypt, during a trip to Egypt and Jordan.



Aditya Saxena, DTM, of Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India, shares the digital *Toastmaster* magazine while visiting the Virupaksha Temple in Hampi, Karnataka, India.

STORYTELLING

How to Use Stories in Speeches

By Caren S. Neile, Ph.D.



When Ed Tate delivered his winning speech, “[One of Those Days](#),” at the 2000 World Championship of Public Speaking, he made a strong point, but he also helped the audience—and judges—see, feel, smell, hear, and taste the experience he described. That helped him prevail over some very tough competition.

Depending on subject matter, many topics can be approached narratively. In fact, you might be able to craft your entire speech as a story.

But likely you will want to incorporate stories as a way of making your topic come alive. You could lead off with a brief story, such as something that happened to you or someone else, or a folktale, or even a simple narrative joke. Ensure the meaning is clear enough that the opening segues easily into the rest of your speech. And keep it brief, so you have time for everything else you want to say.

You could also tell a story or two during your speech to vividly illustrate points. For more impact, pause before you share (as long as it’s clear that’s what it is—a pause). You could also say, “Let me tell you a story,” then pause when it’s over.

Finally, you might end with a story. This is probably the least common use of storytelling in speeches, unless you add a “clincher” line of your own afterward to wrap everything up.

When you choose a story, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Will I feel comfortable telling this story to any audience, no matter their age, gender, class, or ethnicity? Should I alter it a little depending on the audience?
2. Does the story clearly make the point that I intend it to?

3. Is the story so long that the audience might lose track of what is happening in the actual speech? If so, can I shorten it?

By the way, Ed Tate ran out of time before he could tell the moral of his story. When he told me that afterward, I said he was lucky. The speech clearly worked better without it. No moralizing needed. If your entire speech is a story, give the audience, and yourself, the benefit of the doubt that you crafted it well enough that they will understand your meaning.

Just as when you tell a joke, you get the strongest response when you leave the interpretation to the audience.

Adapted from an April 2024 Toastmaster magazine article

An Update on Membership Dues

Beginning August 3, 2026, semiannual membership dues will increase from \$60 USD to \$72 USD. The Board of Directors decided on this change after careful consideration of the organization’s long-term financial needs and its commitment to serving members.

This increase may affect members differently around the world, and the Board carefully weighed that reality while also considering the long-term sustainability of the organization. This decision helps ensure that current and future members can continue to benefit from the learning, leadership, and personal growth opportunities that Toastmasters provides.

Additional information is available in the July 15 email from the Board of Directors, along with a recording of the recent [Talking Toastmasters webinar](#).



TOASTMASTERS NEWS

Share Your *Culinary Creations* With the Toastmaster

Are you a home chef or a professional? Do you simply enjoy whipping up your favorite cookies or trying out a new recipe? The *Toastmaster* wants to see! Our December issue will be all about food, and we want to highlight the culinary talents of our members.

Send us pictures of your latest feast, dish, or dessert. If you'd like to share the recipe and why it is important to you and your culture, pass that along as well! Email photos@toastmasters.org or submit your photos on our [photo submissions](#) page.

TOASTMASTERS NEWS

Promotional Video

If you're looking for a quick, engaging way of explaining the Toastmasters experience to someone, or if you want to add a punch of fun to your club website, check out [Public Speaking Anxiety](#). This new animated video cleverly depicts what Toastmasters is, how it can help people, and the warm, supportive club atmosphere.



CARTOON



"If you can keep your cool under these conditions, then the crowd will be a piece of cake."

QUOTE OF THE MONTH

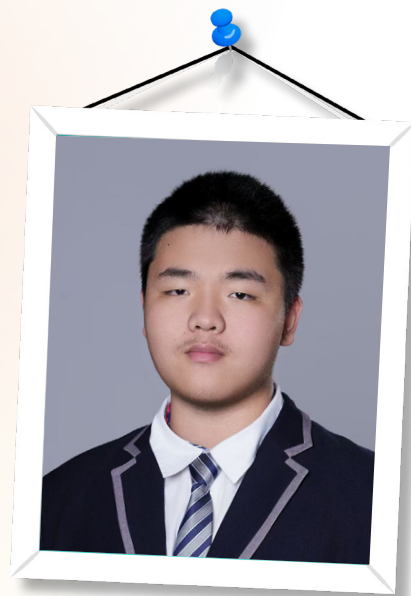
“
Tell me the facts and I'll learn. Tell me the truth and I'll believe. But tell me a story and it will live in my heart forever.
”

—Native American proverb

From Inspiration to Action

Discovering Toastmasters launched my journey to help students like me.

By Runfeng Bruce Yu



When I walked into a Toastmasters club meeting, I had no idea the impact it would bring to a high school student like me. I was invited to visit the Shekou IMAGINE Toastmasters Club in Shenzhen, Guangdong, China. At that time, I thought it would be like my school's speech and debate class. I was completely wrong.

That first Toastmasters meeting left a powerful impression on me. People of different ages and backgrounds sat together, learning and improving in a supportive environment. I was amazed by how joyful and collaborative people were. I had never experienced anything like that before.

Two questions kept spinning in my head: *How can I keep participating in this club? And how can I let my classmates experience what I just did?*

Driven by curiosity and excitement, I searched the Toastmasters website and discovered that Gavel Clubs were an option for people under the age of 18. I immediately thought of starting one at my school.

Over the next few weeks, with the help of Andy Zhou, then President of Shekou IMAGINE Toastmasters Club, I visited several Toastmasters clubs to better understand how meetings run. I began to picture what kind of club I wanted to build—one that could foster an inclusive student community.

The first challenge came when I started inviting people to join. Many of my classmates were hesitant. Some didn't know what Toastmasters was, and

others worried it might take too much time. I soon realized that the best way to inspire others was through storytelling. I told them about my first meeting, how much fun it was, how people helped each other, and how I felt more confident afterward. I also asked what skills they wanted to improve, and explained how Toastmasters could help. Bit by bit, a few friends became interested.

I wanted this to go beyond just one class or grade. During the chartering period, I formed an officer team with friends from two lower grades. There were only four of us at our first club officer meeting.

We created a space where students could take risks, share their voices, and improve without fear of judgment.

On August 28, 2025, we officially chartered the Sea Dragons Gavel Club, named after our school mascot. We held our first official meeting with only six members. Even though it was smaller than expected, I was filled with joy seeing my dream become reality.

Members gained confidence, learned to give and receive feedback, and took meeting roles. But what mattered most was the atmosphere we created: a space where students could take risks, share

their voices, and improve without fear of judgment.

Over time, we helped two other schools start their own Gavel Clubs. We also work closely with other Gavel Clubs in China to exchange ideas and create a unified and supportive learning experience. Through this, we've seen more young people discover their voices and confidence.

Additionally, we donated to the Ralph C. Smedley Memorial Fund and helped financially sponsor the District 118 Annual Conference. We also provide educational opportunities to students through community service and mental health awareness activities by partnering with Rotary Club of Shenzhen and other organizations.

Building a Gavel Club taught me lessons I never expected. I learned that persistence, creativity, and empathy are key to leading a team. I discovered the power of using stories to inspire, the importance of creating a welcoming space, and the true meaning of collaboration. Most importantly, I learned that helping others grow is just as rewarding as growing yourself.

I am deeply grateful to Toastmasters for the joy it has brought me, the friendships it has helped me build, and the chance it gives me to make a positive difference.

Runfeng Bruce Yu is a high school student at Basis International School Park Lane Harbour in Huizhou, China. He is the charter President of Sea Dragons Gavel Club in Huizhou. Learn more about the club at seadragongsgavel.org.

Serving Up Speeches With **FLAVOR**

How one club incorporates food into every meeting.

By Stephanie Darling



A few NY Foodies Toastmasters get together in person.

When the word of the day is *gemütlichkeit*, you know you're in for an enlightening club meeting.

The German word, which refers to the warm sense of community that grows from genuine connections with others, could qualify as the unofficial motto of NY Foodies Toastmasters, a virtual club that chartered in 2023 in New York City. Members are exuberant about the culinary arts, whether creating meals, consuming food, or both.

Everyone enjoys eating, says Jennifer Chan, DTM, who helped launch the club. Food might seem like a narrow focus, but it mixes well with topics like culture, art, history, and more. Talking about food also brings a challenging chance to practice vocal variety, gestures, sensory language, stories of every kind, and even humor, Chan adds.

"When you have a room full of people who are passionate about the same topic and you're hearing mouth-watering stories and seeing delicious pictures, speakers make food come alive!" she notes.

"The club definitely has a unique flavor, like a shared family meal," says charter member Patrice Sturtevant. The group's diverse membership makes for delicious meetings.

"One week we may learn about the best Ethiopian eateries around, and celebrate Chinese treats the next time. At another gathering, we may get the skinny on kitchen gadgets," she explains.

2025–2026 Vice President Public Relations William Robinson says Foodies follows the traditional meeting format, spiced with some creative adaptations. Agendas are reimagined as menus, opening with "starters" (word of the day, meeting roles, etc.). Next comes the popular Cornucopia Corner—an addition beyond the regular meeting format—which Robinson calls a grab bag of member-chosen short talks that may give the audience savory quotes, food facts, or even brief demonstrations. One recent tidbit shared by member Shirley Shing covered the many modern and ancient uses of kitchen tongs.

Foodies follows the traditional meeting format, spiced with some creative adaptations.

The meeting's "main course" serves up two prepared Pathways speeches. Robinson says a food topic isn't required but most presentations are filled with enticing photos, dramatic facial expressions and gestures, music, and other tactics aimed squarely at the audience's five senses.

"Dessert" ends the meeting with reports and impressively thoughtful and supportive evaluations.

"We savor every bite. The speeches are meaty and nicely spiced and some

have new flavors that may take some time to digest," Deborah Leung, DTM, explains with a smile.

One meeting response is guaranteed, says Robinson, "We always leave hungry!"

The club also has a big appetite for continuing foodie conversations beyond regular meetings. Members ardently pursue that family dinner vibe with frequent chats on WhatsApp.

"I could talk about food all day, so [that WhatsApp group] is ideal! From photographs of beautifully plated restaurant meals to home-cooked dishes, the constant food talk keeps us connected and makes the club feel like a true community," says Denise Collins, DTM, 2025–2026 District 119 Director.

Members in or near New York City gather in person as often as possible to try new places and cuisines, revisit old favorites, explore fun food events, and host potluck parties. "These activities bring us closer together and turn members into friends," says Leung.

That's why *gemütlichkeit* expresses the Foodies club culture so well, adds Jonathan Yu, DTM, a member and 2025–2026 District 119 Program Quality Director.

"I always feel *gemütlichkeit*—that great fellowship with members. And I'm a person who rarely cooks. I'm a Foodie for eating!" he laughs.

Stephanie Darling is a former senior editor of and frequent contributor to the Toastmaster magazine.

The Power of *Storytelling* in Sales

How stories create connection and help audiences remember your message.

By Greg Glasgow

Character Challenge
Setting *Storytelling* Conclusion

Craig Valentine remembers when he was a teenager going to buy his first car. He walked onto the lot and found the model he was interested in, but then a salesman approached.

"He said, 'Are you looking at this car? Let me tell you about it,'" Valentine says. "He said, 'This car has this type of windows, this type of motor, this type of tires'—he was trying to sell me the car. And I said, 'Thank you, I'm not interested.'"

Valentine soon found himself at another dealership, where the salesman took a different approach: "He said, 'Are you looking at that car? Oh, you're going to look good in that one. You're going to be flying down the road, the wind will be blowing through your hair, and the girls will be all over you.' Well, what do you think I did?"

Valentine, a member of Randallstown Network Toastmasters in Pikesville, Maryland, and the 1999 World Champion of Public Speaking, bought the car from the second dealership. What made the difference, he says, was the story that brought the experience of the car to life and created an emotional connection to it.

"When I give speeches now, I tell that story and always say to my audience, 'He lied. I was lonely in that car.' I get a big laugh out of it," Valentine says. "But I think it's important for the audience to realize—don't sell the product, don't sell the service. Always sell the result."

And the best way to do that, Valentine says, is through stories. Adding a story

to your sales pitch can hook an audience, create an emotional connection, and enable listeners to remember your main points weeks after the presentation.

"I always say, 'Good speakers speak to be remembered; great speakers speak to be repeated,'" Valentine says. "And the way you get repeated is by sharing stories. It's important to be able to share stories that [the audience] can walk away with and repeat."

Types of Stories

Steven D. Cohen, Ph.D., professor of practice at Johns Hopkins Carey Business School in Maryland, is also an advocate of using storytelling in sales. It's the best way, he says, to make an emotional connection with an audience.

"If you can share a story that's revelatory, that's insightful, that helps you connect authentically with your audience, then listeners are going to respond in kind emotionally, and they're going to be more attached to you and your message," he says.

Among the stories that resonate most with audiences, Cohen says, are origin stories and client success stories.

Origin stories explain how and why a company got its start. They often focus on the founder of the business and how they got their brilliant idea on which to base their company.

Client success stories put audience members in the shoes of someone who benefited from a product or service. "Maybe it's about a time that a customer

or client was a little resistant to what you were selling, and then they became a believer, or they bought in to the idea," Cohen explains. "Why did that happen? Where did the transformation occur? What moment moved the needle? That's a great type of story to use in a sales pitch."

Aspirational stories are Valentine's favorite, and they take client success stories one step further by switching up the flow into a format he calls "then, now, and how."

"You tell a story about where your customer was before they met you—they probably weren't in a very good place," he says. "Then you fast-forward to where they are now, doing really well. And of course, what the audience wants to know is how? And the how is your product or service."

4 Elements of a Good Sales Story

Cohen says a good sales story has four elements:

1. A vivid and memorable setting.
2. A relatable character.
3. A plot where the character encounters a challenge and makes a choice that leads to a resolution.
4. A moral or conclusion that reinforces the message.

Using sensory details like sights, sounds, and smells can help bring a story to life, Cohen says. In the case of the paddleboarder, you could describe the sunlight on the water, the smell of sunscreen, and the cry of the seagulls to help your audience visualize the scene.

Cohen, who started Toastmasters right after college, says the feedback he received from those meetings provided an incredible opportunity to learn effective speaking early in his career. “I ended up going into storytelling and speechmaking as a professor of business communication, and I think that Toastmasters played an early role in inspiring me and motivating me to push the boundaries of what was possible, both for myself and for others,” Cohen says.

Greg Glasgow is a Denver-based author and freelance writer and a frequent contributor to the Toastmaster. His debut nonfiction book, *Disneyland on the Mountain: Walt, the Environmentalists, and the Ski Resort That Never Was*, was published in September 2023.

—CRAIG VALENTINE



Don't Be So Hard on Yourself!



Strengthen your self-compassion so your mistakes and missteps don't derail you.

By Katie Stoddart

Two common, yet debilitating, traits of high achievers and perfectionists are a highly self-critical inner narrative and a lack of self-compassion. For many, there is a false belief that showing compassion implies you're losing your edge and becoming mediocre and complacent.

This inner critic manifests as being chronically disappointed by your performance, harshly judging each mistake, feeling envy toward others' performances, being overly defensive of external criticism, and having overall lower self-esteem.

If that sounds familiar, you are probably your own worst critic and berate yourself over perceived mistakes. You're not alone: Worldwide, it is estimated that 85% of people lack self-esteem.

How can you be kinder to yourself? It all starts with self-compassion—here's what that means, and how you can build yours up, and keep it up.

What Is Self-Compassion?

The expressions “self-compassion” and “self-love” are often used interchangeably. However, the term self-love refers to a more overarching acceptance of who you are—flaws and strengths. Self-compassion is more about a specific event, showing empathy to yourself when you make an error.

Having self-compassion means you are able to speak toward yourself with kindness, to be honest with yourself without an inner harshness, and to understand, honor, and stand up for your needs while being willing to improve yourself. The willingness to grow and improve does not come from a place of lacking but from a place of self-acceptance and choice.

Once you develop self-compassion, you will find yourself improving in other areas of your life, with a greater self-

awareness and motivation to improve. This compassionate mindset leads to feeling less defensive and prickly, making it easier to acknowledge any weaknesses and make amends for any mistakes, whether that's criticism from your boss or an argument with your partner.

The High-Achiever Paradox

Being a high achiever or perfectionist might initially be seen as a strength—after all, it means you have a high desire to constantly push for more—but it becomes unsustainable in the long run.

You have a huge impetus to succeed, but if you keep rising the bar for success, you're left with an ongoing feeling of never being enough, with a need to keep succeeding and desire for things to always be perfect.

Paradoxically, having self-compassion usually leads to achieving even greater results. Instead of being pushed by a feeling of lack, you become pulled by choice, passion, and energy. In the long run, this is better for both your mental health and your productivity.

In addition, as you gain self-compassion, you stop viewing your mistakes as personal flaws, and realize everyone makes them and they are part of our learning path.

Building Your Self-Compassion

If you're recognizing yourself at this point, there is some good news: There are tools to help you increase your self-compassion.

It's okay

Listen



Be Aware

As with any behavioral or internal transformation, awareness is the first step. When it comes to greater self-compassion, awareness is three-fold:

Thoughts

Start paying close attention to your inner dialogue and noticing what you are actually saying to yourself—you might be surprised.

Do you beat yourself up each time you make a mistake?

Do you constantly review all your errors and feel guilt or shame?

Do you feel angry each time you mess up?

Do you over-analyze speeches and conversations and then feel frustrated?

Actions

Next, think about your actions and behaviors. Notice if you're being kind to yourself physically.

Are you getting enough sleep?

Are you eating healthy foods?

Are you getting enough exercise or movement each day?

These unhealthy choices create a vicious cycle:

The healthier the behavior, the more guilt you feel, the lower your self-esteem, and the harsher your internal narrative.

Emotions

Sometimes the lack of self-compassion can be felt in your energy toward yourself, not only in your thoughts. For instance, you might have overall feelings of guilt, shame, sadness, or disappointment in yourself.

Do you often feel a lingering disappointment in yourself or your work?

Do you feel shame for underperforming?

Do you carry heavy guilt about not being "enough"?

Emotional responses can be more subtle to notice but as you raise your awareness, you will start to pick up on them too.



Change the Dialogue

Once you are more aware of your inner dialogue, physical actions, and emotions, you can start to change them.

A useful exercise is to practice speaking to yourself as if you were your

5-year-old self, or a close friend. It might help to say such statements out loud.

The practice goes like this: Let's say you've given a speech, and you feel disappointed in your performance. First, you notice your thoughts: *Wow, that was useless. I can't believe I messed up like that.* Then you realize this was the harsh inner voice showing up.

It is key not to judge or criticize your internal voice! (That just continues the cycle of the internal critical voice.) Instead, take a deep breath and say/think:

Okay, I notice there was a lack of compassion in my initial reaction. I feel disappointed that things didn't go as well as I wanted them to, but I realize that I did my very best, and I hope next time it will go better.

At first this will feel very unnatural; you likely have decades of pre-conditioning to overcome. Then it will start to gradually feel more natural. The cherry on the cake is not only will you start to feel better about yourself and your performance, you will also feel calmer and more grounded.

Start changing your actions and emotions as well. To adjust your actions, try slowly implementing and sticking to one new healthy habit (e.g., going to bed earlier, exercising, etc.) to help rebuild self-trust and nurture self-compassion.

Changing your emotions starts with noticing the initial inner guilt or heaviness, and shifting it toward gratitude (for the lesson learned), and joy (for experience, learning, and improvement).

3.

Observe

Look around

Meditate

Another powerful way to increase awareness of your thoughts, actions, and emotions, and actually rewire your way of thinking, is through meditation. Even just 10 minutes of sitting in silence each day and watching your thoughts can make a huge shift in your feelings and reactions toward yourself. By practicing regularly, you can soften that inner harshness and improve your self-compassion.

Try sitting quietly and just paying attention to your breathing. You can imagine your thoughts as clouds in the sky just passing by. If you get frustrated or start dwelling on a thought or task, remind yourself it's just a feeling, and think of a cloud floating away. Then simply go back to focusing on your breath.

Loving-kindness is another remarkably effective meditation technique for increasing self-compassion. It involves directing peaceful thoughts toward other people and the world. You will feel yourself slowly relaxing as the kind and positive emotions flow through your brain.

4.

Zoom Out

All too often, we are zoomed in to our own world. Everything we do or think is exaggerated and amplified.

This can make it challenging to evaluate our own performance objectively. Rather than obsessing over a mistake, zoom out and simply observe: What did you do well?

What can you improve? What were some important lessons?

Being less emotionally involved and attached to your performance reduces that inner critic, and helps you be more honest about both your strengths and your shortcomings.

Remember, we are all imperfect, flawed human beings doing the best we can to navigate the world each day. You are not immune from imperfection. Sometimes things go wrong even when you've prepared, practiced, and tried your hardest. That's all part of our human experience.

One of the greatest benefits of self-compassion is that you become more attuned to your own needs. You understand more deeply what you need and are able to communicate those needs with others. This also makes it easier for the people in your life, because you are clearer about what matters to you. As a result, you feel more ease, joy, and peace every day, with yourself and toward other people.

Practice,
not perfection.

Katie Stoddart is founder and CEO of *The Focus Bee*, a transformative leadership platform. She is an award-winning transformative coach and leadership facilitator; the host of the weekly podcast *The Focus Bee Show*; and the author of *The Magic of Focus*. She lives in Stockholm, Sweden. Learn more at [linkedin.com/in/katiestoddart](https://www.linkedin.com/in/katiestoddart) and katiestoddart.com.



The Heart of Family Storytelling

Telling our tales keeps our histories alive and enlightens others.

By Caren S. Neile, Ph.D.

When my then-18-year-old father was stationed at Fort Dix in New Jersey, in 1942, he learned he could make a few extra dollars a month by becoming a paratrooper. Being a good son, he wrote to his parents about the idea. My grandmother immediately dispatched my grandfather to the base, a 20-mile train journey from their home, with the following message: “Your mother says that if you jump out of an airplane with a parachute, she will jump off the roof with an umbrella.” My dad quickly changed his plans.

I recount this story for several reasons. First off, it demonstrates both my grandmother’s sense of humor and her wisdom. Second, it shows how close the family was. Then there is that extra dollop of nostalgia for a different era. And finally, it connects me to these people I adored, who are all long gone.

That, in a nutshell, is the heart of family storytelling.

I’ve been fascinated by storytelling for more than two decades—I’ve taught storytelling studies, been a performance storyteller around the world, and even wrote a book on the topic. And I’ve seen the power of family storytelling.

In this form of communication, whether shared onstage or in the home, family members tell stories about other family members, especially recalling when older relatives were younger, or people who are long deceased. The most interesting

and valuable of these tales have often been told from person to person and generation to generation.

You might think of family storytelling as the verbal memoir of the family. Or as the unofficial line on our loved ones.

They’re also cheap therapy, explains Judith Black, an acclaimed storyteller from Marblehead, Massachusetts, with 50 years of onstage experience. “Life happens. Understanding why and how it has touched us is the result of this process we humans call story-making,” she says.

Adele Alexandre, of Boca Raton Toastmasters in Florida, likewise sees a therapeutic effect. “These stories keep my family members alive for me. When I tell stories about my relatives’ bravery, strength, or sense of humor, I feel happy.”

You might think of family storytelling as the verbal memoir of the family. Or as the unofficial line on our loved ones.

Entertaining and Illuminating

Family storytelling takes all forms, long or short, funny or sad, historical or trivial. In every case, they illuminate something about the characters in them, and so, the family as a whole.

People enjoy telling such stories at every family-related opportunity, from weeknight dinners to holiday celebrations to weddings and at bedtime—even while peeling potatoes or washing dishes. That’s because these tales have a wonderful way of binding families together by strengthening the threads between generations. And like all stories, they



“When I tell stories about my relatives’ bravery, strength, or sense of humor, I feel happy.”

—ADELE ALEXANDRE

can also be entertaining, revealing adventure, suspense, and passion.

Family stories can work on a deeper level, as well. Robyn Fivush, Ph.D., a psychology professor at Emory University in Atlanta, said on the *Hidden Brain* podcast, “Family stories are important because adolescents and young adults who know more of their family history show higher self-esteem, fewer behavior problems, lesser depression and anxiety, and a higher sense of meaning and purpose in life.”

Helping children explore and feel pride in where they came from through family role models, she suggests, provides “an anchor, a sense of belonging, and a way of understanding how the world works.” It’s also beneficial for the older people who tell these stories, she adds, giving them a sense of pride for leaving a legacy to the next generation.

And don’t worry, says Fivush, if you start to tell a family story and your children or grandchildren roll their eyes.

They are still paying attention. And later on, they’ll wish you’d told them more!

Story vs. History

There is an important difference between family storytelling and family genealogy or history. The goal of genealogists and historians is to gather *facts* that are as verifiable and indisputable as possible. The goal of storytellers is to create a compelling *narrative* that will be felt, understood, remembered, and passed along.

This is not to say that you want to make up important information in a family story. But you do not need to verify every fact either. You may even find that hearing the same family story separately from different relatives is

instructive. What did one family member take away from the experience that was different from another? Does it affect the meaning of the story?

The Family Onstage

The family is also a major source of material among professional storytellers and speakers.

Alexandre, the Boca Raton Toastmasters club member, who is a storyteller, speaker, and clown, says, “Professionals tell family stories because family is a universal subject, something we can all relate to. After all, everyone came from a family.” She frequently tells family stories in her Toastmasters club.

I have had the same experience. Among my most successful club speeches was one I was rehearsing before presenting it at my father’s 75th birthday party. I was delighted to discover how everyone related to the stories about my dad—I even won a best speech ribbon!

Black, meanwhile, has in her vast



repertoire several full-length shows on the subject, including “Retiring the Champ,” about her mother-in-law’s battle with Alzheimer’s, and another, “Esau, My Son,” about her child who grew into a wonderful man, despite not conforming to all of his parents’ and teachers’ expectations when he was a child.

“When people see themselves in my performances,” she says, “I have opened a door for them to start exploring the meaning of their own experiences. So I keep getting invited back for more.”

When you decide to collect or tell stories from your family, remember: Time is of the essence. People in our lives forget the past, or pass away. People relocate. These stories of your families are your precious legacy. Are you ready to claim it?

Caren S. Neile, Ph.D., is a former Toastmaster and a longtime teller, researcher, and teacher of family stories. She wrote *The Great American Story: In Search of National Values in Family Storytelling* and an entry on family and friendship storytelling for *The Oxford Handbook of American Folklore and Folklife Studies*.



“Family stories are important because adolescents and young adults who know more of their family history show higher self-esteem.”

—ROBYN FIVUSH, PH.D.



Collecting Stories

Do you want to collect family stories to tell your children and grandchildren? Or to use for Toastmasters or other presentations?

You might want to make a storytelling date to gather with older relatives and record stories. Or you can simply collect snippets from time to time. There is also an organization called [StoryCorps](#) that records, preserves, and shares the stories of everyday people.

The key to the process is to encourage stories, not just facts, because narratives are much more memorable. Have patience; not everyone is skilled at storytelling. Be prepared to ask follow-up questions to fill in gaps. Try to avoid questions that lead to “yes-or-no” answers.

Example: “What did your grandmother say when she arrived? How did you respond?”

Robyn Fivush, Ph.D., a storytelling expert who teaches at Emory University in Atlanta, values “iconic” family stories that are told again and again, yet she also feels that everyday family stories about anything and nothing create the strongest bonds. Many such stories are told in what Fivush calls the “small moments”: a few sentences shared while cooking together, or in the car, or watching a ballgame. We find comfort in the familiar.

To get you started, I’ve created a list of questions, based both on the book *A Celebration of American Family Folklore: Tales and Traditions From the Smithsonian Collection* and my own experience in the field.

One other note: Some stories may be too painful for the storyteller to share. Try not to push, but rather keep the encounters as joyful and stress-free as possible.

1. Do you have immigration stories from your family?
2. Did your family surname change, and if so, are there stories about that?
3. Do you have a notorious or heroic character in your family’s past? Do you know stories about them?
4. How did your relatives come to meet and marry? Are there stories of lost love, jilted brides, unusual courtships, arranged marriages, elopements, or runaway lovers?
5. Are there any stories in your family about how a great fortune was lost or made or almost made?
6. Does your family have any heirlooms that have stories connected to them?
7. Do you recall stories about family feuds?
8. Is there a particular scary story in the family?

Happy collecting!

—Caren S. Neile



Before You *Write* a Word

What great speakers do first—and why it makes all the difference.

By Lauren Parsons, DTM, AS

Marcus sat at his desk thinking about his upcoming presentation, a blank document open on his computer and two hours gone with nothing to show for it. The problem wasn't lack of knowledge—it was that he'd started with the wrong approach.

Have you ever stared at a blinking cursor, wondering where to start your next speech? You're not alone. Even experienced speakers can hit that wall, and the reason is almost always the same: They sat down to write before doing the work that actually makes the writing task easier.

Whether you're preparing a Toastmasters club speech or a major presentation at work, here are some powerful steps great speakers take before they start writing—and why they make all the difference.

Start With Your Audience, Not Yourself

The most common mistake speakers make is beginning with what they want to say. But the first question you should ask yourself isn't *What do I want to share?* It's *Who is my audience, and what do they need from me?*

While preparing for a keynote speech to a group of school administrators, I spoke with the event organizer and several attendees—people caught between the demands of parents, students, teachers, and the board. I wove examples of those realities into the talk, and afterward one woman rushed up to me with a huge smile, saying, “That was so relevant—it was like you totally got what I face day to day. What an encouragement!” It landed so well because she felt like I understood her world. Gaining information and insight beforehand paid off.

Sheryl Roush, DTM, AS, of the Professional Speakers and AS We Speak online clubs, uses a powerful preparation technique: “I ask a lot of questions, get to know who the listeners will be, and tailor everything to them, their immediate takeaways, and their ideal outcomes.” She then takes it one step further, visualizing the audience not from the stage but as if seated among them, experiencing the talk from their perspective.

When planning your speech, ask a few fellow members or colleagues what they find most challenging about

your topic. Find out what's keeping them up at night, and start from there.

From Information to Inspiration

Once you understand your audience, the question becomes: What will actually move them? Ask yourself: *Why does this matter for this audience? What do I want them to do differently? And what will motivate them to actually do it?*

Miss any one of those three elements, and your speech may be interesting, but it won't change anyone's behavior. Your intention is to help your audience walk away with something they can feel inspired by and act on.

Before every speech, 2024 World Champion of Public Speaking Luisa Montalvo, of Montalvo Toastmasters in Pharr, Texas, reflects on whether someone recently taught her something she thought she already knew, or gave her a fresh perspective that shifted how she saw things. “My goal is usually to have my audience laugh, cry, and send them home with a message,” she says. “I want to give them the WOW factor—something they've never seen or heard before.”

This is what closing the knowledge-action gap looks like. Your job as a speaker is to find the story that finally makes a point stick and lodges in the audience's memory long after the applause has faded.

Build Your Foundation With Research

Before you write, cast a wide net.

“Research. That's my key activity,” says Maureen Zappala, DTM, AS, a member of Henderson Toasters in Henderson, Nevada. “Data, facts, dates, tidbits of



Sheryl Roush, DTM, AS

information about the audience, their industry, their world. I won't use all of the information I gather, but I certainly will have a good foundation." A strong research foundation allows you to write—and speak—with authority and credibility.

A well-chosen statistic can also be a compelling hook.

Imagine putting the number "63" on a slide and asking your audience what it represents—then revealing the finding from Chip and Dan Heath's *Made to Stick* book: 63% of people remembered the stories from a presentation, while only 5% remembered any statistic. Used well, data adds intrigue. But make sure you get it right: An inaccurate fact undermines everything you're trying to build.

"My goal is usually to have my audience laugh, cry, and send them home with a message."

—LUISA MONTALVO

Create a Story Bank

The most powerful speeches paint pictures and take people on a journey they won't forget. Gathering stories and metaphors before you write is just as important as gathering facts.

Freddi Dogterom, DTM, AS, of the Dynamically Speaking Club in Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada, has a simple but brilliant system. Before speaking, she revisits photos, such as those from her time living north of the Arctic Circle—ice highways, vast tundra, a close encounter with a polar bear—to relive the moment before she writes about it. "I keep a photo log with my story file so I can be accurate and 'see' the story unfolding in my mind as I recount it," she says.

Start building your own story bank. Whether it's a folder of photos, a note on your phone, or a dedicated notebook, the habit of capturing potential stories means you'll never be stuck for the right example when you need it most.

Map Your Speech First

Before drafting a single line, understand your speech at a high level. Past International President Dilip Abayasekara, DTM, AS, of Conestoga Toastmasters in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and four other clubs, has used mind mapping (a technique where you visually organize your ideas, words, or topics, linking them around a central subject or message) to prepare every speech since 1994, including both rounds of his Accredited Speaker presentations. "I rarely write out a speech word for word," he says. "I mind map it."

Whether it's a mind map, a simple outline, or key points jotted on paper, having a clear structure before you write frees you to focus on the words later.

Let It Percolate

There's no fixed timeline for preparing a speech.

Twenty years ago, I walked into my first Exercise New Zealand Conference as a beginning exercise instructor. Last year, in a full-circle moment, I was invited to deliver the opening keynote to 750 of my peers at the same conference. I felt the weight of speaking to that particular audience and really wanted to deliver for them.

With eight months of preparation time, I took my time fleshing out my core message. I started a note on my phone, adding ideas whenever they surfaced over many months. When I stepped onstage, the final speech included a story from a movie I'd seen that year, a joke from a friend, and an interactive experience.

Even if you only have a few days before your next speech, jotting ideas as they come can spark something you'd never have thought of sitting at a desk. Use a running note on your phone, a voice memo, a notebook by your bed. Let the message develop. You might be surprised what rises to the surface.

You may never feel completely ready, and that's entirely normal. At some point, you simply have to begin.

The next time you're assigned a speech—whether it's your next club project or a work presentation—resist the urge to immediately write your opening line.

Start instead with your audience. Sit with their challenges. Reflect on what they truly need. Gather your stories, stats, and ideas. Let those ideas breathe. Then, when you finally sit down, you'll find the words come far more easily than you expected. And your audience? They'll feel the difference.

Lauren Parsons, DTM, AS, is an award-winning wellbeing specialist and New Zealand's Keynote Speaker of the Year and Educator of the Year 2023-2024. A TEDx speaker and author of *Thriving Leaders*, *Thriving Teams*, she hosts the Thrive TV Show and helps leaders and organizations create energized, high-performing cultures. Learn more at laurenparsonswellbeing.com.

Listen First

Do Research

Know Your Audience

Mind Map

Tell Stories

Let Ideas Percolate

A Presidential Year in Review

South African Aletta Rochat, DTM, enjoyed a vibrant term as Toastmasters' top leader.

By Paul Sterman



Aletta Rochat's term as 2025–2026 International President has been a full one. She has, by her own description, done a lot of learning, a lot of connecting, and a lot of participating in fun, festive events.

That spirit of celebration kicked off with her installment as International President—the first person from Africa to hold that position—at the 2025 International Convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Since then, there have been many special experiences, including uplifting visits to different countries around the world. For example, of a visit to India, she says, “Part of their culture is that guests are welcomed as family. I experienced that on a grand scale! It made me realize that we should do the same in our clubs. That level of care and connection is powerful.”

Reflecting on her Presidential term, Rochat says the best part has been meeting so many members and visiting leaders in different countries.

“To meet District leaders who say, ‘Well, last year we were Distinguished for the first time in five years or longer,’ or to see that ambition to get the

Toastmasters growth back up, that is really inspiring,” she notes.

Far-Flung Travels

In January, Rochat participated in Mid-year Training in Oman, the first time she had ever traveled to that country.



International President Aletta Rochat at a District conference in India, sitting next to conference chair Riyas A.F.

In April, she traveled to central California for a visit to District 33, where, in addition to meetings with leaders and members, she enjoyed some of the area's attractions. At the urging of local Toastmasters, she enthusiastically

sampled a hamburger from the popular California chain In-N-Out Burger, and, in the process of presenting a Corporate Recognition Award to E. & J. Gallo Winery in Fresno, toured the site and tasted some of the famed product.

Her stay also included a touching visit to a corporate club based at Memorial

Hospital in Bakersfield, whose members are hospital leaders. Club meetings are a respite from their stressful work environment, said members, who often give speeches about their experiences with patients.

“They joked that they can't get through a meeting without crying because they were sharing such personal stories,” says Rochat. “And these are all senior heads of departments in this very big hospital!”

After California, she headed north to the District 64 Conference in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, where she delivered a speech about how

to ignite your club's potential in the home stretch of the program year.

“We got some people to actually stand up and pledge what they were going to do, which was quite exciting.”



Cultural Flavor

During May, she had a whirlwind itinerary of District visits. Highlights of her visits to India and Malaysia included such cultural forays as:

- Enjoying the many opportunities to savor local cuisine in both countries. In Malaysia, she says, “There were so many fruits and plants that I hadn’t seen before.”
- Watching a vibrant music-filled celebration hosted by a temple in Sibu, Sarawak, Malaysia.
- Kayaking near Kochi, India, to see the luminescent sea at night.
- Attending what she says was a first for her: a Toastmasters meeting on a river cruise, in Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia.

Despite the extensive travel involved, Rochat was energized by meeting members and sharing their excitement.

“It’s almost surreal when you see people are so excited to see you and you want to say, ‘But it’s only me,’” she notes. “But for them, it’s the first and last time maybe they’ll meet an International President.”

It was inspiring to see District leaders in their own settings and to see their enthusiasm for their role in helping members and the organizations, she says.

“It’s great just being there to be able to say thank you for what you’ve done and thank you for what you continue to do.”



Rochat stands inside the Yu Lung San Tian En Temple in Sibu, Sarawak, Malaysia.

Touting Toastmasters in Africa

Throughout her term, Rochat has tried to use her visibility to draw more attention to her continent and inspire fellow Toastmasters there. She actually built a DTM project around that mission, working with a small team to organize an ambitious Toastmasters program on [Africa Day](#), May 25, an annual celebration of African unity.

The online event featured collaborative efforts with Rotary International, African business leaders, and the South African Chamber of Commerce in the United Kingdom, where many people from Africa live and work. Speakers—including Rotary International’s new president, Olayinka Hakeem Babalola of Nigeria—talked about various efforts to work together and promote Africa.

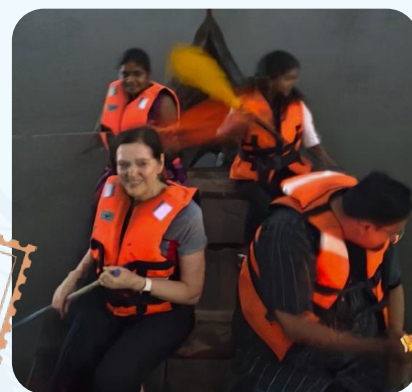
Capping off her term, Rochat even achieved a personal mission: In April she completed her 10th half-marathon (13.1 miles or 21.09 km) at the Two Oceans Half Marathon in Cape Town, South Africa. Fellow Toastmasters were on hand to cheer her on, one actually running alongside her the whole way, something that really touched her. The support from fellow members showcased again the community that is Toastmasters.

As for accomplishing the feat, she says it was a celebration of staying active and strong through the years: “I’m in my 60s now and I’m still running half-marathons.”

Paul Sterman is senior editor, executive and editorial content, for *Toastmasters International*.



Rochat, with fellow Cape Town Toastmasters club members Lorraine Mashau (in the middle) and Kerri-Lea Adlam, after completing a half-marathon in South Africa.



Rochat and fellow Toastmasters paddle at night in the island village of Kumbalangi, India.

Make Your Communication Energy Contagious

Amplify your emotions to engage with and inspire your audience.

By Joel Schwartzberg

Have you ever watched a passionate speaker and felt energized yourself?

Don't just chalk that up to stirring words and deliberate tactics. Research suggests that the transfer of energy from a speaker to an audience is part of a psychological phenomenon known as [emotional contagion](#) (EC).

The theory of EC suggests we unconsciously “mimic” the emotions of people we're paying attention to, including their facial expressions, posture, and tone of voice. That physical mirroring can shift listeners into feeling what the speaker feels, including joy, sadness, or anger.

EC may resemble empathy, but researchers describe it more as a cognitive process of mirroring and synchronization than an intentional act of care.

Author Malcolm Gladwell describes how emotions and emotional contagion work in different directions, “Emotion goes inside-out. Emotional contagion, though, suggests that the opposite is also true. If I can make you smile, I can make you happy. If I can make you frown, I can make you sad. Emotion, in this sense, goes outside-in.”

EC provides speakers with a powerful engagement tool. And the more deliberately you use it, the more powerful it becomes, so here are specific ways to make your mood matter.

Make your stories emotionally sticky.

We have all been moved by a movie's tragic or triumphant scenes. But if characters don't react, neither does the audience.

The same applies to stories told by speakers. The narratives may be inspiring, but their emotional impact will be limited if you don't convey how those moments felt.

Use your voice, posture, gestures, volume, and pauses to convey those emotions, and try to deliver them honestly, not performatively.

“Acting out’ emotions isn't the same as conveying authentic ones,” explains public speaking coach Lisa Braithwaite. “If you're truly moved by your content and your emotional conviction is genuine, your audience will experience it that way. Performing or contriving emotion, however, can leave them feeling manipulated.”

Choose emotional language. Words matter too. Using evocative and emotionally charged language primes your audience's emotional response, making them more receptive to the mood you want to set. Even small shifts in vocabulary can change how a message lands.

“Audiences do more than listen—they mirror. When one person nods, others nod, and emotion spreads faster than logic,” says public speaking coach, keynote speaker, and 2018 Toastmasters World Champion of Public Speaking Ramona J. Smith. “As a speaker, I've learned to use emotional contagion as a tool. When you use it well, your message doesn't only land, it multiplies.”

Use energy as an amplifier.

Research demonstrates that a quiet, monotone delivery dulls the EC impact, while an engaged, energetic delivery amplifies it.

Great storytellers, speakers, leaders, and Toastmasters speech contestants may have never heard of EC, but they know their energy and emotions don't just keep the audience awake. They inspire feelings, thoughts, and actions.

Convey positivity.

If mood is contagious, feelings like anxiety, nervousness, and anger can be transmitted regardless of the words we say.

Imagine a job interview in which a qualified candidate appears anxious or defensive. The interviewer will likely pick up on those feelings, which may impact their decision.

I once worked with an executive who often expressed anger about the challenges his organization was committed to overcoming. By increasing his enunciation, slowing his rate, and inserting pauses, he was able to reframe that anger as determination and commitment [to the solution](#). As a result, he inspired audiences rather than enraging or frightening them.

As a presentation coach, I've seen firsthand how a speaker's feelings become contagious in their audience, whose wide eyes, responsive laughter, and rapt attention demonstrate the power of those feelings.

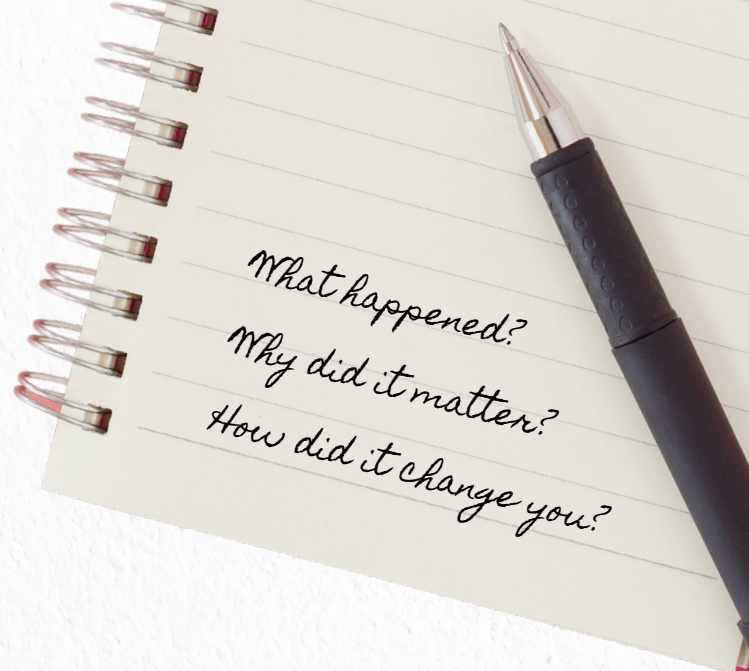
Don't waste the opportunity to show your audience how passionate you are. Emotional energy spreads—and this is one fever your audience will welcome.

Joel Schwartzberg is a presentation coach, executive communication specialist, and author of *The Language of Leadership: How to Engage and Inspire Your Team and Get to the Point! Simplify, Sharpen, and Sell Your Message*. Follow him on [LinkedIn](#).

Tell Me More ...

Learn the simple tool for drawing out your stories in your speeches.

By Margarita Y. Pinhas, DTM



What makes a speech unforgettable? It is rarely the perfect structure, the clever joke, or even the polished delivery. The speakers who truly move audiences do something deeper: They create curiosity.

As a global speaker and leadership communication coach, I have noticed this pattern everywhere, from TEDx stages and corporate keynotes to Toastmasters club meetings. The most impactful speakers make the audience lean in and silently think, *Tell me more*.

Over time, I realized that “tell me more” is more than a phrase. It is a speaking formula. A mindset. A storytelling tool that transforms speeches from informative to memorable.

Many speakers fall into the trap of explaining what happened, but not why it mattered. Yet audiences connect more to meaning, emotion, tension, and transformation.

This realization hit me when my slides failed during a presentation. Rather than focusing on the technical issues and my frustration, I leaned into storytelling. I became more present with the audience, more conversational, and more real.

After the presentation, people approached me, saying, “Tell me more.” That’s when I realized how powerful curiosity truly is.

Since then, I have interviewed professionals from around the world on my podcast, *Tell Me More*, exploring the techniques that make stories impactful and unforgettable.

When preparing a speech, don’t just recount the event. Revisit the experience. Slow down and explore what you felt, feared, hoped for, or discovered. Audiences cannot become intrigued if the speaker is disconnected from the story.

Strong speakers recognize the exact moment curiosity is sparked and they pause, anticipating the questions forming in the audience’s mind:

- What were you feeling?
- Why does this matter?
- How did this moment transform you?

Pausing gives emotions time to land. It allows listeners to reflect, react, and connect, especially when the speaker uses concrete details in their descriptions.

Consider the difference between saying: “I was nervous before my presentation.” And saying: “I stood backstage gripping my notes—*[pause]*—realizing my hands would not stop shaking.”

The second example places the audience inside the experience, and the pause makes it emotionally engaging. But don’t stop there. This is where “tell me more” truly begins, and you can invite listeners into the deeper emotional layer, creating a connection audiences can remember:

“In that moment, I realized I was not afraid of failing. *[Pause]* I was afraid of being seen.”

Vulnerability pulls people closer because it feels human and unfinished. And leaving space for emotion

gives audiences time to become emotionally invested.

The next step is reflection, not a lecture, or advice wrapped in motivational language. Allow the audience to discover themselves inside your story.

“The room went quiet after I spoke. Not because I had the perfect words—*[pause]*—but because I finally stopped trying to prove anything. *[Pause]* I could feel myself there, fully, without hiding. *[Pause]* And in that moment, something shifted.”

In that space, the audience is not being convinced, they are being invited. And something in them begins to fill in the pauses on their own.

Effective speaking is not about saying more. It is about revealing the right depth at the right moment.

When speakers become curious about their own stories, audiences become curious too. And that curiosity transforms speeches into experiences people remember long after the applause ends.

Sometimes, all it takes are three simple words: **Tell me more.**

Margarita Y. Pinhas, DTM, is an international award-winning speaker, leadership communication coach, TEDx speaker, and youth speaker coach. A member of the Professional Career Speakers club, she helps speakers and leaders worldwide develop confidence, presence, and authentic storytelling onstage and in professional settings.

5 QUESTIONS WITH...

Luisa Montalvo

Storytelling advice from an expert.



This month we're talking to Luisa Montalvo, the 2024 Toastmasters World Champion of Public Speaking. A member of Montalvo Toastmasters in Pharr, Texas, and the Poland-based hybrid club Verbal Victory, she also placed second in the 2019 World Championship of Public Speaking®. Her championship-winning speech, "[37 Strangers](#)," is the compelling story of how she nearly died in a car accident in 2022.

More about
Luisa

Hometown:

San Juan, Texas

Number of years in Toastmasters:

≡ 17 ≡

Profession:

Motivational speaker,
dog transporter, dog
rescue volunteer



Hobbies:

Traveling and playing and
listening to music



Why are stories such a powerful way to engage audiences?

Stories are where you have the opportunity to engage the audience and take them on your journey, and who doesn't like a trip when someone else is doing all the work and all you have to do is listen?

How do you shape a story so it resonates with listeners?

There's a fine line between sharing too much and not sharing enough. There's also a level of emotional vulnerability that the speaker needs to be willing to share so the audience can relate to the speaker and the story. Sometimes using our most embarrassing or eye-opening occurrence is the heart of our speech. Once you have the why of your speech, the rest should easily follow.

How faithful do you stay to the facts in your storytelling?

I love this question because so many times we feel we need to stay within 100% of the truth of our story. I usually stay within 90% of the truth. I feel if a small part of the story is fiction but helps enhance the message for the audience, by all means enhance.

Your World Championship speech centered on your experience in a near-fatal car accident. What motivated you to share that particular story?

I'm 99% of the time an upbeat, positive person and nothing gets me down, but going through what I went through was an emotional low for me, something I had never experienced. I think many of us may experience something traumatic but don't talk about it. I wanted to express the fact that it's okay to feel down at times—just don't stay there. Sometimes all we need to do is look around and see all we can be grateful for.

How has Toastmasters helped you hone your storytelling skills?

I used to speak 100 miles an hour because I would get so excited about my story! Toastmasters evaluations have given me the opportunity to see the value in constructive feedback. I've now learned that using pauses, voice modulation, and tempo can enrich any story.

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