



TELLERS TIPS



Improving Your Stories; an extract from Tom Ware's "Tips from a Master Storyteller".

THE WORDS you use, the gestures and sound effects you make, should all be used to enhance the story in your audience's mind.

You do this by using the right type of words, gestures which flow naturally, and sound effects that augment the story.

Nothing should seem contrived.

And, unlike comedy, nothing should be suddenly incongruous.

A seemingly natural spontaneity is the way to go.

Let us look at language.

First the words you use.

If a word is not readily and easily understood by the listener it is not a good word.

The listener might not know the exact meaning of that word or term but it should be easily interpreted within the context of our sentence.

For example, a nautical term might be used such as "A huge wave threw the ship onto her beam ends."

The expression *beam ends* might not be familiar to the listener, but the fact that the ship is in a storm would suffice to make what is happening clear. And you can always paraphrase to make it doubly clear. "*Her rail went right under, water sloshed her deck.*"

One might think it would be easier to avoid the languages used in specialist fields such as the Maritime, Aviation, Mountaineering, Building, Sport or whatever the general background of a story, but to this I say a resounding "No." It is your very use of these words – if they are *familiar to you* because you have lived this life – that will make for the authenticity of the story. To avoid words which spring naturally to our lips could well be a sort of affectation.

Use your words!

Use the words you 'think with.'

Avoid the deeply technical

On the other hand, to strive for effect by using terminology you're not familiar with is an affectation your audience will see through. It will detract from what you have to say.

Don't trot out sentence after sentence of specialist terminology that it is unlikely the listener will understand.

For example,

if you were a medical doctor you could use a few of the more common terms understood by the layman. *Achilles tendon, artery and biceps*, are fine. *Femur* might not be. The term *Anterior Tibial Artery* without carefully explaining what it is would leave a non-specialist listener firstly, confused and, if this sort of thing was kept up, resentful...or asleep.



You will have picked up the use of these specialist words in your life experiences. Avoid the ones you're pretty sure the listener won't readily comprehend. But we can make a deliberate and sustained effort to add colorful and useful words to our vocabulary so that our storytelling – indeed, our general speaking skills – are enhanced.

Certainly this was a method I pursued for some time.

Building a Storytelling Vocabulary

One way to do this is to buy for yourself a book of *Synonyms and Antonyms*.

No, don't rely on a computer program on your PC.

These words must be affixed in *your* memory banks not your computer's.

They need be words that you have practised in some way to make them your own.

You may have done this by writing them into a sentence or three, so that you have actually used them before.

Why Synonyms? Most people need to expand their vocabulary so that it goes from a certain coarseness to one of smoother grain, one of subtlety.

Take a look at these words: Gleam, glisten, glint, glow, shine, shimmer.

All refer to the way an object might be perceived by the eye but there are subtle differences.

Learn them. Practice using them all.

Another word with an enormous amount of synonyms is *big*. We have *large, enormous, gigantic, huge, massive, gargantuan, colossal, immense* – and *great* the last of which is generally done to death.



So use all of them instead of just big or great. One could also generalize and say that the word 'great' is a lazy person's word, used for multiple purposes. It's over use really does detract.

In a presentation, if the same **adjective** is used over and over again it starts to ring in the listener's ear. The thought occurs: "Is this the only word the speaker knows to describe this?" and once such a thought arises, being absorbed is lost. The story goes out the window.

I cannot emphasize enough that as speakers and storytellers, words are our tools of trade. The more we've got in our tool boxes, the more adaptable we will be.

Additionally, the shorter the words the more power they convey.

A generalization, perhaps, but it is true in most instances. The Greek, Latin, and French words might have a certain 'pizzas.' They might indicate an intellectual or highly educated man or woman. They don't do much for story.

Take an example from the famous writer, Ernest Hemingway who, in his story, *The Old Man and the Sea*, uses sentence after sentence of single-syllable words. This is power!

The Anglo-Saxon and Norse words are the English words you want to add to your vocabulary: *Leg, cut, hit, dab, stab, club, ran, fled, plot, plod, clod, plop, clot, clash clank, cliff, cleft, hew.*

Most of these words are familiar to you – do you use them? Learn as many short, single syllable words as you comfortably can. Three letter words. Then four letter words – no, they're not all swear words. Yes, most of those *are* Anglo-Saxon.

And have you noticed how so many long words are deliberately shortened nowadays? Information becomes info, policeman, cop, and psychiatrist, shrink, application becomes app. We like short words!

Learn to use short, powerful words

Devise a system to learn short words. Don't overdo it and say, "I'm going to learn fifty a week." Learn two or three in a week. After a year or so you will have many more colorful and useful words to draw on and as the years go by you'll add more.

One thing about Public Speaking or Storytelling, generally **the older we get the better we get.**



Like Creative Writing it is probably one of the few fields of endeavor where we never get 'beyond it.'

Discounting medical conditions such as senility and Alzheimer's of course. We are better at eighty than we were at forty.

So give yourself time to become that Master Storyteller you are perhaps envisioning now.



Former Guild Member, Tom Ware, has presented his stories to over 800 audiences over the past thirty years.