

Twitter Thread by Julian Shapiro

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This is my 5 year story about becoming a far better storyteller.

Goal: Tell a story as well as Neil deGrasse Tyson.

It started with me podcasting to share stories with friends. Every time I spoke, however, I sounded lifeless like a stressed-out amateur.

Why?

I tracked down great storytellers to learn from them.

Unexpectedly, even the best could only articulate *some* of the ingredients that make them great.

There was something intangible underneath their explanations that they couldn't address when pressed.

That sounded like a treasure hunt to me:

Collect the hidden ingredients needed to tell a remarkable story charismatically.

I would finally become a storyteller.

Because these ingredients were hard to identify, I used the process of "learning by inversion."

This is where you learn how something works by studying its bad examples. Then you do the opposite of them.

So I watched a lot of bad storytellers on YouTube.

Thanks, TED.

It became clear that there are two ways to tell a story:

1. In whatever way suddenly comes to mind

2. *Strategically*

You can be a person telling a story OR you can be a storyteller.

Storytellers know something non-storytellers don't: storytelling is the art of strategically withholding details.

Before starting, decide which points to withhold until the end—to maximize suspense along the way.

This requires premeditation.

Neil deGrasse Tyson told writer David Perell that 90% of the stories and analogies he speaks are first written down.

Most folks don't realize this.

The art is in making this prep work invisible.

Don't memorize every word. Just the key points so that you re-discover rich details in real-time.

This produces spontaneous pauses, moments of self-reflection, and false starts—and that's what you're going for.

Minimizing memorization turns a presentation, which is boring, into an intimate campfire, which gets people to lean in.

Another problem with ineffective storytellers was they couldn't convince me to listen to their whole speech.

They were missing a narrative hook like you'd find in fiction.

Tactic: Raise a question without giving the full answer.

For example, "It was the worst date of my entire life."

People then wonder, "Why?"

Watch good storytellers and you notice that their hooks fall into a few categories:

- Raising questions but not giving the full answer.
- Sharing the stakes of a story but not giving away the conclusion.
- Sharing a shocking truth but not yet explaining how it's possible.

This is when I noticed that storytellers were sharing tactics with Hollywood films:

I spotted that the longer a story is, the more that hooks are interspersed throughout the middle.

Tactic: Keep raising questions that you don't immediately answer.

Eventually, you'll have to deliver the answers you promised.

When you do, filmmaking teaches us to drag out the telling.

The climax in a blockbuster film is an action scene.

The action is never resolved in seconds—even if that's how long it would take in real life.

Instead, every detail is magnified. Every punch is slow-motion.

When the audience senses a threat around the corner, the fear comes from you stretching and sustaining that sensation.

If you don't stretch it, your story is just a line-by-line accounting of how events unfolded.

Tactic: Like a good sleuth, slow down and magnify the details.

Big realization:

Storytelling is not only the art of strategically withholding information, it's also the art of *time dilation.*

By the way, this is a long thread. Don't get mad at me ■ I think it's worth it. I have some amazing videos to show you in a moment.

Films teach us something else too: the importance of having a hero. As humans, we're hardwired to put ourselves in the shoes of others.

That's what happens when you read fiction or root for a boxer in a fight:

You merge your identity *into* theirs and live their story—instead of it being told to you.

Tactic: How can you restructure your narrative through the lens of a hero—instead of being an omniscient author?

Heroes and villains don't have to be people. The hero can be Earth and the villain can be climate change.

Alright, let's hit pause on these YouTube videos.

Ingredients we have so far: limited memorization, hook, mystery, climax, time dilation, and a hero.

Now, do I need every one of those ingredients for my story to land?

Not at all, but the more you have, typically the better.

So I took to the mic and recorded a pilot episode with a friend.

How good could we make this podcast with my newfound knowledge?

It turns out...

Not good at all. Hardly better than before.

The episode was clinical. Lifeless. It resonated intellectually but not emotionally.

It was no better than a middle-of-the-road TED talk.

Darn.

The problem wasn't the content itself, which I constructed well using the techniques above, but rather the delivery was way off.

Realization:

What I failed to notice is that the bar for delivery on the Internet is a lot higher than the bar for talking to friends in person.

Internet strangers lack empathy for you.

They're waiting to see if you'll entertain them more than the Netflix show that's two clicks away.

There's a reason many podcasts go unlistened to. This stuff is hard.

How many Neil deGrasse Tysons can you even think of?

Wait, that's a good question. Could I find more people like Neil on YouTube?

Maybe learning by inversion wasn't the right path.

Who are the best storytellers on the planet?

Hmm.

After days of stumbling through YouTube, I found a few who could magically make anyone lean in.

What they had in common was what they did with their voices: rhythmic variation.

This is the art of:

- Varying your speed
- Varying your volume
- Varying your enthusiasm and energy
- Using staccato and rhythm
- And most of all..

...vocal delivery is the art of pausing.

Of purposeful silence.

Silence says to listeners, "Slow down and think through what I just said."

This creates dramatic effect. Like the quiet before a jump scare in a movie.

During a moment of silence, people can only do two things: reflect on what just happened or fear what comes next.

This is one of the cheapest, easiest, and most powerful ways to play up a moment:

Just shut up for a second.

Silence makes whatever you just said feel 10x more important.

And whatever you're about to say next becomes 10x more intriguing.

The more I listened to vocal pauses and variation, the clearer it became that spoken storytelling is *music.*

Listeners are mentally dancing to your rhythm, staccato, and pauses.

You talk. Now faster.

You whisper. You go silent.

You strike and jab with fast, staccato sentences. The audience feels pressured—on their back toes.

Then you slow down and quiet your voice. They relax.

Your voice is the instrument of storytelling.

When I found this MLK video, I finally understood what vocal variation is.

Notice his time dilation—how he stretches out moments and syllables.

Notice the hero's lens: he's made it his story, and in doing so he's made it personal to the audience.

<https://t.co/qxCV9u2VWf>

Meta note:

Twitter has a glitch where in a few tweets from now it may look like the thread is over, but it's not. You're halfway done. If you see it cut off, click "Expand thread" or "See details" (or whatever) to keep reading.

Anyway, back to the story:

At this point, it was time to re-attempt my podcast.

What storytelling ingredients has my treasure hunt dug up so far?

Limited memorization, hook, mystery, climax, time dilation, a hero's perspective, and vocal variation.

In my first try at recording, I nailed every story beat—and I was compelling.

Sweet. I'm onto something.

But...

There was something strange missing.

Something that really matters when you're hosting a podcast...

I wasn't particularly likeable.

It was obvious to anyone listening.

Why?

I wasn't sure. Something to do with delivery I think. I lacked soul.

Maybe it was the missing ingredient that the great storytellers couldn't articulate for themselves when pressed?

That had to be it. I felt that I had reverse engineered everything else by this point.

Seriously, what the heck was that missing ingredient?

Unclear.

The podcast was paused.

*** One year later. ***

One of my favorite people on the planet is Courtland Allen. He runs a startup community.

One day he asked, "Do you want to start a podcast with me?"

This was one of those opportunities where you don't say no and you trust in serendipity.

But I knew I didn't have "it" on camera yet. I never did.

We went ahead and recorded a sample episode anyway.

We brought in big guests from the tech industry. We prepped hard.

Want to know how it turned out?

...It sucked. Still.

What a waste of time. Just like I expected too.

The episodes were lifeless, like they were before, and frankly weren't worth listening to. I had wasted our guests' time.

(Sorry, Ryan and Greg.)

I had put a lot of time into this. Hundreds of hours.

This time, I would not let this be the end.

What I knew for certain was that the last big leap in progress came from studying great speakers on YouTube.

So I doubled down on that. After a long week of aimless stumbling, I came across a guy named Jason Silva.

Thirty seconds into this video from Jason, it became clear what likeability and charisma look like.

This guy is special:

<https://t.co/mni2c8J9jt>

Magnetic.

The most notable thing Jason does is *blow his own mind* as he recounts his stories. This is purposeful.

This is what I was referring to earlier: don't recite your script. Instead, relive the story and its emotions in real-time.

This is infectious for the audience.

It works so magically because of the phenomenon of "mirror neurons," as some folks call it:

Consider how when you see a fighter break their ankle, you wince in pain too.

That's "mirror neurons" at work.

When you see someone who can't breathe from laughing, you smirk.

And—the classic—when the person next to you on the bus yawns, you yawn.

Mirror neurons are critical to story delivery.

You are reliving the hero's journey for your audience, and they are experiencing it through you.

You are the hero's proxy.

This means be excited at moments of excitement, be shocked at moments of shock, and be wowed at moments of wonder.

Listeners feed off these moments of self-reflection.

When I watch Jason's videos, I'm pulled by his gravity.

Simply put, *vocal storytelling is reliving.*

This reflects tens of thousands of years of human behavior:

Imagine a hunter-gatherer darting down from the mountaintop to gather his tribe members.

He's exasperatedly recounting what just happened: A pack of starving, rabid lions sprinted after him for half a mile.

The tribe members are glued to his every word because they feel the horror on his face—and they fear that could have been them.

It. Could. Have. Been. Them.

That's the magic quality.

And suddenly everything clicked into place. My storytelling treasure hunt was doomed to fail.

I was on a year-long search for every ingredient a story needs, and now I realized that keeping track of all these ingredients in real-time makes you so preoccupied with deliberate construction that you lose the most important thing:

Just blow your own mind.

When you do this, your body captures other storytelling ingredients *automatically.*

It knows how to vary vocal delivery, it knows when to pause, it knows when to emphasize. Because when your mind relives the emotions, your body does the rest.

You become cinema.

It gets better. Hand-in-hand with blowing his own mind, Jason exudes charisma.

This is a serene state of projecting three qualities at once: confidence + joy + love for your audience.

When you embody these, your thoughts flow into listeners' minds without friction.

Listeners are no longer focused on your eccentricities, insecurities and weird hand movements.

Instead, they've opened their minds and deferred to you as their mental travel guide.

Theatre coach Konstantin Stanislavski coined the term “public solitude.” This is the ability to behave like you're alone when in front of a room full of people.

Nothing is more riveting than watching someone truly experiencing public solitude.

The more a storyteller loses themselves in the telling, the more the audience does too.

So, Courtland and I sat down to record our podcast again.

I felt confident I now had the ingredients.

We preemptively bought the domain name, designed the show's graphics, told our friends about it, and started inviting the big guests we always wanted to talk to.

I DM'ed one potential guest who happened to be following me on Twitter. I asked if he'd be our first-ever guest.

He surprised me by saying yes.

Guess who it was?

Jason Silva.

YouTube's ultra-charismatic storyteller.

Then I went to Tim Urban to ask if he'd co-guest with Jason. Tim Urban is the mind behind Wait But Why.

He's one of the best written storytellers of our era.

Me, Jason, Tim, and Courtland sat down to talk for an hour on one topic...

Storytelling ■

Midway into the episode, I told Jason a story of my own. It used many of the ingredients in this post.

He absolutely loved it.

The episode turned out wonderfully.

I asked Jason about the concept of blowing your own mind.

Yes, he does this on purpose.

I was spot on. He told me he relives the feelings he had for an idea when he first encountered it.

He doesn't start recording until he reaches that place again.

It turns out this is the ingredient no one could articulate a year ago!

Blowing your own mind was the unspoken technique.

Treasure hunt complete.

We're off to the races now. You can listen to our podcast here: <https://t.co/ONrGdjbj2s>

I'll be honest, this experience was amazing. Years in the making. Truly, years. Full circle.

Before I wrap up, let's focus on you.

How do you find your stories worth telling?

One way is to identify the significant moments that changed your life:

- Formative moments—moments of change
- Painful moments
- The moments of triumph and cringe

Which memories can't you shake? That means they left a strong impression.

Do they make you look bad? Do they make you uncomfortable?

Good, that makes them extra interesting to others.

Now ask yourself:

Which of these stories can end with inspiration, wisdom, or insight? Which has meaning?

Once you've chosen one, consider stretching your story over a narrative arc:

- The hero's perspective.
- Build suspense and empathy for the hero.
- Goal and obstacles that produce change.
- A surprising and meaningful moment of triumph.
- A lesson that sticks with us.

Remember, don't reveal everything upfront.

And hook listeners with something fascinating.

Then stretch the tense moments out. Relive them. Be excited by the exciting. Be shocked at the shocking.

Test these stories over dinner. See which hold people's attention.

But don't tell the same people the same story multiple times. Especially your grandkids—they hate that.

After all these years, here's what I now tell myself:

When you blow your own mind, you become a better storyteller. Your voice instinctively knows what to do.

And when a great storyteller loses themselves in their story, they also lose their self-consciousness.

Public solitude.

Then we as the audience hang onto their every word. Because this is a rare moment of human authenticity.

I'll be tweeting more about storytelling this month.

I just posted some in-depth writing threads too: [@julian](#)

I turned this thread into a blog post.

Should be easier to read this way:

<https://t.co/yn3giFskMm>