



**WORDS FROM THE WORKPLACE**

**TIPS ON WRITING AND  
DRAMATIC READING**

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*TELLING OUR STORIES IN OUR OWN VOICES*

As workers, we all have important stories to tell; stories that haven't been told often enough, and that contain important truths that society needs to hear.

*YOUR STORY IS IMPORTANT.*

A generation raised on Rambo and robots needs to know what real life is all about. Our children are getting some distorted ideas about life--about work, about love, about sex, about what a real adventure is, about what real courage is.

Your life and your work are filled with stories and adventures you haven't shared with anyone else and haven't put in a form which can be passed on to your family or your friends or your union brothers and sisters.

The rest of society, fed a diet of television fantasy, needs to know what the American worker thinks and feels, about the fights and defeats and victories, about the constant daily petty humiliations of a bad boss; about the satisfaction of a good day's hard work; about the boredom of a repetitious job or about the flights of imagination it can sometimes let happen.

*YOUR VOICE MUST BE THE AUTHENTIC EXPRESSION OF YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE.*

Any of us can end up spouting the "media line" if we allow our doubts and fears to prevail over our dreams and hopes. The message on a popular tee-shirt "Vote your hopes, not your fears" can be applied to writing and thinking about your writing.

Your authentic voice can speak if you have the courage to:

1. Speak for yourself, not for the media image of a working woman or man.
2. Say what you hear, see, smell, taste, touch--not what television says things look like, smell like, taste like or feel like.
3. Say what you think, not what mass public opinion says you should think.
4. Say what you feel; don't worry about what is "acceptable."
5. Describe your actions and your life situations.
6. Use language you are comfortable with.

*YOUR STORY, TOLD IN YOUR OWN VOICE, SHOULD BE SHARED.*

Seek out places to share your best stories and poems. Submit short entries to your local union newsletter; see if your local city newspaper has a section which accepts short fiction. Check with your city library to find out other possible outlets for your written work.

Take your work to the annual Labor Jam in Fort Madison and share it by dramatic reading. Contact a local song writer and get your poems set to music.

Offer to present a reading at a local union event--a Labor Day celebration or even a local union meeting.

*BEGIN AT ONCE.*

Don't wait for a special time or until the mood strikes you. Carry a notebook and get down words, phrases, points you want to make. Think about the tone.

Make a first draft. Let ideas flow. Write what you think you want to say until you run out of words. You don't have to start at the beginning! Start with the end, or start with the major point you want to make. The rest will flow later.

Let the story incubate, if you have the time. Then go back.

Edit your own writing. Use active, not passive verbs. Use language the way you usually do. Write like you talk. Show, don't tell.

## STORIES FROM THE WORK PLACE

*"Stories happen to those that tell them."*

(Thucydides)

**Starting Place:** Think about a time at work when you felt some emotion--your heart rate grow faster or your head lighter or your skin warmer.... Let that be the center of your story and tell about the events that led up to it. What happened and what effect did it have on the people who were involved: that is a story!

Use your own voice--your own language and way of talking. Most stories are told in one of two ways:

--in the first person: "I remember the first time I saw Rodney lose his temper."

or

--in the third person: "George would never forget the time he saw an airplane crash."

Be willing to lie--not just to protect the innocent--and the guilty!--but to make it a better story. You can stretch the truth or take out details that are not necessary or do anything you please. It's your story. What really happened doesn't matter unless you want it to.

**SOME TIPS.** There are no rules for story telling, but a few guidelines might be useful. We've heard stories all of our lives, and these tips describe how stories usually go. Following conventions when you tell (or write) a story can make it easier for the listener (or reader) to get involved.

**1. The opening.** In the first page or so, let the reader know the following:

Where are we? What is the scene like; what time of day and season is it; what year is it...

Which characters are important? You don't have to introduce everyone right away. In a short story, too many characters can throw the reader for a loop. Think of ways to help the reader keep the characters straight.

What kind of world is this? Is this a supernatural or science fiction story?

**NOTE:** Many times the beginning of a story is the hardest part to write. If this is true for you, just keep going and return to the opening when you're done.

**2. Pacing.** Tell the story as you would tell a friend what happened but and then try slowing it down: stay in each scene longer. Show rather than tell. Let the reader hear people talking. Let the reader smell, taste, touch, see what the characters are experiencing.

For example, you might tell us: "Joe enjoyed driving the bus." Or you might show this: "Joe whistled to himself as he opened the

doors to the bus that morning and wiped down his steering wheel. Adjusting his mirror, he straightened the collar of his uniform, and headed out of the garage at exactly 7:54 AM."

3. **The climax.** Usually the most emotional moment in the story (the point at which your reader feels the most afraid, sad, angry, surprised) comes toward the end of the story. Again this is not a rule, but most stories follow this format. Readers (also movie and tv watchers) often expect the climax to come about three-quarters of the way through the story.

4. **The ending.** Stories can end in a number of ways. If the action in your story has affected the main character in some way, you might hint at this in the ending. Or we might see how the character is different now. For example, a formerly stingy character might give away most of his lunch.

NOTE: Surprise endings are terrific, but they work best when they're set up. When the surprise comes, we (the reader) should feel we could have guessed, but we didn't. Hiding important information makes the surprise less believable.

READING. If you're interested in writing stories, reading can be an enormous help. Some books you might look at that include stories about the work place:

*On the Job/ Fiction about Work by Contemporary American Writers.* Edited by William O'Rourke. Vintage Books Division of Random House, 1977.

*A Hard Row to Hoe/ Writing from the Working People of Rural America.* Seven Buffaloes Press, 1981

*Sealskin and Shoddy/ Working Women in American Labor Press Fiction, 1870--1920.* edited by Ann Schofield Greenwood Press, 1988

*Working/ People Talk About What They do All Day and How they Feel About What They Do by Studs Terkel.* Pantheon Books Division of Random House, 1974.

WRITING. The more you write, the easier it will become. Don't worry about getting it right the first time. Just tell the story, knowing that any of it can be changed. One of the best tools for editing and rewriting is simply reading your story aloud to yourself. Then show it to others. What questions do they have? What interests them? How does your story affect them?

Even though most of us spend about half of our waking hours at work, very little has been written about it. It's an interesting topic with lots of untold stories. Good Luck to You. Keep telling stories!

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Tsivia Cohen

## STORYTELLING

### 1. Opener

You have the audience's attention when you appear before it. How long and to what extent you maintain its interest depends upon your opening line(s). You must have this well prepared, because the beginning sets the tone and mood of the story. **Telling a story is like negotiating a contract -- open strong, close big.**

### 2. Bridge

Storytelling is like taking someone else on a trip with you. **Although surprises are always fun, your audience needs to feel that you know where you're going.** They listen for a purpose and trust you to lead them safely home. In preparing your story, map out where you want it to go. If you think of the opening as the **appetizer** and the end as the **dessert**, then the bridge is the **meat** of your story.

### 3. Climax (or Point)

Back to the idea of storytelling as a trip: you've invited your audience along for the ride and the road you've chosen keeps going up and up (or around and around). Hopefully you've made the "scenery" interesting enough so they're still with you. **The climax is the point in the story when one of two things can happen: Either you have developed a series of ideas or images which are arranged progressively so that the most forceful is last OR there is a decisive turning point in the action.**

Example:

"Ol' Big Foot and that Scab got to kickin' and fightin', cuttin' and gougin' until that Ol' Scab tripped on his own tongue and fell clean off the edge of the earth."

Think of an example of a climatic moment in yours' or someone else's story.

### 4. Conclusion

In successful story-telling you paint a picture with your words and lodge it in the minds of your listeners. **They may not remember all the details, but they always remember the ending:**

"And they lived happily ever after."

**The conclusion is your way of wrapping up the action or tying up the loose ends** (sometimes referred to as the "denouement").

## STORYTELLING SKILLS

### Gesture

Before sound recording was added to film-making, movie actors, like their stage counterparts, had to rely on gesture and expression to convey their thoughts, feelings, and actions. Buster Keaton, nicknamed "The Great Stone Face" was known, not only for his stoic, unmoving countenance, but his athletic ability to communicate humor through gesture and expression. The art of effective speaking involves not only effective use of the voice, but the face and body as well.

The following elements can be used in combination or alone to enhance your speech.

1. Mime (or Pantomime): action or gestures without words as a means of expression.
2. Burlesque: imitating or acting out using slapstick comedy or satire; derisive caricature; parody.
3. Dance: to move the body and feet in rhythm, usually to music.
4. Sound and Motion: acting out an idea or action using non-verbal sounds, music, and body movement.
5. Straight-Man: minimal use of gestures or movement (i.e., Jack Benny)

Simple, straightforward speech-making does not need an overabundance of movement, but being frozen to one spot or standing with the arms glued to one's side, may be as distracting and disastrous as too much movement.

### Expression

A gamut of emotions can be expressed on the human face. Although Buster Keaton's style was certainly one to be reckoned with, the purity of a Mary Pickford or the passion of a Valentino were equally effective and respected. The face (and body) can be used to say one thing while your words say another.

Practice using different facial expressions in front of a mirror to be sure your face agrees with what your mouth is saying.

Amused	Relaxed	Annoyed	Roguish
Confused	Tickled	Self-satisfied	Carnal
Anger	Pleasure	Foolish	Angelic
Mysterious	Simple	Divine	Enraged
Innocence	Ecstasy	Sarcastic	Playful
Hard-nosed	Fragile	Sorrow	Joyous
Agony	Fuddy-duddy	Dignified	Puzzled
Embarrassment	Pleased	Hysterical	Proud
Disgust	Giddy	Tired	Woe
Wonder	Mocking	Subdued	Triumphant

### Practicing & Preparation

1. **There is no such thing as "over preparation".** The most moving and talented actors rehearse their lines, over and over again. The three magic words are: practice, practice, and practice (some more).
2. **Practice your story out loud;** ideally before others, but at least in front of the mirror. To tell if it's effective, you need to hear it--it is not a term paper. Use a tape recorder, but beware of the old, "I don't sound like that," trap.
3. **Know your audience,** where you will be speaking, who will introduce you.
4. **Wear something appropriate;** and something that you are comfortable in.
5. **If you can, bring a friendly and trusted critic**--someone to look at it initially to ground you, and who will give you honest praise and criticism after you are done.
6. **Learn it "by heart".** Unless you are in a particularly informal setting, we recommend writing out exactly what you intend to say--word by word or use index cards with key ideas on them. Spontaneity and passion come from good delivery, energy and confidence--not from **not knowing** what comes next.

### Delivery

1. **Open your mouth.** Think about bouncing the sound off your hard palate (the roof of your mouth, just in back of teeth).
2. **Keep your feet on the ground.** Stand up straight. Stand in a firm, rooted posture, as in karate. Your feet should be approximately hip-width apart.
3. **Use eye contact.** Look at individuals for a long time. Give individuals in the audience long, personal looks.
4. **Don't run away when you're done.** Keep looking at the audience and have your expression say "I'm finished."
5. **Use your hands to express and to accentuate.** If you are unsure of your hand gestures, it's safe to let your arms just hang. Empty your pockets of change money or keys so you won't be tempted to rattle them absentmindedly while speaking.
6. **Don't be afraid to speak slowly.** Most of us tend to speak fast when we are nervous or excited (or both), because that way we won't take up so much of our listener's precious time, since they probably don't want to be listening to us anyway. They will want to listen more if you speak slowly and decisively.
7. **Be aware of your voice--your pitch.** Are you speaking in a high, pinched voice or are you rumbling so low that no one can hear you.
8. **About fear: recognize it and work with it.** Use nervous energy to bring animation and caring to your presentation. Fantasize about your worst fears and try to prepare for them (even if they are unlikely to happen). If you make a mistake, get it over with and move on. Don't apologize or belabor it.
9. **Look for opportunities to try your skills.** The best way to improve your delivery is to practice by speaking often.



## ELEMENTS OF POETRY

Awareness of Experience
Emotion
Imagination
Concentration
Metaphor
Sound
Rhythm

1. awareness of experience--not just telling what happened, but what it feels like, how it strikes you, the emotional impact.

prose: My spouse comes home grumpy from the night shift to disturb my sleep.

POETRY:

In the middle of some warm and favorite dream  
 he arrives  
 tense and resentful  
 make me, somehow, responsible  
 for the job the crazy hours  
 the cold walk home  
 Bronwen Wallace, "Nightshift No. 2"

2. emotional response--the trick is to get the reader/listener to feel what you felt, or to call forth from them an emotion that they felt in a similar circumstance in their own lives.

prose: Sometimes when I'm scared, I feel as if I'm drowning.

POETRY:

What does it *feel* like, this fear  
 that smothers me  
 like a flame deprived of air?  
 Hold your head under water  
 until your temples pound  
 and your lungs are clenched like fists.  
 Stephen Dohrmann

3. imagination--try to think of new ways to think about and describe things, feelings.

prose: The wind is blowing; the sun is setting.

POETRY:

The wind twirls on its stem  
 the last of daylight  
 decorates the wall  
 Maureen McCarthy, "Memory"

prose: My older brother died at birth.

POETRY:

My elder,  
Born into death like a message into a bottle  
W.S. Merwin, "To My Brother Hanson"

4. concentration--condensed into a few sharp words, images, metaphors.

prose: You should remember this simple lesson: be careful about what you say in the heat of the moment; you might not be able to take it back without injuring your pride.

POETRY:

Look out how you use proud words.  
When you let proud words go, it is  
not easy to call them back.  
They wear long boots, hard boots; they  
walk off proud; they can't hear you  
calling--  
Look out how you use proud words.  
Carl Sandburg, "Primer Lesson"

5. metaphor--a figure of speech which creates a mental picture by describing one thing as something else.

prose: The moon is a natural satellite revolving around the earth.

POETRY:

what if  
the moon's a balloon?  
e.e. cummings

A simile is a figure of speech comparing two things by using the words "like" or "as"--

inside the factory  
the hammering of machines  
is *like* the beating  
of a hundred hundred iron drums  
Stephen Dohrmann

6. sound--the sound of language, like the sound of music, can be used to convey certain moods, as well as just a pleasant listening experience; two ways to use word-sounds are *rhyme* and *alliteration*.

RHYME:

Not that they starve, but starve so dreamlessly,  
 Not that they sow, but that they seldom reap,  
 Not that they serve, but have no gods to serve,  
 Not that they die but that they die like sheep.  
 Vachel Lindsay, "The Leaden-Eyed"

ALLITERATION:

In the thin loam, each rock a word  
 a creek-washed stone  
 Granite: ingrained  
 with torment of fire and weight  
 Gary Snyder, "Riprap"

7. rhythm--poetry is marked by its cadence of stressed and unstressed syllables and pauses, its "beat" (like music); the rhythm may be in the form of a recurring meter, or just the free-flowing "beat" of the words.

METER:

We're WAITing HERE in ALLEntOWN  
 Where they're CLOSing ALL the FACTories DOWN  
 Billy Joel, "Allentown"

RHYTHM:

I hear America singing, the varied carols I  
 hear...  
 The boatman singing what belongs to him in his  
 boat, the deck-hand singing on the  
 steamboat deck,  
 The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench,  
 the hatter singing as he stands  
 Walt Whitman, "I Hear America Singing"

A bar of steel--it is only  
 Smoke at the heart of it, smoke and the blood of  
 a man...  
 Pittsburgh, Youngstown, Gary--they make their  
 steel with men..  
 Smoke and blood is the mix of steel.  
 Carl Sandburg, "Smoke and Steel"