



# Spice up your training with stories

By Eleanor Shakiba

Imagine being able to breathe life into dry subject-matter, engage a resistant group or have people remember your training years after you deliver it. That's what story telling can help you do. In this four-part series you'll discover how to create teaching metaphors, build engaging characters and bring your stories to life on stage.

## ■ How stories promote learning

Stories are narratives that are designed to entertain, influence or instruct. Since ancient times, stories have been used to reinforce cultural norms, solve problems and teach both children and adults. In the business world, storytelling can be used to create tales that convey business values or strategies. As a trainer, you can use stories to:

- build rapport with your group
- change the mood of learners
- overcome resistance to learning
- challenge negative attitudes
- reinforce cultural norms
- assist learners to suspend disbelief
- boost retention of facts
- add energy to your training sessions.

Stories help everyone in your training understand your material. They also engage emotions – this is why they are so useful

when you need to overcome resistance to the subject matter you're delivering. For example, how would you handle a group who had been sent to a session on Appropriate Workplace Behaviour and didn't want to be there? Stories would be a powerful tool in this situation. You could use them to entertain your group – which would help you build rapport with them. Or you could create stories that would illustrate the key concepts you wanted to teach.

## ■ Using stories to entertain

The simplest way to use stories in your training session is as a tool to engage and entertain. When you tell stories, your participants enter a relaxed and positive state of mind. This helps you connect with them and gain their attention. It is always best to tell your own story, rather than recycling a tale from a book or from another trainer's session. This makes the anecdote fresh and congruent. But it also means that you have to master the art of designing stories.

It is useful to collect ideas for stories in everyday situations. Many great story tellers carry a notebook wherever they go. If you do this, too, you will be able to record great ideas no matter when you think of them. You'll probably find that the ideas you list trigger new ideas when you review them. This will make your notebook a rich source of inspiration when you need to create a story for a training session.

To turn your notes into an entertaining story, you will need to construct a robust plot. Your plots can be based on reality or entirely fictitious. There are starting points for stories everywhere in life. You can base your tales on triggers such as:

- your own experiences
- situations you have observed
- news paper articles
- television shows
- novels
- dreams
- phrases heard in everyday life.

## ■ Using stories to teach

As a trainer, you need to create a story that teaches as well as entertains. This form of story is known as a “teaching metaphor” and is based on the style of story that therapists tell to promote change. Teaching metaphors are different to simple stories because they:

- mirror the actual problems of the group you are training
- suggest solutions for those problems
- contain strategies for action that can be used in real-life
- always end on a positive note.

Writing a teaching metaphor involves three main steps: 1) analysing a real-life problem; 2) designing a strategy for use in that situation; and 3) translating the strategy into a metaphorical context. A process for doing this is outlined below.

### 1. Pinpoint and describe the real-life problem.

Focus on the situation your learners need to address. Write down the key features of their current problem state. For example, if you’re working with a team that is in conflict, their specific problem might be a lack of agreed goals or purpose.

### 2. Design a strategy to solve the real-life problem.

Your strategy will reflect your training objectives. For example, a team without goals will need to learn how to identify individual interests, create win/win options and develop a shared vision.

### 3. Create a fictitious setting for your story.

This is where the creative thinking starts. You can set your story in the:

- animal kingdom
- plant world
- science fiction arena
- cartoon world
- corporate sector
- sports field
- world of fairies and make-believe.

For example, you might choose to create a fairy story to address the issue of team conflict. This would mean setting your story in a place where fairytale creatures might live. The bottom of a garden is one possibility. You could fill out your description of the story’s starting point by outlining what the garden looks like and why it is attractive to fairytale creatures.

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### 4. Create characters for your story.

It’s important to create characters that mirror real life. If there are three men and three women in the team you are training, for example, your fairytale could feature three elves and three goblins. You could introduce your characters by saying “Three elves and three fairies lived in a wonderful garden. They lived peacefully and enjoyed each others’ company. Every day, they met up at 10.30 for morning tea. This was a happy event, full of laughter and fun.”

### 5. Transpose the real-life problem into the story world.

Think of a way to describe the real life problem metaphorically. In our example scenario, the key issue to address in real life is conflict about the team’s goals. This means your characters will need a source of disagreement. You might decide to have your characters setting up a restaurant and disagreeing about what to put on the menu. Thus, you would say “One day the elves and the gnomes decided to set up a restaurant together. But they couldn’t agree on what they should sell. The elves wanted to sell round treats, and the gnomes wanted to sell square food. They spent a lot of time arguing and becoming frustrated.”

### 6. Transpose your problem-solving strategy into the story.

Describe your real-life strategy steps in a way that makes sense in your story world. For example, a strategy for resolving conflict is to list needs and concerns, brainstorm options and then create an action plan. To use this strategy in your story, you would describe some problems (dramatic twists) before allowing the story to climax at a point of win/win resolution. Then, of course, you would suggest that all the characters lived happily ever after. Thus the end of your story would be:

One of the gnomes decided to set up a problem solving session. He asked everyone to write down three characteristics of the foods they’d like to sell. When the gnomes and the elves compared their lists, it seemed like the problem will be impossible to solve. The gnomes wanted to sell round foods,

but the elves insisted square foods were better. The gnomes preferred to sell sweet products, the elves believed savoury goods were a better option. And the gnomes said that small treats were best, while the elves were committed to making large dishes.

The debate became very heated. Everyone was shouting and yelling – except for the smallest elf. She picked up her magic elf-idea-building-pen and started writing energetically. After ten minutes, the smallest elf smiled and said “I’ve found the answer.” Everyone stopped arguing and looked at the smallest elf’s notebook. There, in the middle of the page, she’d drawn a plate of fairy bread. “See,” she said, “we can all have what we want. Fairy bread is round and square, sweet and savoury, small and large.” All the gnomes and elves cheered in delight. They set up their shop the next week and they’re still doing great business today.

Having gone through the story design process, you’ll end up with a tale that will hold attention and teach the key principles you want to communicate. Even a fairy story can engage an adult audience. How do you persuade adults to take it seriously? Read the next edition of *Training and Development in Australia* to find out. ■

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Eleanor will be delivering a workshop at the 2010 AITD National Conference “Using stories to create learning: moving beyond storytelling to story making.”