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Dave Lieber's Dirty Dozen Story Tips

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1. **Stories must have significance.** Stories you tell or write should be more than about something interesting that happened to you. Your stories ought to reveal a universal truth about the human condition — something that brings deeper meaning and triggers heartfelt emotions for members of your audience. If it doesn't, toss it.
2. **Stories must be stories!** They MUST have a beginning, a middle and end. They must have a hero and a villain, although the villain can be a person, place, thing, trend, etc. They must have a plot and a climax with some type of resolution (tying up loose ends) at the conclusion.
3. **Stories must have a dramatic arch** that keeps the readers/listeners entwined as they progress through the story. Each piece of the tale must lead to the next.
4. **Tom Wolfe's New Journalism Tenet #1:** The best stories use "dialogue in full" to help the audience see and hear the characters. Dialogue establishes character better than any other single literary device.
5. **Tom Wolfe's New Journalism Tenet #2:** Great stories use "scene-by-scene construction" in which each scene builds upon the one before and leads to the one after. Stories should be told in individual scenes of varying lengths. Narrative between scenes (including learning points) is useful but best used as links in between great stories.
6. **Tom Wolfe's New Journalism Tenet #3:** Stories should be told through a personal point of view, often using the third person point of view of a participant, usually the hero, not so much the narrator. You gather material you need by asking the character (if it's not you) what happened that day, what they said, what they thought, what they wore, where they were going All to bring out the memorable details

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of the event. This helps them bring it alive when they retell you – so YOU can bring it alive when you tell others about it later. To reemphasize this: Make sure that every scene is presented through the eyes of a particular character, giving the audience the feeling of being inside the character's mind and experiencing it. This is what "show, not tell" means.

7. Tom Wolfe's New Journalism Tenet #4: Work hard on the recording of gestures, manners, customs, style of furniture, clothing, decoration, styles of travel, eating, keeping house, modes of behaving towards kids, servants, superiors, peers – and also the recording of looks, glances, poses, styles of walking, in other words, *the symbolic details of a person's status life*.

8. Using stories to teach. When you have teaching and learning to do (i.e. bullet points, etc.) do your best to hide them within the body of the story so the listener doesn't even realize they are grabbing this information and gaining knowledge. Instruction is buried so deep in the story that they will still get it — and retain it — because it's part of the overall enjoyment of the story. Another technique. Repeat your learning points twice at the end of a story. Once for the audience to hear how it relates to what they just heard; then a second time to burn it into their memory.

9. Consider splitting your story for effect. One technique I use when I have to train, instruct, educate, etc. is to take them through my signature story, and at the most dramatic moment, break off, promise them I will get back to it later, and then quickly go through the instructional portion of the program to satisfy the meeting planner's requirements. Then once I'm done, I re-launch the story and relate the instructional points just shared to the rest of the story as I steer it towards its climax and resolution.

10. Stories must be sparse, so there is not a single wasted word or phrase. As you tell your stories, think what words, sentences, phrases or sections can be eliminated.

11. Structure of the story. Following up on #10, look at each story as a building with many floors. And each floor builds upon the one underneath it. Anything that is not absolutely crucial to the building's integrity as a whole can be deleted. If the building/story does not collapse with that deleted "floors" absence, you know that floor wasn't absolutely necessary. That's how you cut a 30-minute story down to 15 minutes. Or a 5-minute story down to 2 minutes. Hint: Audiences eyes glaze over during weaker sections of your story.

12. Your story constantly changes. A story always evolves. It changes over time as you become more sophisticated in its telling. You watch audience reactions. You keep what works; you throw out what doesn't. During the storytelling, you will actually hear yourself come up with new lines, new funny parts and descriptions. They pop out of your head in the retelling. (That's a good reason to tape your talks.) If these new pieces work, (you can tell by audience laughter, deepened eye contact or vigorous head nodding) you keep them. These add-ons emerge from your subconscious, your writer's muse. Listen to your muse! The muse is buried inside each of us. It fosters our hidden storytelling talent, and we ignore it at our own peril. Tap your muse and let it flow.

Excerpt from *The New Journalism*, edited by Tom Wolfe

Copied from Dave Lieber's storytelling manual, "The High Impact Writer"

When I discovered this book and read the opening chapter penned by Wolfe, I immediately realized that this was how I wanted to write.— and speak. Let me share the two most important pages:

Tom Wolfe writes:

By trial and error, by 'instinct' rather than theory, journalists began to discover the devices that gave the realistic novel its unique power, variously known as its 'immediacy,' its 'concrete reality,' its 'emotional involvement,' its 'gripping' or 'absorbing' quality.

This extraordinary power was derived mainly from just four devices, they discovered. The basic one was **scene-by-scene construction**, telling the story by moving from scene to scene and resorting as little as possible to sheer historical narrative. Hence the sometimes extraordinary feats of reporting that the new journalists undertook so that they could actually witness the scenes in other people's lives as they took place — and record the **dialogue in full**, which was device No. 2. Magazine writers, like the early novelists, learned by trial and error something that has been demonstrated in academic studies: namely, that realistic dialogue involves the reader more quickly and effectively than any other single device. (Dickens has a way of fixing a character in our mind so that you have the feeling he has described every inch of his appearance — only to go back and discover that he actually took care of the physical description in two or three sentences, the rest he has accomplished with dialogue.)...

The third device was the so-called '**third-person point of view**,' the technique of presenting every scene through the eyes of a particular character, giving the reader the feeling of being inside the character's mind and experiencing the emotional reality of the scene as he experiences it. Journalists have often used the first-person point of view — 'I was there' — just as autobiographers, memoirists and novelists had. This is very limiting for the journalist, however, since he can bring the reader inside the mind of only one character — himself — a point of view that often proves irrelevant to the story and irritating to the reader. Yet how could a journalist, writing nonfiction, accurately penetrate thoughts of another person?

The answer proved to be marvelously simple: interview him about his thoughts and emotions, along with everything else. This was what I had done in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, what John Sack did in *M* and what Gay Talese did in *Honor Thy Father*.

The fourth device has always been the least understood. This is the **recording of everyday gestures, habits, manners, customs**, styles of furniture, clothing, decoration, styles of traveling, eating, keeping house, modes of behaving toward children, servants, superiors, inferiors, peers, plus the various looks, glances, poses, styles of walking and other symbolic details that might exist within a scene. Symbolic of what? Symbolic, generally of people's *status life*, using that term in the broad sense of the entire pattern of behavior and possessions through which people express their position in the world or what they think it is or what they hope it to be. The recording of such details is not mere embroidery in prose. It lies as close to the center of the power of realism as any other device in literature. It is the very essence of the 'absorbing' power of Balzac, for example, Balzac barely used point of view at all in the refined sense that Henry James used it later on. And yet the reader comes away feeling that he has been even more completely 'inside' Balzac's characters than James's. Why? Here is the sort of thing Balzac does over and over. Before introducing you to Monsieur and Madame Marneffe personally (in *Coustin Bette*) he brings you into their drawing room and conducts a social autopsy: 'The furniture covered in faded cotton velve, the plaster statuettes masquerading as Florentine bronzes, the clumsily carved painted chandelier with its candle rings of molded glass, the carpet, a bargain whose low price was explained too late by the quality of the cotton on it, which was now visible to the naked eye – everything in the room, to the very curtains (which would have taught you that the handsome appearance of wool damask lasts for only three years) – everything in the room begins to absorb one into the lives of a pair of down-at-the-heel social climbers, a Monsieur and Madame Marneffe. Balzac piles up these details so meticulously – there is scarcely a detail in the later Balzac that does not illuminate some points of status – that he triggers the reader's memories of his own status life, his own ambitions, insecurities, delights, disasters, plus the thousand and one small humiliations and the status coups of everyday life, and triggers them over and over until he creates an atmosphere as rich and involving as the Joycean use of point of view....



Dave's Favorite New Journalism books that show great storytelling

- *The Right Stuff* by Tom Wolfe
- *Fame and Obscurity* by Gay Talese
- *I Want to Thank My Brain for Remembering Me* by Jimmy Breslin
 - *Bad Dad* by Dave Lieber (NEW, yeah, that's me!)