

# Exercises Related to Storytelling and Narrative Theories

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# Background

The follow exercises were pulled together during the development of the workshop, *Everyone has a story: The power of narrative in healthcare*

These are exercises you can use within your own teams to practice the application of storytelling to your work.

When known the author of the exercise is noted.

They are organized into icebreakers (takes <30 minutes) and activities.

## **Purpose**

This activity is a fun way to get people to share stories, while helping people learn similarities or common interests.

## **Setup**

Have everyone divide into small groups of 6-8 people. Ensure each table has several post-it notes and pens. The goal of the game is to connect mini-stories in an interesting way. Each person must share at least one item that connects to the other mini-stories. The longer the chain of items that can be created, the better. Write down a few words on a post-it note to keep track of each part of the story.

## **The Activity**

The first player begins by sharing an interesting memory or experience that they have. For example, one player can say: "One time, I accidentally locked myself out of the house. So then I spent the entire day at a coffee shop."

Any other person can tell a related story that has any similar themes or elements to the previous story. For example, the next person can say, "I am a total coffee addict. Every day I drink 3 cups of coffee and it sometimes prevents me from being able to sleep at night."

The next player, based upon the previous story shared, can say something related, such as: "I don't sleep much at night because I play lots of computer games until early morning."

Any person can then add to the story, by saying something like, "I also love computer games."

To help the group remember each part of the story, write a few words on a post-it note for each part of the story chain. The more interesting or funny the story, the better.

At the end of the game, the group with the longest connected chain of stories is the winner. You may ask the group to share the entire story with the whole group.

## **Purpose**

This exercise helps build rapport between people by working towards a shared goal. It is also an exercise that taps into active listening skills.

## **Setup**

Ask participants to pair up and stand facing each other. The exercise can be done orally or if desired you have participants pass a piece of paper back and forth.

## **The Activity**

Participants create a story by taking turns adding only a phrase or a few words at time. Participants try to get their story to go as long as possible but contributing pieces that continue the story rather than driving it to an end.

## **Purpose**

In this technique, borrowed from improv, participants practice asking for and providing more or less detail in a story.

## **Setup**

No supplies needed.

## **The Activity**

- Pair participants.
- One narrates a story while the partner, from time to time, says 'zoom in' or 'zoom out'.
- Zoom in means the storyteller should add more details and zoom out means that she should reduce the level of detail.

## **Purpose**

This fun activity loosens up the group, gives them a chance to interact with another participant and practice crafting stories on the go.

## **Setup**

Three grab bags: one for place, one for issue and one for goal. Fill the boxes with unrelated words that fit under the category. If desired you can steer the words towards a larger topic, such as healthcare.

## **The Activity**

1. Have everyone choose one word from each bag.
2. Create a story from the words provided using one of two options
  - a. Participants pair up and take turns crafting the story in real time.
  - b. Participants take 5 minutes to write a story using a worksheet with the story framework outline and then take 3 minutes each to share their story with a partner
    - i. Place
    - ii. Characters
    - iii. The issue
    - iv. The resolution

## **Purpose**

This fun activity loosens up the group and warms up their storytelling muscles

## **Setup**

Small cards (3x5 postcards cut in half), pens and a bag, basket or box for each small group of 3-5 people.

## **The Activity**

1. Each member of each small group gets three small cards.
2. On the cards ask participants to write on the 3 cards and fold each one in half
  - a. Card 1 - Person
  - b. Card 2 - Place
  - c. Card 3 - Thing
3. One person in the group collect the cards, put them in a bag, basket, or box and shake them around.
4. One person begins the story by randomly drawing a piece of paper and using the word in the first sentence of the story.
5. Pass the papers around the circle, with each person drawing a paper and adding to the story, with only ten seconds to do so.
6. Keep going as long as the papers last. The stories usually turn out very strange and funny.

# Shared Stories

Aka Story Exchange, based on an idea from Appreciative Inquiry

# Activity

## Purpose

This exercise helps build rapport between people through active sharing and allows people to be exposed to many people in the group. After hearing stories from many people, participants are asked to identify patterns in story structures.

## Setup

Participants need paper, pen and the ability to stand and move around the room.

## The Activity

- Ask participants to take a couple of minutes to write the outline of a story they want to share.
- Now ask them to stand and pair off with someone from another part of the room. participants should listen enthusiastically to their partner's story and then narrate their own.
- Participants then find new partners and repeat the procedure.
- After exchanging stories with half a dozen other participants, form groups and ask participants in their groups to find common elements in storytelling from all the people they heard for example what made it a positive experience.

## **Purpose**

This activity demonstrates the value of active listening. It has been estimated that people listen to 80% of a story they are told and then complete the story by themselves. In this activity participants experience how differently people can fill in the details.

## **Setup**

Facilitator provides a short story (1 page long) where 20% of the details have been removed and left with blank spaces. Participants need a pen and surface to complete the worksheet.

## **The Activity**

- Each participant gets a copy of a story that is missing 20% of the details
- Participants spend 5 minutes filling in the missing details
- Break into small group of 3-4 participants, each participant spends a few minutes sharing the details they added.
- Report out to the larger group reflections. What was similar. What was different. How would the differences impact decisions in care or action?

# Listening Dilemma

# Activity

Peter Garber, [50 Communications Activities, Icebreakers and Exercises](#)

## Purpose

The rate of words that we are able to hear versus the rate at which we speak and how the difference in this rate creates a dilemma. This activity helps participants understand why listening is such a big challenge for most people.

## Setup

Facilitator displays the image on the following page or provides it in a handout.

## The Activity

Explain that listening is a big challenge because you spend so much of your communications time listening—over 45%. If you are not a good listener, you will be a less effective communicator. The average person speaks at about a rate of 150 words per minute (wpm). The problem is that we can hear at about a rate of 1,000 wpm. This obviously gives us a lot of extra time.

Ask participants what they do with this extra time. It is likely that they will say that they think about other things rather than what the other person is saying. This is a big problem for many people and the reason why they are not good listeners. This creates the listening dilemma.

## Debrief

Discuss as a group things they could do to stay focused on what the other person is saying and not be distracted by their own thoughts. For instance, the following listening tips can help you be a better listener

1. Concentrate on what the speaker is saying, both with his or her words as well as with voice inflections, rate of speech, body language, etc.
2. Try not to think about how you are going to respond to the other person while he or she is speaking to you.
3. Interact nonverbally with the other person with small gestures or verbal affirmations, such as nodding your head or saying very brief comments such as “I see” or other words that would not interrupt the other person.
4. Do not interrupt or finish the other person’s sentences.

## The Listening Dilemma

- We speak at a rate of about 150 words per minute (wpm).
- But we can hear at a rate of about 1,000 wpm.



- This gives us a lot of extra time!
- What do we do with this time?

## Purpose

Review and discuss with participants methods for becoming better listeners.

## Setup

Present the visual aid on a screen or in a handout

## The Activity

Review these listening tips and discuss as a group. Another option is to present the list and ask people to discuss them in triads or quads. Ask participants how often they use these tips in their communications with others. It is likely that they use some or all of these tips on a regular basis, probably without being aware that they are using the tips. Ask participants how they could use them more often and what effect this would have on their listening skills.

1. Paraphrase the message to the speaker in order to confirm your understanding. Explain that by putting the message in your own words, you concentrate more on what was said, making you listen better.
2. Repeat the message to help you remember what was said. Explain that by doing this to the other person's satisfaction that you have heard his or her message correctly; you ensure that you not only are listening but really understand what was said.
3. Probe for missing information. Explain that by requesting or asking questions, you find out any information that may have been missing in the communications or that you need or want.
4. Clarify any points that you might not completely understand. Explain that this also ensures that you have heard exactly what the other person intended to communicate.
5. Remember the important points of the message for future application. Explain that this helps you retain the most important points of the communication.

## Listening Tips

- **Paraphrase** the message to the speaker in order to confirm your understanding.
- **Repeat** the message to help you remember what was said.
- **Probe** for missing information.
- **Clarify** any points that you might not completely understand.
- **Remember** the important points of the message for future application.

