

# Telling Stories in Public Speaking

Binghui Li

School of English Language, Literature and Culture,  
Beijing International Studies University,  
Chaoyang District, Beijing 100026, China

\* E-mail of the corresponding author: [lbhcahy@163.com](mailto:lbhcahy@163.com)

## Abstract

English public speaking is a comparatively new but promising course in China. Aristotle's Rhetorical Triangle reveals the importance of ethos, pathos, and logos in effective and successful communication. To appeal to the audience's emotion and establish ethos and pathos, storytelling is a good way and it's also an important skill in public speaking. Taking the 25 most popular TED talks playlists as the study object, the author found that storytelling, especially telling personal stories is frequently used in those TED talks. After making clear the definition of a story, this article attempts to make clear how to tell a good story and what teachers can do to help students tell good stories in public speaking.

**Keywords:** storytelling; TED talks; rhetorical triangle; personal story

**DOI:** 10.7176/JEP/14-33-10

**Publication date:** November 30<sup>th</sup> 2023

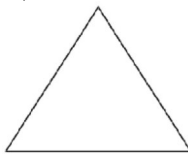
Public speaking as a course enjoys a long history in the West. However, it became popular in China only by the late 20th century and the early 21st century, lagging far behind the Western countries. The famous national English public speaking contests in China were started during that time. For example, the 21st Century Cup was held first in 1996, CCTV Cup was held in 2000. The Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP) cup was held in 2002. Our university, one of the major foreign language institutes in China, set up an English public speaking course only in 2013, which was among the first several universities to do so. Then in 2019, we began to participate in national speech contests. So there is a lot to learn and a lot to explore.

## 1. Significance of Storytelling in Public Speeches

In public speaking, the two main types of speech are informative speech and persuasive speech, which overlap with each other. To persuade the audience and cause some resonance among them is the goal of public speaking. But how to achieve that?

Aristotle's Rhetorical Triangle as the model of communication is widely used and cited in public speaking. According to him, the purpose of rhetoric or communication is to persuade others through argument by appealing to their emotions to change their thinking. His rhetorical triangle is composed of three elements: ethos, pathos, and logos, which is also called the Aristotelian Triad. It can be demonstrated by the following figure:

Pathos (Emotions, Values/Audience, Connection)



Ethos (Credibility, Character/Speaker)

Logos (Logic, Facts, Statistics; Reasoning/Text)

Figure 1. Aristotle's Rhetorical Triangle

Among the three elements, pathos refers to the role of the audience in public speaking. To arouse the audience's attention and leave them deep impression, the speaker's argument must appeal to their emotion and stimulate their imagination. Thus certain bond between the speaker and the audience can be established. The speaker also tends to have a high ethos among the audience.

Ethos is the speaker's credibility, which covers his/her character or presence. To make himself seem to be trustworthy, the speaker should have a credible argument. Otherwise, the audience could not be persuaded. Meanwhile, the speaker's education, experiences, research area, and even use of tone or voice in delivering the speech are also helpful in establishing ethos.

Logos is logic in Latin, and it refers to the validity of an argument. To make himself persuasive, the speaker needs to use facts, statistics, and other types of logic to support his arguments, and to present them clearly and logically.

While these three elements are presented in an equilateral triangle, it means that they should be balanced within a speech. In order to persuade his audience and achieve the ultimate purpose of his speech, the speaker should establish his credibility, use facts or statistics from reliable sources, arouse the audience's emotional

responses, and present his speech in a clear and logical manner. Then how can a speaker arouse the audience's emotional responses and develop a sense of empathy in the audience, that is, to increase the speaker's pathos? This paper is going to focus on one way: the art of storytelling in a speech.

We human beings liked stories since we were kids. Researchers also revealed that human brains are more active when hearing stories. Stories can potentially activate up to seven areas of the audiences' brains, including language, sensory, visual, and motor areas, etc., while facts and statistics can awaken only two areas of the brain. So stories are easy to understand and easy to remember. Brene Brown in TEDx Houston once said: "Stories are just data with a soul." Telling stories can reach the audience's hearts and minds. Dale Carnegie also said: "The great truths of the world have often been couched in fascinating stories." Uri Hasson, a psychologist at Princeton, also reported that by simply telling a story, the speaker could plant ideas, thoughts, and emotions into the listener's brain. In the book *Talk Like TED* by Carmine Gallo (2015, 51), he said: "If stories trigger brain-to-brain 'coupling', then part of the solution to winning people over to your argument is to tell more stories". Therefore, telling stories is the fresh of a speech, without it, the speech is just a skeleton.

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## 2. What is a Story?

The book *The Art of Public Speaking* (2015) by Stephen E. Lucas is regarded as the Bible of public speaking, and our university chose it as the textbook. In Chapter 6 Supporting Your Ideas, he talked about three different kinds of examples: brief examples, extended examples, and hypothetical examples. Among them, extended examples refer to some narratives, illustrations, or anecdotes, while hypothetical examples are used to describe an imaginary situation, which usually has a brief story related to a general principle (2015, 74). "These examples are so important that many experienced speakers consider them 'the very life of the speech'". He then emphasized that "by telling a story vividly and dramatically, they pull listeners into the speech" (2015, 73). Then what is a story?

*The Oxford Dictionary* defines it as an account of imaginary or real people and events told for entertainment. So a story may be a description of a connected event, whether true or imagined. It is usually composed of three parts: context, action, and results. The context part is the setting of a story, which talks about the time, place, characters, and some conflicts or some big problems they encounter. In the action part, the characters interact with the conflict, try to solve the problem and take action. Choices and decisions are being made as well as behaviors and deeds. After solving the conflicts or problems, that is, the climax, some changes might happen to the characters in the results part. They might have some financial gain or loss, intellectual and emotional gain, or even more important impact and change in the life of the character. It's just like climbing mountains. After introducing the setting of the story, we begin the rising action on the upward slope of the mountain, trying to figure out a way to settle the conflicts. When the conflicts are settled or changed, we are at the top of the mountain. After that we begin to descend, reflecting on the loss and gain.

After doing some research on TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) talks, Carmine identified three simple and effective types of stories in speech: Personal stories; Stories about other people, and Stories about brand success. The first are stories that happened around the speaker; the second are stories about other people who have learned a lesson the audience can relate to; the third are stories involving the success or failure of products or brands. Everyone needs a hero, for the audience, they want someone to cheer for and be inspired. Telling stories can easily create empathy among the audience, putting them in other's shoes, and experience other's emotions. So speakers can create this kind of empathy by telling their own stories, stories about people around them, or stories about some famous and successful brands.

## 3. Storytelling in TED Talks

To see the importance and frequency of storytelling in public speaking, the author chose the 25 most popular talks of all time from the TED official website playlists as the object of research. TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) Talks started in 1984, and their topics touch upon culture, politics, medical development, and so on. It has posted thousands of Talks online for free distribution under the slogan "ideas worth spreading." The 25 most popular talks are ranked based on the total number of views on the TED site as of Jan.

2023. They are so well received by the audience. So by analyzing their talks, we can see if they have stories in their speeches or not. If yes, then how many stories are told? And what kind of story do they use? The following Table 1 shows the result.

Table 1. Stories Told in the 25 Most Popular TED Talks

rank	Speaker	Title	Number of views	Number of stories told	Story type
1	Sir Ken Robinson	Do schools kill creativity?	75,620,243 views	4 stories	2 about his son; 1 about his wife; 1 about his friend
2	Amy Cuddy	Your body language may shape who you are	69,326,263 views	2 stories	1 personal story; 1 about her student
3	Tim Urban	Inside the mind of a master procrastinator	68,443,205 views	2 stories	2 personal stories
4	Simon Sinek	How great leaders inspire action	62,960,689 views	1 story	1 story about Samuel Pierpont Langley
5	Brené Brown	The power of vulnerability	62,807,474 views	2 stories	2 personal stories
6	Julian Treasure	How to speak so that people want to listen	56,486,457 views	1 brief story	about his mother
7	Sam Berns	My philosophy for a happy life	47,549,549 views	4 stories	4 personal stories
8	Bill Gates	The next outbreak? We're not ready	44,972,868 views	No story, but abundant examples	
9	Robert Waldinger	What makes a good life? Lessons from the longest study on happiness	45,629,539 views	1 story	1 story about Harvard's 75-year research
10	Cameron Russell	Looks aren't everything. Believe me, I'm a model	39,945,088 views	2 stories	2 personal stories
11	Mary Roach	10 things you didn't know about orgasm	41,137,954 views	3 stories	3 stories about other people
12	Graham Shaw	Why people believe they can't draw	39,983,602 views	2 stories	2 stories about other people
13	Tom Thum	The orchestra in my mouth	37,872,475 views	No story; Show his skill	
14	Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie	The danger of a single story	34,802,095 views	5 stories	3 personal stories; 2 about other people
15	Susan Cain	The power of introverts	33,508,214 views	2 stories	1 personal story; 1 about other people
16	Apollo Robbins	The art of misdirection	33,207,452 views	No story; show his skill	
17	Pamela Meyer	How to spot a liar	33,104,869 views	3 stories	3 about famous people
18	Mel Robbins	How to stop screwing yourself over	32,292,278 views	1 story	1 hypothetical story about yourself
19	Elon Musk	The future we're building -- and boring	31,872,924 views	No story, interview	
20	Kelly McGonigal	How to make stress your friend	31,697,745 views	No story; statistics	
21	Angela Lee Duckworth	Grit: The power of passion and perseverance	30,925,075 views	2 stories	2 personal stories
22	Dan Pink	The puzzle of motivation	29,771,065 views	2 stories	1 personal story; 1 about other people
23	Jill Bolte Taylor	My stroke of insight	29,173,161 views	1 story	1 personal story
24	David Blaine	How I held my breath for 17 minutes	29,126,429 views	3 stories	3 personal stories
25	Jon Ronson	Strange answers to the psychopath test	28,971,422 views	3 stories	2 personal stories; 1 story about other people

([https://www.ted.com/playlists/171/the\\_most\\_popular\\_ted\\_talks\\_of\\_all\\_time](https://www.ted.com/playlists/171/the_most_popular_ted_talks_of_all_time).)

From the above table, one can see that among the 25 TED talks, each of the 20 talks has at least one story, 46 stories in total. Only 5 talks have no story. Elon Musk’s talk "The Future We're Building -- and Boring" is an interview. Beatboxer Tom Thum’s talk "The Orchestra in My Mouth" is a highly entertaining performance using his mouth only. In the talk, "The Art of Misdirection", Apollo Robbins, the greatest pickpocket in the world, gives a hilarious demonstration of stealing a watch without being noticed. For the other two by Bill Gates and Kelly McGonigal, although they have no story, they use abundant brief examples or statistics to support their ideas. This depends on the topic of their talks. The maximum time for a TED talk is 18 minutes. But among the 25 TED talks, 1 talk even has 5 stories, 2 talks have 4 stories and 4 talks have 3 stories, which highlights the importance of storytelling in winning the audience in making public speeches.

Based on the previous classification of stories, we can divide these stories in the 20 talks into personal stories, stories about other people, and stories about famous brands or famous people. Then we find that for the 46 stories in these 20 talks, 24 are personal stories; 16 are stories about other people; and 5 are stories about famous brands or famous people. The left one is a hypothetical story, putting the audience into an imagined situation and a series of events happened. Figure 1 demonstrates this very clearly. It shows that storytelling, especially personal stories, plays a very important role in reaching out to the audience in public speaking.

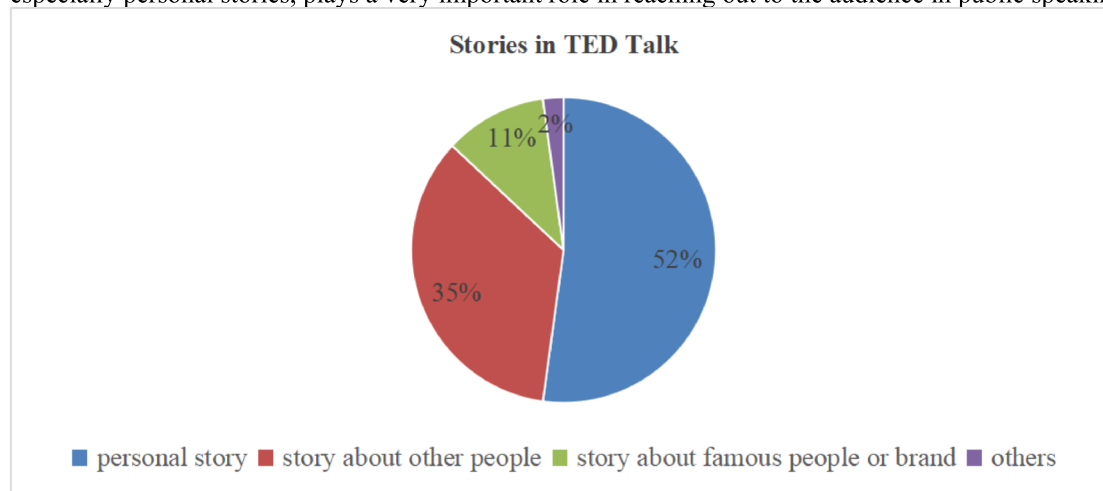


Figure 1. Stories in TED Talk

Cameron Russell’s speech "Looks aren't Everything. Believe me, I'm a Model" ranks No. 10, but it’s my students’ favorite speech. As a very beautiful underwear model for Victoria’s Secret and Chanel, Cameron's speech changed my students’ concept of beauty. This speech contains 1689 words, lasting for 9 minutes and 20 seconds. The author analyzed those words and assigned them into each of the three categories mentioned above: pathos, ethos, and logos. If Cameron told a story and tried to appeal to the audience’s emotion, we placed that sentences or paragraphs under Pathos. If she talked about her job as a model, we placed the content in the category of Ethos. When she gave statistics, we added the sentences to the category of Logos. The results are shown in the following pie chart in Figure 2.

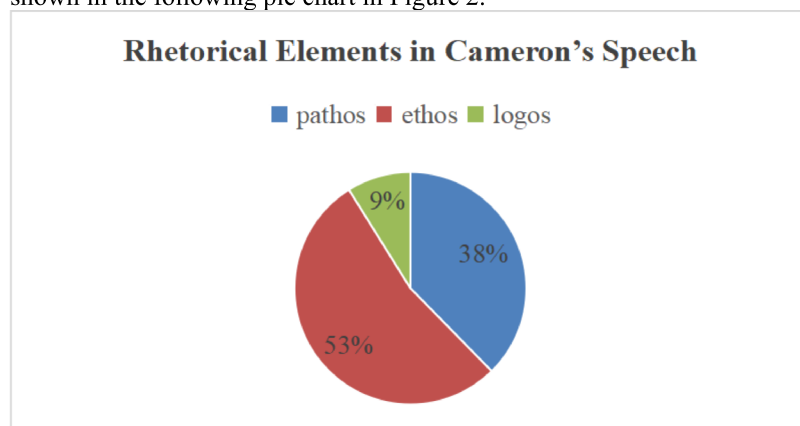


Figure 2. Rhetorical Elements in Cameron’s Speech

In this speech, Cameron honestly answered five questions about the model profession, and showed the audience the real life behind runways and magazine covers. To start with, she changed her outfit on the stage, from a professional model to a neighborhood girl, thus totally changed the audience’s perception of her and established her ethos and credibility. After this, she revealed the central idea of her speech: “Image is

powerful, but also, image is superficial.” She could become a model because she won a “genetic lottery” and had been cashing out on it. So “there is very little that we can do to transform how we look, and how we look, though it is superficial and immutable, has a huge impact on our lives”. Then she moved on to answer five questions about her profession: “How do you become a model?” “Can I be a model when I grow up?” “Do they retouch all the photos?” “Do you get free stuff?” “What is it like to be a model?” Since this is a talk about explaining her profession, it’s reasonable that ethos takes about 53% of the whole speech. In answering these questions referring to her profession, she used a lot of stories and statistics to support herself and appeal to the audience. These two categories of pathos and logos occupy about 38% and 9% of the whole speech. She achieved a good balance of pathos, ethos, and logos, which is why this talk was well-received by the audience.

#### 4. How to Have a Good story in a Speech

From the above discussion, we can see the importance of telling good stories in a speech. Then how to do it? The following are some tips.

##### 4.1 Tell Stories with a Clear Purpose

When we make a speech, we have a clear specific purpose or goal in mind. To achieve it, we use stories, quotations, or statistics as evidence to support it. Stories may entertain the audience, and make them laugh, then what? We hope they can walk away with something from the story, maybe a moral lesson, insights, perspective, or even some information only. Anyhow, our story should have a clear goal. If a speaker just tells a random but interesting story to attract the audience’s attention and then moves on to something else, the audience may be annoyed and the speaker will lose his audience quickly. So before using the story, speakers should first ask themselves “what do I want my audience to get out of my story?”

##### 4.2 Use Personal Stories

No matter what kind of story the speaker is using, a success story, a personal story, a humorous story, or even a story with suspense, it should be attractive. But from the above analysis, one can find that personal stories weigh the most. And many experts also agree on this. Chris Anderson, TED head curator said: “The personal story is the simplest, easiest-to-prepare type of talk; after all, you know your story and you know more about it than anyone else in the world. A personal story will also create empathy with your audience”. Burt Helm, renowned writer for some major magazines, like The New York Times, receives thousands of emails from business leaders and entrepreneurs who hope to be featured in one of his upcoming articles. But 21,000 emails had not been read. When Burt was asked what types of stories capture his attention, he didn’t hesitate to respond by saying, personal stories.

Even for personal stories, certain techniques can be used to tell them in an attractive way, such as creating certain suspense. Suspense is one of the oldest techniques in storytelling, and its purpose is to keep the audience engaged throughout the story. In 2010, Stacey Kramer gave a 3-minute speech “The Best Gift I Ever Survived”. In the beginning, she put the audience into an imagined situation and asked them to imagine that they would have a gift. Then she moved on to describe the features of the gift:

*“about the size of a golf ball... it’s going to do incredible things for you. It will bring all of your family together. You will feel loved and appreciated like never before and reconnect with friends and acquaintances you haven’t heard from in years. Adoration and admiration will overwhelm you. It will recalibrate what’s most important in your life. It will redefine your sense of spirituality and faith. You’ll have a new understanding and trust in your body. You’ll have unsurpassed vitality and energy. You’ll expand your vocabulary, meet new people, and you’ll have a healthier lifestyle. And get this -- you’ll have an eight-week vacation of doing absolutely nothing. You’ll eat countless gourmet meals. Flowers will arrive by the truckload. People will say to you, “You look great. Have you had any work done?”*

( [https://www.ted.com/talks/stacey\\_kramer\\_the\\_best\\_gift\\_i\\_ever\\_survived/transcript](https://www.ted.com/talks/stacey_kramer_the_best_gift_i_ever_survived/transcript))

After her introduction, every audience is already eager to know what the gift is. Thus she successfully aroused the audience’s curiosity and invited them to engage in the speech. Then she revealed the gift: a brain tumor, which is out of everyone’s expectation. Now every audience remembers her topic: “So the next time you’re faced with something that’s unexpected, unwanted and uncertain, consider that it just may be a gift”. This is a very brief but impressive speech.

In a complete story, besides the suspense of the overall structure, the speaker can also constantly set up small cliffhangers to ensure that the whole speech can grab the attention of the audience.

#### 4.3 Use Specific Words in Stories

A well-told story must have some vivid details, and more concrete descriptions should be used to enhance the audience's perception. Remember Anton Chekhov's famous sentence: "Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass." The speaker should employ all the senses, using vivid language to give visual descriptions to the audience or give them a picture in their brain. This will leave the audience a clearer impression and produce a strong persuasive effect. Let's look at two examples:

In 2016, Bill Clinton, the former US president, delivered a very passionate speech to support his wife Hillary Clinton in the presidential election. At the beginning of the speech, he described his first meet with his wife and he put it this way: "She had thick blond hair, big glasses, wore no makeup, and she had a sense of strength and self-possession that I found magnetic." These detailed description leaves the audience with a deep memory and shows his love for his wife.

Another example is a speech by He Jiang, a Chinese student who spoke at Harvard University's graduation ceremony. The title of his speech is The Spider's Bite. He grew up in a small and remote village and was bitten by a poisonous spider when he was in middle school. Because of the backward state at that time, they could not find a doctor, so his mother set his hand on fire. He described the situation in this way:

*"She put a chopstick into my mouth, and ignited the cotton. Heat quickly penetrated the cotton and began to roast my hand. The searing pain made me want to scream, but the chopstick prevented it. All I could do was watch my hand burn – one minute, then two minutes –until mom put out the fire".*

([https://www.sohu.com/a/245619040\\_608434](https://www.sohu.com/a/245619040_608434))

From these several sentences, we can feel the pain the speaker went through at that time, especially when he counted the time in minutes. It presents a picture in the audience's heads.

#### 4.4 Use Body Language to Help Tell Stories

Darwin believed that the basic pattern of human expression of emotion is generally the same all over the world. Long before symbols or even the simplest verbal expressions, human beings learned how to convey feelings to each other through a series of movements and expressions. Expressing emotion and receiving information is hard-wired in our genes, and we're born with it. When telling a story, in order to better convey information, persuade the audience, and create a stronger impression on the audience, we should arouse some emotional resonance among the audience.

To make stories vivid to strike the audience, we can apply some body language to amplify their effect. Hand gestures, facial expressions, and some other body moves can reinforce what we are going to say. Our hand movements, our facial expressions, and even the way our body moves should coincide with the general emotion of the story. The audience will have a clearer picture when our body and voice convey emotions while telling a story.

Also when telling a story, our emotions must be consistent with the content of the story, with our own language and rich tone to embellish the content. The volume and tone of voice, expression, and body movements, combined with the content of the story, all these together show the audience the story.

#### 4.5 Pay Attention to the Audience's Response

While telling a story, the speaker needs to keep an eye out for the audience's feedback. Listen to their body language and be receptive to head nods, attention, laughs, and ahhs. These indicate the story has been received and accepted and our audience are ready to hear more of the story. If they respond with frowning or quizzical feedback, then we need to clarify what we have said. Also be attentive to yawning, crossed arms, and other body language, through which the audience is speaking to you that you may have lost rapport. Rapport is very important for your information to get through. Actually, in the course of a successful speech, it is best for the speaker to constantly ask and answer questions to the audience.

### 5. Implications for Teachers.

When we take students to attend speech contests, it's quite common that they have no stories to tell at all, especially for the impromptu speech part. So what can we do to help them to tell stories in their speeches since they are so important? Besides what we mentioned above what students should know, there is also something we can do as teachers to help them.

Read more books and learn some classic stories. The classic story is passed down precisely because the plot has many twists and turns, making it interesting. For example, the story of Muhammad Ali can be used in many ways, when we talk about willpower, or when we talk about persistence. Once we have this story in mind, we can use it in our speech, and possibly make it the punch line of the speech.

Require students to consciously accumulate some small stories in daily life. Jot down the stories we hear, see, and think, and then use them in delivering speeches. For the scenes we may encounter in our daily lives, we can accumulate relevant stories and use them for our own. Then later, when we come across the scene again,

change the content a little, and we will be able to follow the story.

The last but not the least, exercise regularly. It's one thing to know how to tell a story, it's another thing to be able to tell a story. If we don't practice often, what we know will be forgotten sooner or later. Practice makes perfect.

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