

# Practical Storytelling

**Practical Storytelling**  
**By Dominic R. Villari**

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## **About the Author**

Dominic R. Villari was born in Riverside, New Jersey in 1971. He studied communications and multimedia at Rider College and Boston University. In these formidable years he was heavily influenced by the writing of South American magical realists such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Jorge Borges. After earning a masters degree, Dominic spent several years as an instructional designer. He has also worked as a graphic designer and interactive developer. Throughout his eclectic career and interests he has always remained a storyteller. After specializing in non-fiction writing for several years, in 2007 Dominic returned to the magical realist genre with his new novel the Ginger Bread Man.

## **Preface**

The concept of using storytelling in personal and business applications is not new. The idea of using stories in our daily lives is embedded into the human condition. People are instinctively drawn to hearing stories and telling stories. This is certainly not the first book on storytelling or even the first book on storytelling in business and other situations.

However, many of the books on storytelling concentrate on making the case for using stories in business and everyday situations. As the title implies, this book takes a more practical approach to storytelling. The book focuses on the physical and mental aspects of how and why stories work. Building on this foundation it provides models and processes to help you improve your own storytelling ability.

The example stories presented here, including the central story: Tan's Tile were chosen specifically to demonstrate aspects of these models and processes. The result serves as both textbook and "fieldbook." The lessons in this book are accompanied by a series of worksheets located in the back of the book and downloadable at [www.practicalstorytelling.com](http://www.practicalstorytelling.com).

It is not my intention to sell additional books, seminars, videos or consulting. After reading this book you should be able to use stories for practical purposes within business and personal relationships.

Dominic Villari

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## **Overview**

This book examines the impact and importance of storytelling in our world, focusing on the practical application of this art within your personal and business relationships. It reviews the background and skills needed to construct a persuasive story in training, sales or marketing.

It includes worksheets to help you develop a theme and plan a story. It also explains how and why stories attract attention, achieve retention and increase the chance you'll affect behavior. This book introduces the BEARS technique of audience analysis and how to apply it by choosing a story type.

### **Objectives:**

After reading this book you will be able to:

- Define the three cognitive challenges in conveying information.
- Construct concise story themes.
- Define the five main story components.
- Perform basic audience analysis using the BEARS technique.
- Choose a story type based on audience analysis.

The example projects and worksheets from this book are available at:

**[www.practicalstorytelling.com](http://www.practicalstorytelling.com)**



# **Part I: Story Mechanics**



## **Chapter 1: Practical Storytelling**

### **Chapter Objectives:**

1. Tell a story with the theme of creative thinking.
2. Describe Tangram, the Chinese puzzle used as a learning metaphor within this book.

### **Chapter Overview:**

In this chapter you'll hear a story based on an ancient Chinese puzzle. We'll use this story throughout the book as a metaphor for creative thought and to illustrate storytelling technique.

## **Tan's Tile – A Tale of Creative Thought**

One spring day Emperor Tan was building a new tile pathway through his garden. Tan admired the perfectly square shape of the clay tiles as he placed them uniformly along the path.

The last of the clay tiles slipped from Tan's hand and fell to the ground, breaking the hard-packed stone into seven pieces. The square was gone and his path would be one tile short.

"Now it will never line up," said Tan. He decided to try putting the pieces back together. After several attempts he stepped back to look at his work.

"That's a lovely swan," admired his wife as she passed by Tan in the garden.

"It's supposed to be a square," muttered Tan, returning to work.

Seeing his father's next attempt, Tan's son observed: "I saw a fox like that in the garden."

"Still not much of a square," replied Tan. He looked towards the edge of the garden, where the clay-baking ovens sat cold. It would take hours to reheat the ovens and bake a new tile.

Tan continued working with the pieces of his broken tile. Later, Tan's daughter sat beside him and watched his progress.

"Father made a kitty," declared his daughter clapping her hands. Tan let out a long sigh.

"Let us go inside and get something to eat," said Tan. He took his daughter's hand and led her back into the house.

After his meal Tan returned to the garden. He began to re-arrange the pieces again. As the sun approached the horizon, Tan stepped back from his work. The square had returned.

“Finally, the square!” proclaimed Tan. He looked around the garden for his family. “I solved the puzzle,” he said to the setting sun.

But no one noticed...

## **About Tangram**

Tan’s tale is an original story featuring Tangram, an ancient Chinese puzzle. The puzzle consists of a box divided into mathematical shapes. You can form the shapes into a number of different animals, people and other objects. The exact history of the puzzle is not known, but it has been played as a game for thousands of years. It also continues to be the inspiration for stories and educational lessons. Tangram is a metaphor and exercise for storytelling because it demonstrates creative thought.

Like the Tangram, stories are made up of several unique components that can be assembled in a number of ways to deliver an infinite number of messages. In the story above, Tan wanted to re-create the original square tile. However, his family saw animals in the tile pieces. Different audiences interpret stories in different ways. Later in this book we’ll explore the BEARS method of audience analysis and how it relates to story development.

Caught up in the quest for his square, Tan failed to see the creative potential in the tile pieces. He was, quite literally, unable to think “outside the box.” Every time he arranged the pieces in a unique way, he immediately attracted the attention of a member of his family. However, when he finally recreated the square, no one took notice – not even the sun. There was nothing inherently unique about the square; it was the same as all the other clay tiles on the path.

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Tan's tale is a metaphor for creative thought. It demonstrates how uncommon patterns can attract the attention of others. Words are like the tiles in Tan's tale. When arranged into different shapes or patterns, they catch our attention. Stories are like the animal shapes, except that we use words instead of tile pieces. In the next few chapters, we'll take a closer look at why stories like Tan's Tale capture our attention and how they help us retain information. We'll also look at how they help affect behavior. Then we'll examine story components in more detail.

### **Role of Storytelling**

The art of storytelling has been an integral part of human culture for literally thousands of years. Ancient tribes left cave paintings that essentially tell us stories about their lives. Many of these paintings depict the hunt, the quest for food. Over the centuries humans gradually became better and better at providing for their basic needs such as food and water. This allowed us to expand our storytelling.

Stories told of cultural histories, such as the flood story common to many ancient civilizations. Parables taught values and ideas. Epics entertained people with stories of great deeds – some real, some imagined. Humans have long been masters of the metaphor, the art of using seemingly unrelated concepts to relay a specific point. This is storytelling and it is still very practical and very relevant to every day life.

Think about the most persuasive people you know in your personal and occupational life. Chances are they use storytelling to achieve their goals. They tell about humorous encounters to entertain us or relate an

experience with a past client to sign a new one. Storytelling resonates with something deep inside us and speaks to the core of what it means to be human.

Chances are good that you already tell stories. However, you can harness the power of storytelling to achieve even more success in your personal and business relationships. Stories allow us to make more personal and lasting connections with the people in our lives. They help us maintain current friendships and establish new ones. Shared stories are an integral part of strong marriages and partnerships.

Storytelling also has practical application to almost every aspect of business and career. “Water cooler talk” helps us connect with our colleagues. Tales of past experience illustrate a company’s mission and values. A well formed testimonial sells a product. An experience with a difficult client teaches new employees how to handle a tough situation.

## **How Stories Motivate**

Why does an experience with a difficult client teach new employees how to handle a tough situation? Wouldn’t it be easier to just give them a list of things to say?

Motivation is one of the toughest barriers in a training situation. Employees are “required” to take most courses, based on job necessity or compliance or to achieve advancement. This is a natural extension of our educational system. We attend grade school to move on to high school, high school to get into college and college to move on to a good career, and so on. Thus, we see most training programs as an obligation, something we must “get through.”

Ironically, humans have a passion for learning. This is evidenced by the proliferation of education channels and programming on television. Topics on these shows are increasingly growing in sophistication. After gritting our teeth through a day of corporate training, people return home to watch a documentary about the movement of tectonic plates or the construction of the Hoover dam.

Why are we motivated to watch these programs? We watch these programs because they do not so much seek to “teach” as to tell the “story” of a particular topic. They contain acts, scenes, central characters and through lines.

For example, the first act of a documentary on dinosaurs may open on a scene in ancient Arizona, sixty-five million years ago. A herd of stegosaurus (our central characters) wanders along a dry creek bed. The herd comes to this creek during the dry season, where they can usually find water. However, this year is dryer than usual, and the herd must find water by digging into the ground (our through line).

The scene above is more interesting than an archeologist holding a leg bone in his lab. I’ve also conveyed several pieces of information: 1) There were dinosaurs in the area now known as Arizona sixty-five million years ago; 2) Stegosaurus traveled in herds; and 3) Dinosaurs sometimes looked for water by digging.

This technique need not involve expensive computer animation and high priced narrators, either. Documentary filmmaking has used storytelling cost effectively for years. Panning or zooming the camera along a painting or still picture with narration and music is a powerful way to tell a story. Entire Civil War and World War II documentaries have been filmed using one

or two large illustrations. A powerful yet underused method in multimedia is sound and fading stills.

Storytelling can be applied to all training programs and informational multimedia. We tap into the oral traditions humans have used to communicate for thousands of years using stories, metaphors and examples. In this section we focused on training. However the same principles apply to sales, marketing and other key aspects of business.

Which of the following examples do you find more compelling:

1. An unseen narrator explains each of the safety features of a car. As the narrator reviews each feature, we see a picture of it and bullet point summarizing its importance.
2. A woman explains how a car's safety features saved the life of her and her family, followed by video of the car's crash test and shots of the cabin still intact.

The second example immediately captures our attention and seems much more personal. It taps into our experiences, needs and fears. It actually tells the story of the car. Before beginning any business project, first ask: "What is the story?"

## Story Types

Not every story begins "once upon a time" or features an animated character. The first question is "what's the story?" The second is "what type of story is appropriate?" There are many story types. The key is choosing the genre that best fits your goals and

personality. Stories range along three main dimensions: formality, length and complexity. The topic provides several clues and correlations to determine these dimensions.

Formality is derived from the topic and audience. Topics such as “Effective Presentations” and “Effective Writing” can be told in less formal stories, such as the comic strip characters used in the sample series. Other subjects like a medical system or company history require a more formal story. To see the book’s example, visit [practicalstorytelling.com](http://practicalstorytelling.com).

We must also account for the tolerance of the audience. Certain groups may be less receptive of an informal story. A scenario-based program is an example of a more formal storytelling technique. In a scenario the participant is given a role within a reality-based story.

The amount of material determines length. The simplest of the three dimensions, length is determined by dividing and sub-dividing a program into groups of three to five complete bits of information, each definable in an action-oriented sentence sometimes referred to as an “objective.” However not all story types are sustainable over certain lengths. Stories perform most effectively and efficiently when used consistently.

Complexity is the most difficult dimension to calculate and deal with, especially in longer stories. More complex topics generally require more complex stories. The story in a complex program anchors the material in metaphor and example. This helps the user visualize the material. In other cases the story is a simple one. A series of concise and practical worksheets may be the whole narrative.

A good example of this technique is the book *What Color is Your Parachute* by Richard Nelson Bolles. The reader is an active participant in the book, which utilizes

a series of questions and worksheets to help someone discover his or her true calling.

In this case the audience themselves are the main characters and the plot is the task at hand. Animated characters or comics don't help in this case. Just as a story must resolve itself, the learner must complete a specific sequence of events to resolve the task at hand.

The storytelling technique is a unique approach to design, not a way to trivialize the topic. There are different types of stories, ranging from lighthearted character treatments to "real life" scenarios. Analysis of the topic, audience and organizational personality inspires the appropriate story. Later sections of this book examine each of these aspects as well as story types in greater detail.

## **Cost-effective Storytelling**

At first glance storytelling may seem expensive. The History Channel and Discover Channel now favor sophisticated computer animation and re-creations over the simple picture panning method described earlier. If you look close though, you'll still see some of the earlier techniques applied to the technology. For example, it's common to create one computer model of ancient city and use several "fly-by" shots from different angles.

There are several methods to make storytelling cost-effective. Educational storytelling has roots in documentary, a genre of filmmaking with traditionally small budgets. Below are several additional methods that provide powerful storytelling while reducing costs:

- **Live storytelling.** Don't underestimate the power of someone simply telling a story. Word

of mouth is still the most powerful motivator in most forms of advertising.

- **Sound and stills.** An underused method in multimedia is sound and fading stills. A developer's first instinct is often to use video. However, a series of stills that fade into each other with a sound or voice track can be just as effective. It's cheaper and uses less bandwidth.
- **Re-use.** Often elements of a program can be used multiple times in subtly different ways. With modifications, the same script can be used in a workbook, job aid and online training tool. Pictures and video can also be re-used in different ways (such as the documentary example above).
- **Cloning.** One of the benefits the computer offers is cloning and modification of objects. You can create an element once as a template, then modify it slightly for a multitude of uses.
- **Alternative animation.** Animated characters have become increasingly more fluid in their movements. However, a little movement goes a long way. In fact, limited movement sometimes becomes "stylistic." A classic example of this minimalist animation is Terry Gilliam's work on "Monty Python's Flying Circus." A more contemporary example is the animation style used by DNA Productions in "Olive, the Other Reindeer."
- **Economy of scale.** Design methods become more efficient when they are used repeatedly. Steps in creation can be streamlined, and lessons learned applied to future projects.

A constant within all of these methods is a need for good writing. The underlying text, whether it physically appears in the program or is read in the background, carries the through line. Even the most expensive animation cannot cover up bad writing. With good writing and creative methods storytelling can be both interesting and cost-effective.

## **Applying Stories**

The Practical Art of Storytelling refers to the use of stories to enhance our every day lives by establishing deeper connections with other people. These deeper connections can lead to a number of benefits in both our personal lives and our careers.

This book is divided into three main parts. In Part I: The Mechanics of Stories, we'll continue to explore the underlying reasons why stories impact our lives and the lives of others. An awareness of these concepts is the first step to employing stories on a more practical level.

In Part 2: The Anatomy of a Story, we'll break down stories and storytelling into a series of inter-related parts. Once you understand all the parts, you'll be able to construct stories specifically suited to your individual goals. All of the worksheets included in this section are also available at [practicalstorytelling.com](http://practicalstorytelling.com).

In Part 3: Practical Application of the Story, we'll review the use of stories in everyday life through a series of sample stories. These example stories cover a range of different goals, both personal and business. All of the examples in this section are also available at [practicalstorytelling.com](http://practicalstorytelling.com).

Each chapter of the book is divided into several main sections. The title page of each chapter includes several

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learning objectives and an overview of the chapter. Following the actual content of the chapter are three additional elements:

- **Diversion** – a light and interesting story or activity related to the chapter.
- **7 Secrets** – seven key points from within the chapter.
- **Exercises** – short series of fill in the blank questions to test your retention and several discussion questions to get you thinking.

Although this book contains a certain amount of theory and background, the main focus is on the actual application of storytelling. The content and worksheets are designed to help you practice the art of storytelling in your everyday life. If have any questions or comments during or after reading the book, please visit [practicalstorytelling.com](http://practicalstorytelling.com) or email me at this address: [ask@practicalstorytelling.com](mailto:ask@practicalstorytelling.com).

## **Diversion: Make your own Tangram**

It's relatively easy to make your own Tangram. Use the pattern at [www.practicalstorytelling.com](http://www.practicalstorytelling.com) to cut shapes out of cardboard, foam or heavy paper. It's more interesting to make the shapes different colors.

Once you've cut out the pieces, see how many different animals you can create. Pick your five favorites and try to write a simple story around them. Next, see if you can use that story or a similar one together with Tangram for your next training, sales or marketing program.

## **7 Secrets**

- Be careful when carrying clay tile pieces.
- It's hard to reproduce a perfect square.
- People notice unusual patterns.
- Typical patterns, such as a square, often go unnoticed.
- Uncommon patterns attract attention in words as well as tile pieces.
- Creative thought captures attention.
- Stories come in a variety of different types and styles, applicable to many different situations.

## Exercises

### Fill in the Blanks

1. Tan's Tile is based on an ancient Chinese puzzle called \_\_\_\_\_.

### Discussion Questions

1. Why does Tan's family notice the animal shapes, but not the square?
2. In what ways can you use the Tangram puzzle to stimulate creative thought in your organization?
3. What types of stories are applicable to your everyday life?



## Chapter 2: Attract Attention

### Chapter Objectives:

- List the three cognitive challenges stories overcome.
- Describe how Tan's Tile meets the challenge of attracting attention.
- Explain why uncommon patterns attract our attention.

### Chapter Overview

This chapter examines the way Tan's Tile attracts attention and explains the reasons behind our perception of pattern and changes in pattern.

## **Cognitive challenges**

In Chapter 1 we saw that storytelling overcomes two main cognitive challenges:

1. **Attract attention** – Tan’s family was immediately drawn to the unique shapes he created. Hopefully the opening story also attracted your attention to the book.
2. **Achieve retention** – Tan’s family remembers the specific shapes, they probably don’t remember the square. Hopefully the opening story has provided you with a memorable metaphor for creative thought.

In this chapter we’re going to add a third:

3. **Affect behavior** - The goal of any training, marketing or sales program is to initiate or modify behavior. The objective of a training program is to teach skills or knowledge that directs behavior. The objective of a sales or marketing program is get someone to purchase or purchase more of a product or service.

Whether you’re trying to sell a car or just make a new friend you have to overcome each of these three cognitive challenges. Within this chapter and the next two chapters we’ll examine how storytelling overcomes each of these challenges in more detail.

## How Stories Attract Attention

Tan's tile is a simple square before it breaks. Although the tile no doubt represented quality and craftsmanship, it was one among the many throughout the emperor's palace. The moment the tile slid from Tan's fingers though, it became something more. Split into pieces, the tile could be reassembled into a number of different forms.

As Tan is rearranging the pieces, his wife notices a swan, his son a fox, and his daughter a cat. The animal shapes attract attention because they represent uncommon patterns among the other square tiles. We practice the same basic concept when we use bold type or bullet points.

We see by the refraction of light. It enters our eye through the cornea and is projected onto the retina. The retina contains cells called rods and cones that help us detect a range of colors. We see various "objects" based on color differences. For example:

**ATTRACT ATTENTION**  
**ACHIEVE RETENTION**  
**AFFECT BEHAVIOR**

The words you see on this page are a function of the contrast between the blackness of the letters and the whiteness of the page. That's why print is harder to read when it's smaller or lighter in color. It's harder for our eyes to detect the contrast. Conversely, we see things more clear when there is greater **contrast** between the colors. We see the word "contrast" in the previous sentence better because it's larger and darker.

Similarly, repeated contours tend to blur together in our vision, while opposing contours stand out. Can you

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look at the following line and immediately tell how many times the letter “X” appears -- just by looking and not by specifically counting?

XX

Now look at this line:

XXXXXXXXXOXXXXXXXXXOXXXXXXXXXXOXXXX

How many times does the letter “O” appear? You see the precise number of O’s almost immediately because they stand out against the existing pattern of X’s.

Let’s look at another example:

XXXXXXXXOXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXOXXXXXXXX  
XXXXXXXXOXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXOXXXXXXXX  
XBXXXXXXXXOXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXOXXXXXXXX  
XXXXXXXXOXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXOXXXXBX

How many O’s could you see this time? How about the number of B’s? The human eye can perceive patterns on a sophisticated level. This allows us to effectively process the incredible amount of input we receive.

Up to this point, we’ve only looked at physical examples. But we perceive mental patterns as well. This occurs as the brain processes the information it receives from the eye. If you see the four-line pattern above again, you’ll probably experience a sense of familiarity, even if you don’t remember exactly where you saw it.

After we’ve seen a cat and associated the word “cat” with it, we know that animal to be a “cat” when we see it again. In fact, our mind’s application of that pattern is

so sophisticated that we can see almost any breed of cat and still know it's a cat.

Even that isn't the amazing part. We can see the pattern even in an abstract collection of shapes. Like Tan's daughter, we can recognize the form of a cat even if it's constructed from Tangram pieces, just as Tan's daughter did in the story. In fact, we don't even have to see the whole pattern to recognize it. Can you recognize just the eye of a cat when you see it? For a demonstration of these concepts, visit [www.practicalstorytelling.com](http://www.practicalstorytelling.com) and click on the "patterns" link.

## **Putting Patterns to Work**

But why spend all this time on patterns? By understanding how patterns are formed and processed, we become better able to manipulate them to deliver our message. For example: What do you think of as a classified ad? Probably something like this:

**Improve your sales, marketing and training products. Meet learning objectives by telling stories. We can teach you how. For more information, visit [practicalstorytelling.com](http://practicalstorytelling.com).**

The ad above uses action words such as "improve" and "meet." It is written in active voice and even implies a direct benefit. However, chances are good this ad would not attract attention. The problem is that it fits right into the pattern of most classified ads. It would blend in with all the others on the page.

Classified ads are an example of a complex pattern. We expect them to look a certain way. Try the following

experiment: look through the classified section of your favorite periodical. When you stare at the pages as a whole, how many of the ads actually catch your attention? The ones that do are probably boxed or contain a picture. Everything else tends to blur together.

That's our brain interpreting the overall pattern of the pages. Now pick a couple of pages and read line by line through each ad. Did you notice any products or services you're interested in? That's why some people make a point to read every ad in the classified section of their favorite periodical (especially if it's hobby-related).

Even if you read the ad above though, you probably won't remember it. Aside from the use of action words and the implication of a benefit, it's not that memorable. Most of the ads probably employ both of these techniques. Now look at the following classified ad:

**Henry Ford has a problem. It takes a mechanic a day to build one car. To get ideas, Ford tours a meat packing plant. At the plant, meat travels on hooks. At each station a worker makes a different cut. Ford's idea for the automobile assembly line is born. He moves the cars through the factory and each worker builds one part. Ford solves his business problem by looking at an industry parallel yet different to his own. For more stories, visit [practicalstorytelling.com](http://practicalstorytelling.com).**

The story in this ad breaks the usual pattern, just as the tile animals break the pattern and capture the attention of Tan's family. It attracts attention and stands out among the usual classified ads.

The examples we've looked at so far involve the direct use of individual stories. However, as we continue in this book, we'll also be looking at ways to use the qualities of storytelling to convey information.

## Not Just Gimmicks

Effective stories are well thought out and tightly constructed. If you own a restaurant that sells chicken sandwiches, just putting a guy out front in a chicken suit is not a story. Consider Chik-fil-A's long running "cow campaign." Cows appear on billboards and posters holding the message: "Eat Mor Chikin." (The misspellings are intentional.)

The cow itself doesn't attract attention. Unless you're a dairy farmer, cows aren't all that exciting. This campaign is successful because it's based on the story of a bunch of cows who want people to eat chicken (rather than the cows). The cow is actually the central character, not the story itself. The cow's quest to not get eaten is the plot.

Although this advertising seems gimmicky at first glance, it's actually well planned. Here are just some of the choices that were made:

- The use of "life-like" cows to enhance the absurdity
- The crooked writing and misspelling for comedic effect
- The misspelling of "chikin" mirrors the spelling in the brand name
- The cows write on a simple whitewashed board with black paint

These are just few of the important choices that were made when this story was constructed. This campaign contains a number of successful story elements such as humor. The fact that the words are crooked and misspelled is part of the appeal. We've probably never

seen a cow write, but if they did we just assume they wouldn't be able to spell. The notion the cows can write at all is actually "suspension of disbelief" another bonus you get when telling stories.

Another key point is that we identify with the cow. "How do we identify with the cow?" you ask. Think about it: would you want to be eaten? Imagine there was a popular restaurant selling Solient Green (as Charlton Heston pointed out in the campy science fiction film by the same name: "Solient Green is people! It's people!"). You'd probably be writing signs about eating more vegetables in your diet.

## **Identifying with the Characters**

The interesting thing about identification is it usually occurs on a deeper level than we realize. In fact, it works best when we identify without even realizing it. We identify with the cows out of our innate need for survival. We root for the cows without even realizing why.

Abraham Maslow, one of the founders of humanistic psychology, describes five levels of human needs. Chances are you learned about Maslow in school, but classified him as one of those "areas you don't use in real life." However, when applied to a specific situation, Maslow's Hierarchy actually suggests practical strategies.

Maslow's theory was that we climb these needs like a ladder; we must fulfill the lower or "basic" needs before we can achieve the higher ones.

- 1. Physiological** – Food, water, air and shelter.
- 2. Safety** – Security and stability.

3. **Love and belonging** – Social needs and acceptance.
4. **Esteem** – Pride in one's self.
5. **Self-actualization** – Be the best person you can be.

Consider that participants approach a training program, advertising campaign, presentation or meeting with a finite supply of personal energy. Activity at each of Maslow's levels of need draws off some of this energy. For example if you're giving a presentation and the room is too hot or too cold, a certain portion of the participant's energy is devoted to that condition.

Remember the last time you were in a situation where the temperature did not suit you? We maintain constant awareness of a temperature that is just a few degrees beyond our acceptable range. Although our mind is still able to pursue other activities, a portion of our mental energy is siphoned off in the awareness of the uncomfortable temperature.

In the example above we are identifying with the cows on the lowest rung of the ladder: survival, the basic need for life. The second rung, safety is also a connection. It seems silly to think of yourself identifying with a cow, but just by giving the cow slightly human nuances makes it work.

We can address the need for safety in a meeting by fostering an atmosphere in which questions and suggestions are welcome. Group exercises and icebreakers build up a common bond among the participants.

We can build esteem by encouraging participant contributions to discussion. Fulfillment of learning objectives or achievement of a meeting goal can be considered limited self-actualization. Maslow's

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hierarchy becomes a tool through which we can address the individual needs of others. Connecting with basic needs allows us to attract attention.

## **Diversion: Your Hierarchy of Needs**

This chapter introduced Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and provided a practical example of the hierarchy in real life. What main points are included on your Hierarchy of Needs? Take a few moments to consider each level and envision the practical application of each to you.

### **1. Physiological**

- Do you eat to live or live to eat?
- Do you have favorite foods or no preference?
- Are you a collector or do you travel light?
- Is home where you hang your hat or something more permanent?

### **2. Safety – Security and stability.**

- Do you deadbolt the doors or leave the screen door open?
- Do you feel secure around others or are you self-reliant?
- Are you a planner or more spontaneous?
- Do you have a regular routine or prefer every day to be different?

### **3. Love and belonging – Social needs and acceptance.**

- How important are your relationships to your identity?
- Are you close to your family?
- How large is your circle of friends?
- Are you a social butterfly or more comfortable at home?

**4. Esteem** – Pride in one's self.

- Do you like yourself?
- How would you describe yourself?
- How satisfied are you?
- What do you consider your major accomplishments?

**5. Self-actualization** – Be the best person you can be.

- What do you need to be happy?
- Are you defined by your accomplishments or your personality?
- How do you define yourself?
- What makes you happy?

## **7 Secrets**

- We physically see by refracting light.
- When interpreting light, the human brain looks for patterns.
- The human brain interprets patterns on many levels.
- We can identify abstract as well as detailed patterns.
- The human brain compares patterns to existing memory for identification.
- Uncommon patterns attract attention.
- We can take advantage of the way in which the mind sees patterns.

## **Exercises**

### **Fill in the Blanks**

1. When delivering a message, you face the following three cognitive challenges:

a. \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_

2. We physically see by refracting \_\_\_\_\_.

3. This occurs in the eyes through \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

4. We see objects more clearly when there is \_\_\_\_\_ between the colors.

5. Tan's family notices the animal shapes as opposed to the square shape because they represent \_\_\_\_\_.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What are some additional abstract and/or sophisticated patterns we are able to interpret (such as the Tangram cat shape)?

2. Do your current training, sales or marketing programs use common or uncommon patterns? What are some strategies for using uncommon patterns in future programs?

3. Which has more impact: black and white or color? Is this true in all situations?



## Chapter 3: Achieve Retention

### Chapter Objectives:

- Describe how Tan's Tile achieves retention by helping the reader retain its main ideas.
- Explain how short-term and long-term memory allows us to remember information.

### Chapter Overview:

This chapter examines the mental processes behind our retention of the key points in stories like Tan's Tile. We'll explore the differences between short-term and long-term memory and establish why we need to get our messages into long-term memory. The chapter also covers techniques for moving information into long-term memory.

## **Association and Long-term Memory**

Let's return to the story of Emperor Tan for a moment. Imagine the scene at dinner later that evening. Tan no doubt announces the successful re-creation of his square tile. However, all his family can talk about are the wonderful animals he was able to create. Perhaps if Tan gives it some thought, he'll realize that the square, because it follows common patterns, simply isn't as memorable.

This is a biological offshoot of the same science that attracted our attention in the first place. In order to register an uncommon or unknown pattern, our mind focuses more attention on it. This allows us to recognize the pattern the next time we see it. A cat holds more fascination for you the first time you see one. That feeling of interest is our brain's way of requesting more information about the object.

We have a natural desire to register the pattern for future reference.

At the dinner table, Tan's family talks about his tile animals because at that point they still reside in their short-term memory. However, what about breakfast the next morning? Any guess about who might still remember the animals?

Depending on how interesting or unusual the occurrence was, they might all remember. However, there is one person in the family who is more likely to remember one of the tile animals than the rest. Tan's son associates the arrangement of the tiles with a fox he's seen in the garden. The association helps him remember.

Once you attract attention, it's relatively easy to get into short-term memory. Short-term memory is electrical. It's actually an extension of sight itself. After our eye refracts the light, that information is passed

along the optic nerve directly into the brain. In a fraction of a second, our brain compares this electrical impulse against the records in long-term memory. It's in this instant the brain discovers that the pattern is unique.

The unique pattern gives us a "one day pass" so to speak, into the brain. That electrical memory remains until we go to sleep. Have you ever woken up in the middle of the night with a great idea or the memory of a vivid dream? No matter how hard you try, it's usually difficult to remember these things once we wake up. This is a demonstration of short-term memory cleaning itself out.

By contrast, long-term memory is designed to last years or even a lifetime. This is the land of Abraham Maslow and his Hierarchy of Needs. Here we store all the information we need for survival, relationships, fulfillment, etc. That's why we have natural desire to learn about the cat the first time we see it.

Because it has to last for future reference, long-term memory is chemically based. Chemical reactions in the brain form lasting patterns that we can recognize throughout our life. Our brain uses these patterns to interpret what we see.

The keys to staying in long-term memory are pattern and association. This is somewhat ironic because we had to use uncommon patterns to get noticed in the first place.

However, it is logical. We're interested in the cat the first time we see it because we want to be able to recognize it again. That's why it's important to nest patterns within the story. In Tan's *Tile*, the animal shapes are patterns that represent creative thought while the square pattern represents the opposite.

Association is a well-known trick for remembering. If you've ever studied music, chances are you know the

meaning of “every good boy does fine” and “FACE.” This phrase and word are acronyms used for reading the notes on sheet music. Music itself is another association device. If you recognize the phrase “stronger than dirt,” chances are good you know the musical note that goes with each word (either from the commercial or the Doors song).

Other associations are visual or verbal cues such as the one Tan’s son uses to connect the broken tiles with the fox he saw in the garden. So if we have all these methods already, why do we need stories?

Stories inherently apply all of these methods and allow you to subtly weave them around your message. The Tangram fox and the fox in the garden in Tan’s Tile represent an association. Just as Tan’s son associations the tile shapes with the fox he saw in the garden, you can associate that example with this chapter.

The entire story of Tan’s Tile demonstrates the use of creative thought and storytelling, as well as being an example of it. I can also draw from the story to provide repetition of the main points without boring you by simply stating the same thing over and over again. The story helps me re-present the ideas in different ways.

## **Metaphor and Example**

Two effective ways of emphasizing key points in your message are metaphor and example. An illustration of metaphor is the way the shapes in the Tangram are used to represent the components of a story. The shapes are easier to remember. However, if the audience remembers the shapes, they are better able to remember the concepts associated with them. Specific

examples are another method of establishing long-term memories.

The Tangram is a metaphor, but examples often work just as well. If you think about the years of history class you've had, you may not remember many of the specific dates, but you most likely remember specific occurrences such as the Boston Tea Party. By remembering the Boston Tea Party, you also remember the colonies were protesting taxes (tea = tax in long-term memory). That's why the Boston Tea Party was an effective strategy by the rebels – not only did it send a key message to Parliament, it was memorable.

The Spanish-American War was largely fought on the back of the slogan: "Remember the Maine." The Maine was an American battleship sunk off the coast of Cuba. The initial conclusion was that the Spanish had blown up the warship. (Actual investigations have been inconclusive.) Nonetheless, "Remember the Maine" became a rallying cry for the war.

In this case alliteration does the heavy lifting. "Remember the Maine" contains several "m" sounds that make it chemically easy to remember. Another example is the "Battle of Bunker Hill." History indicates it's easier to go to war if you have a good slogan.

## **Finding a Connection**

The trick to turning a simple suggestion, idea or persuasion into a story is to find a connection. Don't just explain to a colleague why something is a good or bad idea. Tell an actual account of when that idea was tried. Let the outcome demonstrate your point for you. Don't just walk up to someone you want to meet and remark

that the room is crowded - give an example of how crowded.

It seems a bit unnatural at first because we tend to think of stories as “mini-events.” A friend tells us about her trip. We sit down to watch our favorite program. We read a book about John Adams. With practice, we can make stories a more integrated aspect of our lives.

The connection is the extended pass that gets us into long-term memory. Remember: the barrier to short-term memory is deceptively simple. All we have to do is break the pattern a bit. The guy in the chicken suit can do that much. Chances are we won't remember him a mile up the road, though. To get into long-term memory we need to build a connection such as the one with the cows.

Before you can establish a connection, you need to examine your core message:

- “I make a strong contribution and deserve a raise.”
- “We have the best solution for your business.”
- “You're an interesting person and I'd like to spend more time with you.”

Once you've determined your core message, or “theme” it's easy to see a natural connection:

- “I've made some innovations to the new product line...”
- “Last year we had a client with exactly your problem...”
- “Remember that night we were talking and walked right past your house...”

All of the examples deal with one type of story: an “account.” An account is a simple retelling of a true occurrence or incident. There may be slight embellishment or certain aspects of story may receive more emphasis than others. However, the core of the anecdote is usually true (or at least true as we see it).

Anecdotes are generally the easiest type of story to use. We all have anecdotes. Just about anything that happens to us during the day is a potential anecdote. (Some are just more interesting than others.) Any trip to the bank can be an anecdote. However, a trip in which there’s no line but the teller still makes us walk through the rope maze is a much more interesting one.

Anecdotes are also very flexible. We can emphasize or de-emphasize different aspects of an anecdote based on our audience or purpose. If we’re trying to entertain, we may play up the more humorous aspects of the anecdote. For example, we could describe in more detail all the turns in the maze at the bank or how we tripped over a pole at one point.

If we’re using the same anecdote as a simple way to illustrate inefficiency we stick close to the main points and emphasize how much longer it took than usual. This type of modification works well with just about any anecdote. Anecdotes are a good way to get started in practical storytelling. This book examines other story types in more detail in a later chapter of the book.

## **Diversion: Watch Some TV**

There are a lot of good examples of storytelling on television. However, the ones most relevant to practical storytelling are up in the “higher” numbers of the cable guide. Those of you who are “infotainment” junkies know exactly what I’m talking about: Discovery, Discovery Health, History Channel, History Channel International, National Geographic, etc. The documentary programming on these channels makes excellent use of storytelling to make dry topics more interesting.

Watch these programs and pay careful attention to the way they are constructed and filmed. You should be able to pick up at least one to three techniques or strategies from each program. Look for the following:

- How does the program initially attract your attention?
- How is the plot organized?
- Who are the main characters in the story and how are they developed?
- What types of visual aids are used (stills, computer graphics, etc.)?
- How does the program end off before each commercial break?

## **7 Secrets**

- Short-term memory is electrical.
- Short-term memory is cleaned out each night when we sleep.
- Long-term memory is chemical.
- Our messages must pass to long-term memory for retention.
- Long-term memory uses patterns and association.
- Develop metaphorical connections between your story and the information in your message.
- Stories make repetition easier.

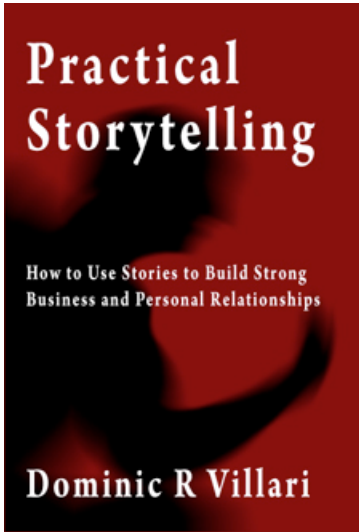
## **Exercises**

### **Fill in the Blanks**

1. The member of Tan's family most likely to remember their animal shape is Tan's \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Short-term memory is \_\_\_\_\_-based.
3. Long-term memory is \_\_\_\_\_-based.
4. For our messages to survive, they must get into \_\_\_\_\_.
5. The keys to staying in long-term memory are \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What associations help you remember facts and skills?
2. Using the information about long-term memory, what are some strategies for making repetition more affective?
3. How can the method used for attracting attention be leveraged when moving information into long-term memory?



## Ready to learn more?

Click [here](#) to order Practical Storytelling from Amazon.com for only \$14.95.

People are instinctively drawn to hearing stories and telling stories. Practical Storytelling explains the mechanics of how and why stories work.

The book provides several step-by-step processes to help you create and tell your own stories to improve business and personal relationships. The example stories presented here, including the central story: "Tan's Tile," were chosen to demonstrate each aspect of story development.

Practical Storytelling breaks a story down into a set of core components and explains how you can construct each one. You'll learn to implement stories in business and social settings including sales, marketing, meetings, training and more. This hands-on guide also includes a glossary, exercises, worksheets and sample stories.

Topics include: attract attention and achieving retention, affecting behavior, story types, theme development, audience analysis, character design, plot construction, acts and scenes, factoring the environment, collecting stories and story delivery.