

# Stories and Communication

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss how telling stories can be an effective way to communicate complex messages. In particular, we'll look at:

1. Stories as a Means of Communication
2. Storytelling in Conflict Resolution

## 1. Stories as a Means of Communication

Human beings have been telling stories since the dawn of time; stories are how we make sense of the world. Everyone has a story, and when we share our stories with one another, we become connected.

A **story** can be defined as a form of verbal communication depicting real or imagined events; **narrative** is just another term for story.



### BIG IDEA

Think about the last time you heard the phrase, "What's your story?" It's a very common phrase; we want to know what another person's story is so that we can make sense of their actions, behavior, and beliefs.

When you hear people tell a story about an experience they've had, you get brought into that experience. Storytelling is really the original virtual reality in that it gives us the ability to bring others into our story by communicating it to them.

We feel as if we are experiencing what the storyteller experienced because they are using multiple channels of communication.

The storyteller is not only speaking to us, but also using:

- Body language
- Facial expressions
- Tone of voice
- Eye contact

Thus, storytelling is a very rich medium through which to transmit a complex message. Stories evoke the imagination through the use of multiple **codes**, or sets of symbols with consistent meanings used to hold and convey information.

**Story**

A form of verbal communication depicting real or imagined events.

**Narrative**

Another term for story.

**Code**

A set of symbols with consistent meanings used to hold and convey information.

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## 2. Storytelling in Conflict Resolution

If you don't know someone's story, chances are you're going to make up a story for that person. This is what we do as human beings; we take the facts and what we observe, and we use them to make up stories that we hold in our heads

These made-up stories are based on our:

- Perceptions
- Assumptions
- Preconceived notions

Sometimes these stories may not be very flattering, especially when two parties are in conflict. These parties are holding stories about each other in their heads, and these stories may or may not be accurate.

Storytelling is therefore a very powerful tool in the conflict resolution process because the process provides an opportunity to replace a false story with the real story.

### IN CONTEXT

Stories can be particularly useful in restorative justice, in which an offender actually has an opportunity to hear the victim's story. When the offender hears this story and steps into that experience, the impact of the offender's wrongdoing really hits home in a way that it doesn't typically in a courtroom setting. There is then an opportunity for restitution.

Imagine a teenager who is arrested for throwing rocks at a nursing home and breaking windows. The judge refers the teen to a restorative justice process. The teen sits down with the owner of the nursing home who talks about the expense of replacing the windows, but this doesn't move the teen very much. However, when the residents of the nursing home join the process, they tell stories about how frightened they were when they saw the windows breaking. Some of them even tell stories about traumatic experiences earlier in their lives that were brought up by the teen's vandalism. These stories help the teen to truly understand the impact of his behavior.

The process would also include the perpetrator telling their story, so the teen explains how he is frustrated and angry all the time, and breaking windows helps let out some of the pain. The nursing home residents understand—they were teens once, too.

This same healing can happen in any type conflict resolution process that involves bringing two disputing parties together.

The process of hearing a party tell their story in a safe, confidential environment allows the other party to step into that experience and understand the situation from a different point of view.

This will often create an opportunity to work out an agreement that is different from what either party originally had in mind, as the agreement can now take the mutual needs of both parties into consideration. This is very common in the mediation process.

➡ **EXAMPLE** Two neighbors come in clashing, ready to perhaps file a restraining order or call the police. They sit down in a mediation, and one neighbor begins to tell a story that reveals complex extenuating circumstances about which the other neighbor had no idea. This neighbor can now replace the false story in their head with this new true story, opening up opportunities for reconciliation.

The conflict resolution process not only allows false stories to be corrected and replaced, but it also provides multiple opportunities for the parties to confirm what they have heard one another say during the process.

We've discussed this idea before as a **confirmation message**, or a message sent by sender to receiver indicating that a message has been received, and how the message has been interpreted.

This confirmation is a chance for the parties to correct their perceptions and assumptions; simply telling their stories to one another opens the door for that to happen.



#### TERM TO KNOW

#### Confirmation Message

A message sent by receiver to sender indicating that a message has been received and indicating how the message has been interpreted.



#### SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about **stories as a means of communication** that can provide context for a person's thoughts and behavior. When we don't know another person's story, we have the tendency to create a (sometimes inaccurate) story for this person in our own heads. You now understand that **storytelling in the conflict resolution process** allows opposing parties to share and listen to each other's perspectives, thus providing an opportunity for the parties to correct the false stories they have internally constructed about one another. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



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