

# The Neuroscience of Storytelling

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**I** [inc.com/carmine-gallo/the-neuroscience-of-storytelling.html](https://inc.com/carmine-gallo/the-neuroscience-of-storytelling.html)

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Photo: Getty Images

Storytelling is not something we do. Storytellers are who we are.

That's how I opened my Harvard course on storytelling and presentation skills. Since the students enrolled in the executive education courses I teach come from around the world, I like to remind them that storytelling is a powerful skill handed down over centuries and across languages and cultures.

Although my classes take a deep dive into specific tactics anyone can leverage to improve their storytelling skills, many students want to know the why before the how. It makes sense. They've heard from bosses or peers that they need to improve their "storytelling skills," but few people understand the reason to do so.

While the science of storytelling can -- and has -- filled books, there are a few high-level reasons the human brain is wired for story. These reasons might inspire you to learn more about storytelling in all its facets. At the very least, you can impress your friends with your science knowledge.

## 1. The Campfire Ritual

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Fire was a major milestone in human development because it allowed humans to cook food, ward off predators, and protect themselves from the cold.

Anthropologists now point to another important benefit -- campfires gave ancient tribes the opportunity to continue their conversations at night after the day's hunt. They exchanged stories during these campfire rituals, sharing information, educating each other, and inspiring people to explore the outside world.

Although the tools we use to communicate have changed, our brains haven't changed much. Our ancient wiring still finds joy in sharing stories around a campfire -- or a luxurious fire pit on the patio of a local restaurant.

We love listening to stories and admire people who can tell them well.

## 2. The Mind Meld

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Storytelling in science got a boost with the publication of a 2010 paper in *The Journal of Neuroscience*. I spoke to the author, Princeton University researcher Uri Hasson, who used magnetic resonance imaging to measure brain activity in his subjects related to storytelling.

Hasson discovered "extensive neural coupling" between speakers and listeners when they shared stories with one another. It's like having a mind-meld, Hasson told me.

Stories literally bond us together in ways that no PowerPoint slide ever could.

### 3. The Bonding Chemical

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Three thousand miles from Hasson's lab, I spoke to a scientist in Los Angeles whose research attempts to explain the chemical reaction happening in our brains when we tell stories.

Dr. Paul Zak says an emotional story triggers the release of oxytocin, a neurochemical often referred to as the "love hormone" because it builds bonding, trust, empathy, and compassion.

Zak says sustained attention is a "scarce resource" in our brains. That means we must use all the strategies available to grab people's attention and make them want to pay attention to us. Storytelling is the strategy that works best because we are wired for it, literally.

So before you open PowerPoint, ask yourself a simple question: What story do I want to tell? You can always create visual slides to complement the story, but nobody bonds over PowerPoint. They bond over shared experiences told through the very human stories we tell.

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