Crafting Strategic Visual Stories™
# Table of Contents

2 Four signposts of a great story

7 Walk in your audience’s shoes

8 The executive mindset

10 Your BIG Idea

16 Visualize your story

18 Story headlines

20 5 Ways to display information visually

22 Visual story checklist

26 Resources

27 About TPC
Fact:

Our brains are wired to remember stories.

However, weaving tales alone isn’t enough to spur your audience to take action. Combining your story with data and powerful visuals allows you to infuse both logic and emotion into your presentation and encourages sound decision-making.

Use this booklet, along with TPC’s Visual Story Planner™, to transform your insights, data and recommendations into compelling, audience-centric stories.
FOUR SIGNPOSTS OF A GREAT STORY

All great stories take the audience on a journey.

Your role as a communicator is to create stories that are emotional, engaging and ultimately transactional in the business world.

As you construct your story, you can introduce the setting, characters and conflict in any order. To keep your audience engaged, resolution must always come last.
Setting shows your audience where you are in the context of your presentation.

For many, the word “setting” means “place.” However, the definition of setting is much broader than a physical location. As you build your setting, remember to bring in important data, trends, and insights that give your audience context and prepares them for the resolution.

FOR EXAMPLE:

*The holidays are the number-one time of year when consumers buy or switch smartphones.*

This setting connects your audience to time, place, and circumstances of the story.
Characters help your audience relate to your story.

You can introduce them in a variety of ways: You can start by introducing an individual character, then broadening the context of your character by relating him or her to a larger group that your audience can identify with.

FOR EXAMPLE:

Maria is an 18-year-old exchange student from Bulgaria. She wants to stay in touch with friends and family back home. There are millions of people like Maria on social media who share the same wish—to stay connected.

Alternatively, you may start with a broader context, and then introduce an individual character.

FOR EXAMPLE:

We know that the holidays are the number one time of year when consumers switch or buy smartphones. We want to stay relevant with millions of Millennials in the UK who are looking to switch their phones this year...Millennials like 22-year-old, Alex.
Conflict is the core issue that makes your audience care about your resolution.

Without conflict, your audience cannot be sure you understand their problem, and may feel as though you are pushing information on them instead of understanding their problem and addressing their specific needs.

Sometimes, it’s helpful to create conflict that escalates as the story unfolds. You may introduce a series of small challenges that combine to create a much larger conflict. When possible, use quantitative data to support the conflict.

FOR EXAMPLE:

One stolen phone can lead to $10,000 in lost revenue.

OR

According to our research, 50% of users aren’t aware of the risk.
Resolution is your story’s ultimate payoff.

It brings your characters—and your audience—safely through conflict.

As you move toward your resolution, share evidence that supports your recommendation and illustrate how things will change for the better. Use confident, action-oriented language that grabs your audience’s attention and addresses their concerns.

FOR EXAMPLE:

*The benefits are clear.*

OR

*Connect with their optimism and self-motivation.*

Finally, conclude with “next steps” or a call-to-action that moves your audience to a decision.
WALK IN YOUR AUDIENCE’S SHOES

The best stories address your audience’s needs.

Take the time to discover what matters to your audience. When they can see themselves (or their customers) as characters in the story, you’ve successfully demonstrated your knowledge of their world and your understanding of their problem. This helps keep them engaged and ultimately helps win them over.

ASK YOURSELF:

Who or what matters to them?

What’s happening in their world?

What challenge or obstacle are they facing?
In order to craft strategic visual stories that speak to executives, it’s important to understand how executives think, what they care about, what they fear, and how to get and keep their attention.

Here are five tips for connecting with executives:

1. Executives value time as their most precious asset
   - Get to the point in the first 30 to 60 seconds
   - Set expectations
   - Keep it simple, short and candid
   - End early
2 Executives are experienced audience members
   • Cut common knowledge
   • Anticipate questions

3 Executives think big picture and long term
   • Present your vision (BIG Idea) before details
   • Lead with stories, not data
   • Link to strategic initiatives

4 Executives represent multiple constituencies
   Consider issues from the perspective of a broad group of stakeholders:
   • Board of Directors
   • Analysts
   • Competitors
   • Shareholders
   • Customers
   • Regulators

5 Executives evaluate rewards and risks
   • Find an insider who can coach you:
     – Executive assistant
     – Direct report
     – Colleague who presents to executives regularly
   • Keep their business goals, professional aspirations and fears top of mind
   • Show how your project will help them achieve success and mitigate risk
Your BIG Idea or key takeaway provides a narrative thread that moves your audience from **point A** (where they are now) to **point B** (where you want them to be). You want your audience to remember it, believe in it, and share it with others after you’ve left the room.

*Your BIG Idea is the “what” of your story with high-level benefits.* Order isn’t important, as long as you include both the WHAT and the BENEFITS.
Some of the most memorable BIG Ideas can also be expressed as a soundbite (but they don’t have to be).

If you create a memorable soundbite for your BIG Idea, it’s important that you also express it in a way that articulates both the WHAT and the BENEFITS.

EXAMPLES OF BIG IDEAS IN BUSINESS:

*We need to implement the performance-tracking dashboard to improve business results.*
*(Soundbite: Let’s hit the GO button)*

*Embracing sustainability will help us meet customer demands and protect our leadership position.*
*(Soundbite: It’s time to GO GREEN)*

*Let’s give our clients a reason to share and retweet by creating content that “sticks.”*  
*(Soundbite: Create a culture of social stickiness)*
YOUR BIG IDEA

This is the “why” of your story. These signposts can go in any order and can be expressed verbally or visually.
BIG Idea

This is the “what” of your story with high-level benefits. It can be a soundbite (but doesn’t have to be). When presenting to executives, consider starting with your BIG Idea. If they want more context, be prepared to share your “why.”

This is the “how” of your story. Your resolution includes details of your recommendation, evidence to support it and a call-to-action.
YOUR BIG IDEA

Your checklist for creating a

WEAK:

✗ Wordy
✗ Includes jargon and/or unfamiliar acronyms
✗ Does not include the “what” of your story
✗ Benefits are not clear, too many
✗ Language is passive
✗ Difficult to remember or share with others
✗ Audience is not compelled to ask “how” or “tell me more”
✗ Doesn’t flow easily from your Setting/Character/Conflict to Resolution
BIG Idea or key takeaway:

**STRONG:**

- ✔ Concise
- ✔ Conversational (uses everyday language)
- ✔ Includes the “what” of your story
- ✔ Benefits are clear (1, 2 or 3 max)
- ✔ Language is action-oriented
- ✔ Easy to remember or share with others
- ✔ Audience is compelled to lean in and ask “how” or “tell me more”
- ✔ Flows easily from your Setting/Character/Conflict to Resolution
VISUALIZE YOUR STORY

To bring your story to life visually, resist the temptation to start in PowerPoint.

Instead we recommend a 3-step process:
**Story Planner**
Use the Visual Story Planner to:
- Capture what matters most to your audience
- Craft your BIG Idea
- Build your story using classic storytelling signposts

**Storyboard**
With the Visual Story Planner as your foundation, it’s now time to develop a storyboard to:
- Map out your signposts
- Refine your headlines
- Generate ideas for visuals

**STEP 3: Visuals**
Use the storyboard to bring your story to life with visuals:
- Remember to work within the guidelines of your corporate brand
- Vary your visuals—create visual pauses between a series of photo-rich or data-heavy charts
- See “5 Ways to Display Information Visually” for guidance
What is a headline?

headline (n)
Conversational statement that captures attention and helps advance a story.

As a storyteller, your role is to craft a story that captures and keeps your audience’s attention. Headlines are the foundation of your story. Once you’ve built a strong foundation that’s grounded in the four signposts, your message will be clear and you’ll find it easy (and fun) to make your story visual.

Headlines serve as transition statements that advance your story.

When headlines are well-crafted, you don’t even need to be present to tell your story—your story will tell itself. Your headlines anchor your story, link your signposts, and engage your audience.
HOW TO WRITE GOOD HEADLINES:

**Be concise.**
Try using a short phrase, sentence, or question.

**Be specific.**
Include an element of time, a unit of measure, or a key data point that means something to your audience and relates to your BIG Idea.

**Be conversational.**
Speak your headlines aloud. They should sound natural. If you’re stuck, imagine that your slides can talk. What would they say?

Avoid catchy statements that aim to get a laugh. Simply getting a reaction shouldn’t be your first goal. If your headlines don’t advance your story, they won’t be effective in communicating your message to the audience.

**Finish your headlines before selecting visuals.**
Let the message drive your choice of visuals. If you have a great visual idea, make note of it as you create your headlines.
5 WAYS TO DISPLAY INFORMATION VISUALLY

Now you’re ready to bring your story to life with visuals.

**Photo:**
Use a photo to visualize a concept or idea

**Diagram:**
Use shapes and icons to “chunk out” information or steps

**Data:**
Use charts and big bold numbers to show data

**Text:**
Use text to ask a question, make a statement, or quote someone

**Video:**
Use video to add a different voice
Balance your story with a variety of visual displays.

There is no exact science to selecting the right mix of visuals.

HERE ARE A FEW BEST PRACTICES:

Avoid “falling in love” with a photo or visual. Instead, focus on your message and then choose visuals that support that message.

If one visual category seems to dominate your story, review your choices and look for opportunities to vary your mix.

Don’t feel obligated to use each of the five visual displays. Conversely, don’t be afraid to try a visual approach that’s new to you.

It’s okay to use text only. In fact, a short statement on an otherwise image-free slide can be quite powerful. We call this a “visual pause.”
VISUAL STORY CHECKLIST

Presenter:

Four signposts of a great story
Did the recommendation or update include the 4 signposts of a great story? □ Yes □ No

Did RESOLUTION follow SETTING, CHARACTER, and CONFLICT? □ Yes □ No

How well developed was each signpost?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signpost</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Fair</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SETTING</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>CHARACTER</td>
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<tr>
<td>CONFLICT</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESOLUTION</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Your BIG Idea
What was the BIG Idea or key takeaway?

Did it express the “what” of your story with high-level benefits? □ Yes □ No

Was it inspirational and memorable? □ Yes □ No

Was it restated using different language throughout the presentation? □ Yes □ No

If yes, how?
Walk in your audience’s shoes
Did the presentation successfully demonstrate knowledge of the audience’s world and/or an understanding of their problem(s)? □ Yes □ No

Story headlines
Did the headlines serve as transition statements to help advance the story? □ Yes □ No

Visualize your story
*If visuals were used in the presentation:*
Did the visuals reinforce the headlines? □ Yes □ No
Did the presentation include a variety of visual displays? □ Yes □ No

*What specific feedback do you have on the visuals used?*
- Photos
- Diagrams
- Data
- Text
- Videos
RESOURCES

External stock photography
Search your organization’s internal photo library first to save time and ensure your selections are on-brand. Should you need stock photography, here are some of our favorite sources: Shutterstock, iStock, Thinkstock, Getty images, Adobe Stock.

Icons
Icons are a fantastic way to visualize information without using a photo. Check your organization’s internal resources first for custom-built icon libraries. If you need access to external icons, visit the stock photo sites (above) to search for icons or visit TheNounProject.com to build your own.

Storytelling resources
If you’re interested in advancing your storytelling skills, here are a few of our favorite resources:

BOOKS

HONE YOUR SKILLS BY WATCHING AND LISTENING TO GREAT STORIES:
ABOUT TPC
The Presentation Company, LLC (TPC) was started by Janine Kurnoff and Lee Lazarus, two sisters with a passion for helping people become world-class presenters.

For more than 15 years, TPC has been training business professionals on how to communicate their ideas both visually and virtually. Using today’s most innovative presentation technologies, TPC helps people transform complex messages and data into memorable, persuasive visual stories.

For more information about TPC, visit: www.presentation-company.com