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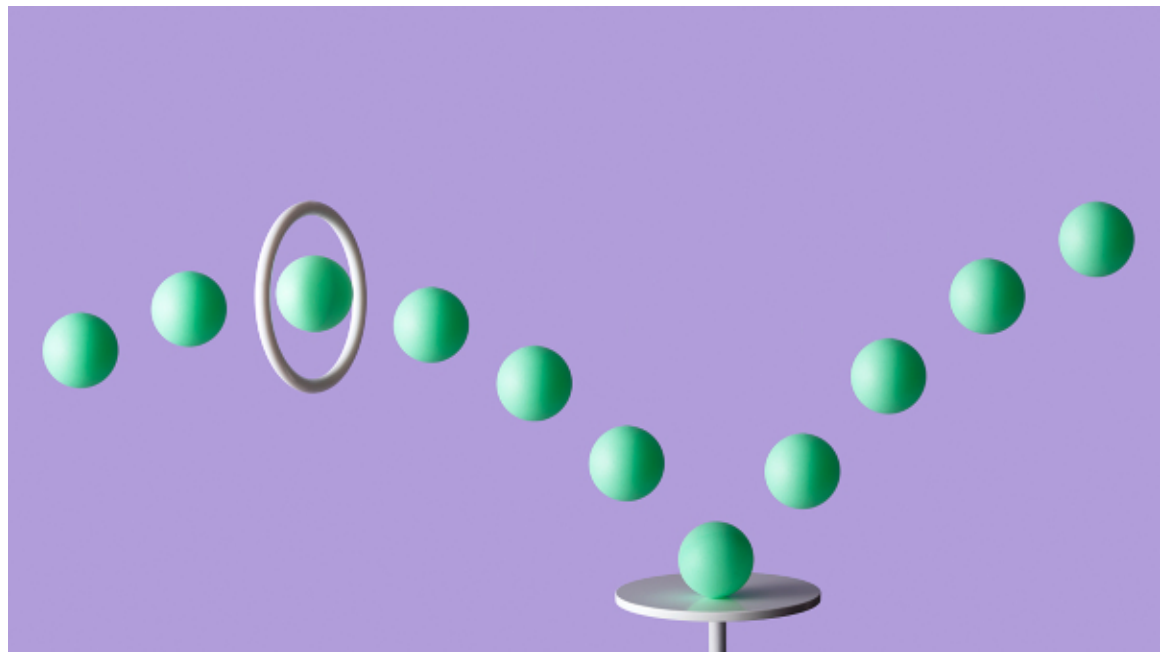
Structure Your Presentation Like a Story

by Nancy Duarte

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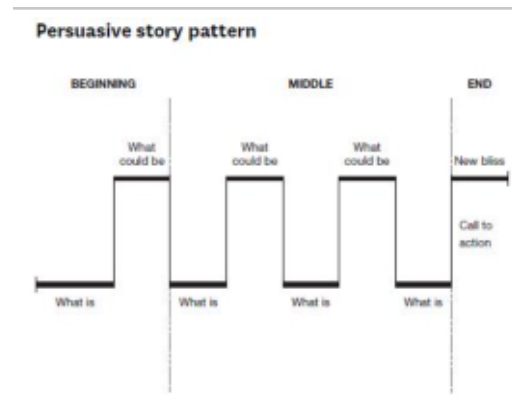


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After studying hundreds of speeches, I've found that the [most effective presenters](#) use the same techniques as great storytellers: By reminding people of the [status quo](#) and then revealing the [path to a better way](#), they set up a conflict that needs to be resolved.

That tension helps them persuade the audience to adopt a [new mindset](#) or [behave differently](#) — to move from what is to what could be. And by following Aristotle's three-part story structure (beginning, middle, end), they create a message that's easy to digest, remember, and retell.

Here's how it looks when you chart it out:



And here's how to do it in your own presentations.

Craft the Beginning

Start by **describing life as the audience knows it**. People should be nodding their heads in recognition because you're articulating what they already understand. This creates a bond between you and them, and opens them up to hear your ideas for change.

After you set that baseline of what is, introduce your vision of what could be. The gap between the two will throw the audience a bit off balance, and that's a good thing — it jars them out of complacency. For instance:

What is: We fell short of our Q3 financial goals partly because we're understaffed and everyone's spread too thin.

What could be: But what if we could solve the worst of our problems by bringing in a couple of powerhouse clients? Well, we can.

Once you establish that gap, use the rest of the presentation to bridge it

Develop the Middle

Now that people in your audience realize their world is off-kilter, keep playing up the contrast between what is and what could be.

Let's go back to that Q3 update. Revenues are down, but you want to motivate employees to make up for it. Here's one way you could structure the middle of your presentation:

What is: We missed our Q3 forecast by 15%.

What could be: Q4 numbers must be strong for us to pay out bonuses.

What is: We have six new clients on our roster.

What could be: Two of them have the potential to bring in more revenue than our best clients do now.

What is: The new clients will require extensive retooling in manufacturing.

What could be: We'll be bringing in experts from Germany to help.

As you **move back and forth between what is and what could be**, the audience will find the latter more and more alluring.

Make the Ending Powerful

You don't want to end with a burdensome list of to-dos. Definitely include a call to action — but make it inspiring so people will want to act. Describe what I call the new bliss: **how much better their world will be when they adopt your ideas.**

So if you're wrapping up that Q3 update from above, you might approach it this way:

Call to action: It will take extra work from all departments to make Q4 numbers, but we can deliver products to our important new clients on time and with no errors.

New bliss: I know everyone's running on fumes — but hang in there. This is our chance to pull together like a championship team, and things will get easier if we make this work. **The reward** if we meet our Q4 targets? Bonuses, plus days off at the end of the year.

By defining future rewards, you show people that getting on board will be **worth their effort.** It'll meet their needs, not just yours.

This is the fourth post in Nancy Duarte's blog series on creating and delivering presentations, based on tips from her new book, the [HBR Guide to Persuasive Presentations](#).

Read the other posts here:

Post #1: [How to Present to Senior Executives](#)

Post #2: [Create a Presentation Your Audience Will Care About](#)

Post #3: [Do Your Slides Pass the Glance Test](#)

Nancy Duarte is a best-selling author with thirty years of CEO-ing under her belt. She's driven her firm, [Duarte, Inc.](#), to be the global leader behind some of the most influential messages and visuals in business and culture. Duarte, Inc., is the largest design firm in Silicon Valley, as well as one of the top woman-owned businesses in the area. Nancy has written six best-selling books, four have won awards, and her new book, [DataStory: Explain Data and Inspire Action Through Story](#), is available now. Follow Duarte on Twitter: [@nancyduarte](#) or [LinkedIn](#).
