

THE PERSUASION STORY CODE

THE MAGIC OF CONVERSATIONAL
STORYTELLING

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INTRODUCTION

A man walks up to the counter at the gate, 10 minutes before takeoff. The flight is full and everyone before him has been screaming a blue streak at the flight attendant staffing the desk.

“No,” she says to the man before he can say a word.

“I think I know what you’re going through,” the man says to her with a grimace. “I manage a store downtown, and the last three days before Christmas, our customers are just like the people here. Rude, impatient, and they won’t listen to reason. Sometimes you wonder why you took a job like this in the first place.”

The flight attendant looks at him for a few seconds. The hint of a smile dances at the ends of her mouth.

“May I see your ID?” she says.

He hands it to her. She types into the computer, prints out a boarding pass, and gives it to him along with his ID.

Then she says to him, almost in a whisper,

“We had a cancellation in first class. I’m upgrading you. Get on the plane NOW.”

People have conversations like this every day. Intentionally or simply out of compassion, the man told the woman a story—about what goes on in his store before Christmas, and how he understood what she must be going through—and, after she heard it, she changed her mind.

What he told her, whether or not he realized it, was a *persuasion story*. And, probably to his great surprise, he got a seat on what he thought was a fully-booked plane.

This book is about those kinds of stories. Most of us don’t have a name for them or even recognize them as stories when we hear them. It’s as though persuasion stories are all around us, hiding in plain sight.

If persuasion is part of the work you do, you probably already tell or write persuasion stories more often than you realize. What this book will do is give you new options, by providing you with ready-to-use information on how to increase the number and types of these stories you have at your fingertips.

There’s a very good chance that your persuasion efforts will succeed like never before. And just as important, you’ll finally

understand what you've been doing up until now, and exactly why it works.

On the other hand, telling persuasion stories may be a brand-new idea to you. If that's the case, you are in for a treat!

Welcome to the brand-new, age-old world of persuasion stories.

CHAPTER 1

STORY VS. \$TORY

Let's say a new restaurant opens in your town—Marty's Premium Steakhouse.

It's received good reviews, so one evening you decide to give it a try.

The server comes to your table and...

Version 1

... you ask about the filet mignon.

In a flat, neutral voice, your server says, "Yes, we do serve filet mignon.

"It's a six-ounce steak, one inch thick and three inches in diameter. Because it is filet, there is relatively little marbling.

“It is grilled in our kitchen by first searing the steak at high heat, and then transferred to lower heat to get it to the correct degree of doneness. Like all of our steaks, it’s USDA Prime.”

He’s not the worst server you’ve ever had. But what he says doesn’t especially whet your appetite, either.

Version 2

... when you ask about the filet mignon, your server gets an almost conspiratorial look on his face.

“You must be a true connoisseur, because only people like that ask about the filet first thing,” he says with a wink. “It is our most tender steak, and I’ll tell you a secret: This is the steak that’s the chef’s favorite. Not only to cook, but when it’s time for his dinner break, he’ll ask for a filet if one’s available.

“Marty, our owner, is famous among all the restaurant owners in town mostly because of his filet, and also the paces he puts the meat guys through to get the first cut of their best steaks every day. I guess they don’t like the pressure, but he keeps them in business, so they put up with it.”

By now, your mouth is watering. You can’t wait for your filet.

Version 3

... when you ask the server about the filet, the restaurant lights start to dim. In a few seconds, you’re enveloped in darkness. Next, a dramatic spotlight washes over your server’s face. You hear heroic music in the background. And your server begins speaking ominously to you in a deep baritone:

“Our filet is intimately tied up with what happened to Marty, the restaurant owner. At age five, he was orphaned and sent to live with his aunt and uncle. When 9/11 happened, he was deeply moved by the real heroes of the day, the firefighters. From that point forward, Marty dreamed of becoming a fireman. But at age 14 he was kidnapped by a gang of outlaw restaurant owners. Completely ripped away from the life he knew.

“Marty was held prisoner for five years by these people. His journey into the culinary underworld was brutal—practically indentured servitude. Strange customs and rituals. But the thing is, these outlaws *really* knew how to cook steaks. Breaking away from them was a big challenge, though...”

You’re thinking: This is fascinating, but I didn’t know they had dinner theater at this restaurant. And what was I going to order, anyway?

We’re going to examine all three versions of how the server answered your question about the filet. But first, let’s talk for just a minute about stories overall.

A Brand-New Type Of Story—One That, Surprisingly, You’re Already Familiar With

If your work requires you to persuade other people to accept ideas and/or to take actions—especially, to buy things—then you end up telling stories. A lot more than you probably realize. And whether you lead or manage people in a business... create marketing materials... coach clients... consult to businesses...

or sell one-on-one, *the quality of your stories has a direct impact on the quality of your results.*

This book will show you that anyone can tell a persuasion story. In fact, you're almost certainly already telling some of these stories without always realizing it.

In the pages ahead, you'll find out how to identify persuasion stories (they don't look like stories as we normally think of them)—and how to improve them. Telling *persuasion* stories is far different—and really, much easier—than the kind of *dramatic* storytelling playwrights, novelists and screenwriters do.

I've been studying the writing and telling of dramatic stories for 40 years. But more importantly, I've been actually *writing* stories for 50 years—first as a journalist, and then later as a sales copywriter and copywriting teacher.

My own writing has brought in 10s of millions of dollars in sales. I've consulted to companies in more than 100 industries. I've personally mentored dozens of professional copywriters, on four continents for the last 30 years. Their work has brought in hundreds of millions of dollars in sales—and a big part of why is the persuasion stories they tell.

I've also used persuasion stories to personally sell dozens of five- and six-figure coaching, consulting and copywriting packages—over the phone.

To boil this down to a simple statement: *I know my way around stories.* And I have some unusual skills in teaching people how to rapidly improve their persuasive chops very quickly.

In the next chapter, I'll tell you more about how I came to identify this unique set of stories that work like gangbusters in persuasion. And about my special skills in coaching and teaching others.

But first, let's get back to Marty's Premium Steakhouse.

Remember what you said to your server? "Tell me about the filet."

From a persuasion point of view, you were *asking to be sold on something you already wanted* (a filet).

Now, let's go through the responses you received.

In Version 1, the server sounds like he's reading from a data sheet.

In Version 2, he gets your mouth watering.

In Version 3, instead of answering your question, he sounds like he's pitching you the script for a new movie, *Medium Rare At Gunpoint*.

In real life, of course, most skilled persuaders will give you an answer something like Version 2 (starting with, "You must be a true connoisseur..."). What's especially interesting here is that the server didn't answer you with *one* story—he answered you with a rapid-fire combination of *three* extremely short stories:

1. A story about you (you ask the question true connoisseurs ask).
2. A story about the chef (he always chooses a filet for himself whenever one is available).

3. A story about the restaurant owner (he pressures the meat guys to give him the very best cuts).

Again, these are not stories as we usually think of them. But when it comes to persuasion, these are stories *exactly* as I think of them.

And to be sure, they don't have the normal characteristics we expect of stories. They don't each have clearly defined beginnings, middles and ends. They don't resemble the plots of movies, TV shows, novels, plays, or video games. And, to be sure, they are *short*. In Version 2, all three persuasion stories add up to a mere 115 words, and, combined, they would take under a minute to tell.

But—and this is important—those three, tiny stories, told together seamlessly, were *all it took to make the sale*.

The key difference I will explain in this book is that persuasion stories are actually the most commonly used, and most effective, stories in business. They are different from what we traditionally think of as “stories” in several important ways.

First, they are much shorter.

Second, they do not attempt to teach universal life lessons, as many traditional types of stories do.

Third, they contribute in an important and meaningful way to helping *one* person persuade *another* person (or a group of people).

So, persuasion stories are not stories as we usually think of them. But, as you will see, they are indeed stories. And when it comes to persuasion, these stories *work*.

Let's look some more at what these persuasion stories are, and how they're different from what people usually think of as stories.

STORY VS. \$TORY

A shorthand way to make the distinction: There is "Story," and then there is "\$tory."

"Story" is what we usually think of when we hear the word. A tale that has a beginning, middle and an end. Even what we call a "short story" is *much* longer than a persuasion story, which I'll call \$tory.

Every movie, novel, or fictional TV show is some version of Story.

On the other hand, \$tory is what you find written in most successful ads, direct mail letters, video sales letters and e-commerce web pages.

And not just in print and on the internet. Great coaches, salespeople, business leaders, consultants and seminar leaders use \$tory, too. In live sales presentations. In a successful coaching session. And in a really moving speech.

\$tory is a term to describe the kind of thing we naturally say when we are casually trying to convince another person of something.

Here's an easy way to spot the difference between the two types:

A Story is something that *costs you money*—to watch (movie), read (novel), listen to (audiobook version), or play (video game).

A \$tory is something that *brings you money*—because it helps advance, or even close, a sale. Sometimes you need only one \$tory, but usually you use more than one. Because they're short and they're simple, in most persuasion situations there's always room (and time) for multiple \$tories.

Both Stories and \$tories have people (characters) and some form of action, identity and/or dialogue. But that's where the similarity ends.

A friendly warning: You may have heard of a widely held theory that the *only* kind of story which works for persuasion in business is what is known as “the hero's journey.” While this complex, long-form narrative *can* work in persuasion, it rarely does. Especially when you look at how most people actually get convinced most of the time in real life.

THE HERO'S JOURNEY

A lot of authors and seminar leaders talk about the hero's journey. The phrase was popularized by scholar Joseph Campbell, who introduced it in his 1949 book *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*.

The hero's journey is a very powerful concept. And when you're writing a Story for Hollywood or a fiction publisher, the hero's journey is a reliably winning formula. But there are a couple of problems when you try to use it for persuasion:

- It's complicated and tricky to master.
- It has many moving parts and it takes great knowledge, practice and skill to create a successful hero's journey.

Besides the difficulty, there's another problem. For many experts, the hero's journey has become *a deity*. These experts worship it as though it were the *only* type of story that works—*for anything*.

But that's just not true.

For the vast majority of persuasion situations, using a hero's journey story is the equivalent of wearing a tuxedo (or a fancy evening dress) to go out in the woods and cut down some trees.

Yes, the fancy clothes the Hollywood in-crowd wears to attend the Academy Awards look stunning. The makers of hero's journey stories can be really sharp dressers.

And it's easy to see *why* people accept the idea that the only kind of story that works is a hero's journey story. Americans spend an average of 2 hours 33 minutes a day watching TV. All the movies and fictional series use some variation of the hero's journey to tell their stories.

We see these shows and movies over and over again. So it's understandable that someone would come to the conclusion

that when it comes to telling a story in *any* situation, it's got to be a hero's journey.

Only one problem: Hero's journey stories are *not* how we talk (most of the time, anyway) in real life—especially in *business* situations.

Our everyday language is more casual, and straightforward.

If a client tells you about how they were mistreated, you might respond, “That’s terrible, and you have every right to be upset. I’d feel the same way. No one should be treated like that.” (That’s actually a \$tory that builds trust by showing empathy. See more in Chapter 5.)

If a prospect tells you about how they’re having trouble getting their automated lawn-watering system to turn on and shut down on time, you might say, “Just the other day, a customer named Gladys told me about this great app for her phone that synchs up with the lawn-watering timer. Just a couple clicks and she got it working the way she wanted. Plus, it sends you alerts when the watering doesn’t start or end on time, and you can fix it right on your phone, no matter where you are.” (Another \$tory. This time, about how other people have made something work. See more in Chapter 7.)

If your boss is hesitant to approve the purchase of a new printer, you might say, “I understand it seems expensive. But they use a new toner-saving technology that cuts costs by 20%. So compared to the standard model, based on how much printing we do, it will pay for itself in 3 months. And after that, the savings are all gravy.” (Also a \$tory, this time about the

unexpected benefit of making a particular decision. See more in Chapter 6.)

As for hero's journey stories, well, they're tremendously entertaining. Again, occasionally, a simplified hero's journey story *can* work for persuasion. But most of the time, a persuasion story is a much better fit.

Why? Because normally, people are used to reading and watching hero's journey stories to *escape* real life.

Not to *engage* in real life. To get away from it.

When people want to persuade others, they talk in a plainer, simpler way than the theatrical storyteller does. In doing so, they tell much more straightforward stories. The plain, simple language (especially when it is based on the truth) is just more believable. And to persuade, you must first be believed.

WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

Everyone is welcome to read this book, but I wrote it with six types of people in mind:

1. If you own a business, persuasion stories will help you make deals and close more sales.
2. If you are a sales professional, persuasion stories will add credibility, interest and intrigue (and closing power) to your presentations.
3. If you more or less talk for a living—as a coach, consultant or professional speaker—persuasion stories

will both help you get business and help your clients accept your advice and new ways of looking at things.

4. If you are a business executive, persuasion stories will increase your influence and bolster your reputation.
5. If you are an advertising copywriter—as I am—then you already know that persuasion stories are the bread and butter of your craft. These stories will especially help you come up with inspiring and convincing posts on social media like Facebook and TikTok.
6. If you have an online store or you're a course creator, persuasion stories will help you cut through the clutter and bring in the bucks.

In Chapters 3 to 7, I'll show you how to use 25 different types of persuasion stories to achieve these goals. You'll find this book different from other books about story. For one thing, *every type of story included here has been proven to help increase sales*. Also, no other book covers as many different types of persuasion stories and shows you how to put them together yourself the way this one does.

THE TWO-BILLION-DOLLAR PERSUASION STORY

Many persuasion stories simply add power to a sales message. But some persuasion stories *supercharge* a sales message to an astonishing degree. And one of them broke all records.

In the direct marketing community, a 775-word, two-page letter is legendary: The *Wall Street Journal's* “Two Young Men” sales

letter to get subscriptions. It was written by copywriter Martin Conroy in the mid-1970s.

Veteran copywriter and direct-response-marketing journalist Denny Hatch interviewed the newspaper's circulation manager, Paul Bell, in 1991. Based on what he learned, in 2019 Hatch determined that overall, the letter had brought in more than \$2 billion in sales for the newspaper.

That makes it, as Hatch noted, the most successful advertisement in the history of the world.

For our purposes, what's interesting are the four paragraphs the letter starts with, and three paragraphs near the end:

Dear Reader,

On a beautiful late spring afternoon, twenty-five years ago, two young men graduated from the same college. They were very much alike, these two young men. Both had been better than average students, both were personable and both—as young college graduates are—were filled with ambitious dreams for the future.

Recently, these men returned to their college for their 25th reunion.

They were still very much alike. Both were happily married. Both had three children. And both, it turned out, had gone to work for the same Midwestern manufacturing company after graduation, and were still there.

But there was a difference. One of the men was manager of a small department of that company. The other was its president.

At the end:

About those two college classmates I mention at the beginning of this letter: they were graduated from college and together got started in the business world. So what made their lives different?

Knowledge. Useful knowledge. And its application.

An Investment In Success

I cannot promise you that success will be instantly yours if you start reading The Wall Street Journal. But I can guarantee that you will find The Journal always interesting, always reliable, and always useful.

The rest of the letter contains details about the newspaper, and tells the prospective subscriber what they will find in it.

Besides saying this is the most successful *advertisement* in the world, because it is based mostly on a \$tory, it would not be a stretch to say this is the most *powerful persuasion story* in the world.

Notice: It's not very flashy. Not emotionally complex. Not quite ready for the big screen. Certainly not all that long.

And yet... *2 billion dollars.*

Is this a hero's journey story? No, it's not. Why? Because so many required elements of a hero's journey story are missing. There's...

- no excursion into a special world where challenges arise and unfamiliar things happen
- no deep life lessons learned
- no high-stakes moment where all could be lost, or a grueling battle could be won
- no astounding transformation and redemption at the end.

The *Wall Street Journal* subscription-letter story is much, much simpler than that:

A guy goes to a class reunion 25 years after he graduated, and now he's president of a company.

So, we're not looking at a hero's journey story. We're looking at a problem-solution story (The problem? How to become more successful in business. The solution? Read the *Wall Street Journal*. More about this kind of story in Chapter 8.)

At this point, are you wondering why so many of these highly effective persuasion stories have escaped your attention up until now? If you are wondering why, there's a good reason. Unlike hero's journey stories, persuasion stories deliberately *don't* seek the limelight. It's not that they're covert. It's just that they're comparatively low-key.

An easy way to understand this is to look at the differences between...

WORKHORSES AND SHOWHORSES

Persuasion stories, like the one in the *Wall Street Journal* subscription letter, are *workhorses*.

Hero's journey stories—like, for example, the movies *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* and *Margin Call*—are *showhorses*.

Workhorses get the job done (i.e., haul the money into the bank), but they don't call a lot of attention to themselves and in fact avoid center stage. Nevertheless—and this is worth repeating—*they get the job done*.

Showhorses are all about the show. They *love* attention and crave as much of it as they can get. They put on a great show. But when push comes to shove, they're not the most reliable results-getters. True, they make money by selling tickets. But not all that often by selling products and services *other than themselves*.

Let's face it: These workhorse persuasion stories, while interesting and attention-getting, are really not as *glamorous* as hero's journey stories.

But then, they're not supposed to be. In theatrical terms, workhorse stories play a supportive role. In business terms, though, workhorse stories solve problems to move a prospect smoothly towards becoming a customer.

This book is about the *workhorses* of the story world.

In the next chapter, I'll tell you how I discovered persuasion stories.

CHAPTER 2

HOW I DISCOVERED PERSUASION STORIES

1993 was a tough year for me. I was having trouble making ends meet, problems putting food on the table. I was frustrated. But I was also optimistic, because I was learning a new skill that promised me a way out of my misery.

A little background: Eight years earlier, I had walked away from a successful journalism career. My biggest win was landing the San Francisco Bureau Chief job for McGraw-Hill's news service in 1984. The problem for me with journalism was, the more successful I got, the more uncomfortable I felt.

And being a reporter is not the kind of job you can do very well if you don't really want to do it. So I left in 1985. I was not sure what I was going to do, but I knew it had to be *something else*.

Certainly, though, it was not going to be advertising. Not based on what I knew at the time.

See, as a journalist, I hated advertising. I really *hated* it. This was because the only kinds of advertising I knew anything about were the big, bland, largely meaningless ads in magazines and newspapers, and the goofy commercials on TV. These seemed like a huge waste of money to me, and an insult to the intelligence of consumers.

I wasn't yet aware of the kind of ads that treated prospective customers respectfully, and gave them information they needed to make a decision.

That was the *something else* I was looking for, and it took me eight years to find it.

In 1992, I learned about the kind of advertising that tells a story, or multiple stories, laying out facts and promises in a way that respects prospects and entices them to buy. I'm talking about direct-response advertising.

(By the way, I know there's a ton of crass stuff out there. I'm not talking about the cheesy junk mail or tone-deaf spam. What captivated my imagination was the stuff that's so interesting and conversational that half the time you don't even *realize* it's trying to sell you something. Like, for example, the *Wall Street Journal* letter from Chapter 1. Or a really good product page on Amazon.)

Once I started to learn about this mysterious form of advertising, I inhaled lessons, information, learning. I worked much longer and harder than I ever had as a journalist. I was a man on a mission. I attended seminars, listened to CDs (remember those?), read books and newsletters--and wrote, wrote, wrote.

I really threw myself into it. In time, finances got a lot better.

Early on, one of my sales letters became a once-in-a-lifetime blockbuster. I wrote a three-page sales letter during my first year as a copywriter that brought in a whopping \$40 million for the business, Abacus Travel Management. (Though I wrote it with a lot of help from a mentor—and it took seven painful rewrites.)

Once that letter started to get traction, I knew that this kind of advertising was what I wanted to do: direct-response copywriting.

BUT I WAS STILL FASCINATED WITH DRAMATIC STORIES

Throughout the 90s, I continued to push hard with copywriting. I really saw this as my future and I wanted to do everything I could to make it work.

I focused quite a bit to build my copywriting business and keep improving my skills. But I didn't put on the blinders completely—I was still insatiably curious about storytelling. Especially, screenwriting.

In 1999, these two obsessions (copywriting and screenwriting) converged in a fateful way. I was taking a screenwriting class in Marin County. Every now and then, our instructor would explain an advanced movie technique and I would raise my hand and say, "From the tawdry world of copywriting, that reminds me of..."

I would get a laugh, and proceed to explain how a similar technique worked in the persuasive language of direct-response advertising copy.

One day after class, two students came up to me and said,

“David, what is this thing called ‘copywriting?’ Would you teach it to us?”

Teaching was a new idea to me. I had been writing copy for eight years, and I’d scored some big wins. But I’d never taught copywriting to anyone, or even thought of doing so.

One thing that had bothered me as a new copywriter was the mystery of the whole thing. There were successful copywriters who taught the best they could, but after reading their books and taking their seminars, I would have more questions than answers. Enough answers, to be sure, to write copy that worked. But not nearly enough to understand *how it worked* to my satisfaction.

In short, I had not found a clear, simple, A-to-Z copywriting course after many years of searching. So I would have nothing to use as a model to create my own course.

I knew that if I told the two students, Sue and Jane, that I would teach a class, I would feel an obligation to do something that I was not sure could be done. Namely, teach the language of persuasion in a systematic, comprehensive, and—most important of all—*easy-to-understand* way.

But I’d always been up for a challenge and willing to take a risk. I saw a big opportunity here. So I told Jane and Sue I’d do it if

they wouldn't mind having a professional audio engineer in the room, to record the whole seminar. That way, I could create a product and share this with more people.

Jane and Sue said fine, and I set about creating the course. I took everything I had learned, organized it and simplified it. I sweated the details. And I made supreme efforts to fill in the gaps when I needed to come up with something new to make it all make sense. It was a massive effort. I was hoping to create a complete guide and system for writing direct-response copy.

I gave the class, and my students were happy. Then I turned the recording and handouts into a cassette-tape-and-workbook course, and sold a few dozen. One of my customers, a marketing consultant named Burt Dubin, confirmed what I had suspected. The overall state of copywriting education up until now was nowhere near where it could be. But I had taken a step to fix that. Burt wrote me this testimonial:

“David, I've sat at the feet of about every direct marketing guru in the Western world. Invested mega-thousands of dollars to get in on their secrets, too. Your course made mastering the simple truths of writing persuasive, alluring, magnetic prose, easier for me than all the others.”

This led to my *first big discovery*:

THE LANGUAGE OF PERSUASION COULD BE TAUGHT... AND LEARNED

I had a hunch that there were a lot more people that felt the same way Burt and I did, but I didn't know how to reach them.

Fast forward to today for a sec: My friend Joe Vitale is an international celebrity. But back then, he was known mostly as the go-to guy for online publishing. I asked him if he'd like to check out my tapes-and-workbook course, and he said sure.

I sent it to Joe. He liked it and suggested I send a copy to his friend, online publisher Mark Joyner. I did, and a few days later I got an email from Mark: "I'm only halfway through the first side of the first cassette, and I want to publish this online."

What an opportunity!

In 2000, publishing an audio course online was *much* harder than it is today. But Mark was ahead of the curve, both in his understanding of technology, and his business vision. His team transferred the audio portion of the course to a streaming platform called RealAudio, and we had a product to sell on the internet.

The first week, we sold \$6,000 worth. I was stunned. Sales continued upward from there. It was clear to me that a lot of people wanted to learn this. Teaching copywriting was now a new part of my business.

But even as all this was happening, three questions kept gnawing at me:

What's the connection between copywriting and storytelling? How are they similar? How are they different?

In 2002, I heard that the visionary inventor Rob Kall was giving a conference in Palm Springs, California, called "StoryCon: The World's First Summit Meeting on the Art, Science and Applica-

tion of Story.” Through some of my friends in the screenwriting world, I was able to get a slot to speak there.

Once again, promising to give a presentation forced me to figure out something I hadn’t been able to do just by thinking about it. As I sorted things out, getting ready for Palm Springs, I made a *second big discovery*:

TWO IMPORTANT DIFFERENCES BETWEEN \$TORY AND STORY

The 36 speakers at the Palm Springs Hilton Resort ranged from screenwriters, professors, a psychotherapist, a software developer, a film and TV director, and of course many screenwriting teachers and consultants. But I was the only speaker talking exclusively about persuasive stories.

I gave two talks: a ten-minute speech, and a one-hour workshop. In my speech, I compared the box office phenomenon *Rocky* with the world’s best-known ad: a comic-strip-formatted story designed to sell the Charles Atlas Dynamic Tension body-building course. The name of the ad is *The Insult That Made A Man Out Of Mac* (“Mac”).

I was a little surprised when I compared the length of the two stories:

- *Rocky* is a two-hour movie, made from a screenplay of 115 pages.
- *Mac* is a one-page comic strip. The dialogue in the speech bubbles in its seven panels total 132 words. (On

the *Rocky* 115-page screenplay, you'll read 132 words before you've even made it halfway down the page 1).

First important difference: Persuasive stories are *shorter* than dramatic stories. *Much* shorter.

Now let's look at the stories themselves.

Here's how I recapped *Mac*:

Picture this: You're on a beach, it's summer, the breeze is cool and the sand is hot beneath your feet. You see a skinny young man with his beautiful girlfriend.

A much bigger, stronger man comes up to them and kicks sand in the young man's face. The young man refuses to fight and the girl is totally unimpressed. She walks away. The young man decides this can't go on, so he orders a home-study course about muscle building.

Later, at the same beach, the bigger, stronger man runs into the young man, who is now all bulked up. The young man kicks some serious butt, and the girl is all over him.

Pretty simple story, right? But powerful (sales-generating) enough to run in comic books and other publications all over the world for decades.

Now, the *Rocky* recap:

Imagine this: You're in Philadelphia, in a working-class neighborhood. You see a young man who works as an enforcer for a

local loan shark, and when he's not working, he puts on boxing gloves and spars at a club. He's sweet on this shy girl who works at a pet shop. The girl's brother works at a meat-packing plant.

It's America's bicentennial and as a publicity stunt, the world's greatest boxer picks the club boxer (Rocky) and offers the young man a shot at his title. The young man accepts the challenge. In the fight, he goes 15 rounds with the world champion. It surprises everybody that he lasted this long, but the young man loses by a split decision of the judges. The story ends with the young man and the pet shop girl professing their love for each other.

This story's a little more complex, wouldn't you say? In *Rocky*, we know the young man's job. We know a lot more about his character, as well as his goals and dreams. The stakes of the title bout are huge—he's on track to unseat the world champion, and only loses the fight by a split decision of the judges. Plus, on the relationship side of the story, we know what his girlfriend does for a living, and we find out about what her brother does, too.

So, here's the **second important difference**:

When I watch *Rocky*, I feel *great*. I believe I can climb mountains, run marathons, even sit down to write without procrastinating at all! It's a feel-good story that puts my optimism and sense of possibilities in high gear.

But even though it makes me feel great, *Rocky* does not make me want to *buy* anything.

Mac has sold thousands upon thousands of Charles Atlas courses. I don't have the sales figures, but I know that whenever a company runs the exact same full-page ad worldwide for more than half a century, the ad *must* be making money for them. Otherwise, they couldn't afford to keep running it.

So, the difference I discovered is simply that *persuasive stories help move a person towards a willingness to agree* (in *Mac's* case, agree to buy a bodybuilding course). Dramatic stories help a person have important insights and feelings, usually about themselves. Sometimes about human nature at large. But these stories don't necessarily make you want to *buy* anything.

That's a crucial thing to realize when you're planning to use a story as part of your persuasion message.

Now, at this point (2002) I was clear on the first two big discoveries:

- The language of persuasion could be taught and learned, and
- The two important differences between \$tory and Story

But it took me a good 20 years to arrive at the *third big discovery*:

USUALLY, PERSUASION STORIES WORK LIKE PUZZLE PIECES

A lot of people seem to assume that if you use stories to sell, then one story has to do the complete selling job. But that's rarely the case.

Think back to the last chapter. Our beguiling server at Marty's Premium Steakhouse used *three* persuasion stories—all in the course of less than a minute—to help you decide on the filet. Could one story have done it? Maybe. But did three work a lot better? Yes.

Now the *Wall Street Journal* subscription letter—the \$2 billion behemoth—only had one story, but the story was not the entirety of the persuasion message.

Of course, *Mac* is a single story that pretty much closes the sale all by itself.

On the other hand, my three-page \$40 million sales letter for Abacus Travel Management includes a **Qualifications/Track Record Origin Story** (more in the next chapter) and an **Unexpected Benefit Story** (see Chapter 5). What is more, these two stories together make up only three paragraphs—less than 15% of the total words in the letter.

Over the years, as I looked and thought and categorized and organized and checked and double-checked, I realized in the vast majority of situations, multiple persuasion stories work better in persuasion messages than just one.

Now why would we assume there should only be one story?

It's the up-until-now unexamined assumption that *all* sales stories are hero's journey stories. Since, prequels and sequels aside, all hero's journey stories are *just one story*...and, if you are going to insist that *every* story used in selling *has to be* a hero's journey story, well then... you end up with the rule that one story *always* does the trick.

You know how that line of thinking works, right?

When the only tool you have is a hammer, then every problem looks like a nail.

Pro tip: Get more tools!

One thing that really helped me connect the dots was something from an obscure speech by one of history's greatest copywriters, Eugene Schwartz.

He gave a talk to a company that used a lot of direct-response advertising (including sales letters Eugene wrote himself). The company was Rodale, Inc., publisher of *Men's Health* and *Prevention* magazines, and many health-related books.

In the talk, Eugene said

You do not *write* copy. You assemble it.

You are working with a series of building blocks, and putting the building blocks together. You're building a little city of desire for your person to come and live in.

This is a mind-boggling concept for people who write advertising copy, at least when they first hear it. Yet I haven't found an experienced copywriter yet who doesn't agree with it.

I only became aware of the quote recently. It led me to realize that *persuasion stories* were among those building blocks, or, as I now call them, *puzzle pieces*.

Not only that. *Among all the puzzle pieces that go into a persuasion message, the stories are the most powerful pieces of all!* Because people

naturally fixate their attention on *any* story, whether written down or spoken out loud. (A great book on how *all* stories galvanize our attention is *Wired for Story*, by Lisa Cron.)

The immense yet subtle power of *persuasion* stories will become clearer and clearer for you as you see great examples of all the different kinds. And you've got a wide selection to explore in the pages ahead:

- **Origin Stories**, which build confidence by showing how a person's or company's background makes them solid and worth doing business with (Chapter 3)
- **Stories About Your Prospect's Pain**, which build trust by showing you understand the dilemma your prospect is in, thus creating valuable empathy (Chapter 4)
- **Stories That Predict The Future**, painting a compelling word-picture of how much better your prospect's future can be (Chapter 5)
- **Reassurance Stories** are probably THE most effective way to deal with early doubts and worries that come up—*especially* when a prospect is really interested (Chapter 6)
- **Stories That Explain** walk the fine line between interesting but neutral explanations and persuasion that puts up prospect defenses. These stories persuade *while* explaining! (Chapter 7)

- **Stories That Build Trust** organize credentials, reviews, expert endorsements and case histories into powerful persuasion tools that eliminate last-minute doubts (Chapter 8)

So let's get started.