

# Shortform | Book

---

 [shortform.com/app/book/storyworthy](https://shortform.com/app/book/storyworthy)

Storyworthy is oral storytelling champion Matthew Dicks's master class on how to discover, craft, and share great personal stories. Drawing on his experience telling stories on stages around the world and teaching storytelling to businesspeople, academics, performers, and people who just want to make a good impression on first dates, Dicks offers insights into how to shape ordinary moments into stories that spark profound human connections. (Shortform note: Dicks's advice on storytelling is tailored for on-stage storytelling performances. But as we'll discuss, his advice is valuable for all kinds of personal storytelling, from writing memoirs to relating to your professional clients.)

Dicks is a novelist, blogger, consultant, and former fifth-grade teacher. He's a 59-time winner of the StorySLAM open mic competition run by The Moth, a nonprofit New York-based storytelling group.

This guide is divided into four parts:

- **Part 1: Why Storytelling Matters** explains why Dicks thinks everyone should learn how to tell stories and describes some of the benefits of storytelling.
- **Part 2: Discover Your Best Stories** outlines Dicks's advice on how to decide which moments in your life you should tell stories about.
- **Part 3: Put Your Story Together** explains how to combine all the elements of a good story, starting with the key moment you identified using the strategies in Part 2.
- **Part 4: Share Your Story** covers Dicks's tips for memorizing, practicing, and sharing your story on stage.

Throughout, we'll supplement Dicks's advice with tips from experts on writing, psychology, public speaking, and more.

## Part 1: Why Storytelling Matters

---

When Dicks talks about stories, he's referring to people's firsthand accounts about important events in their lives. According to Dicks, these are more powerful than fictional stories because they create genuine connections between the storyteller and the audience. Personal stories require vulnerability, honesty, and authenticity from the storyteller, which allows the audience to feel that they know the person better by the end of the story.

(Shortform note: Dicks's assertion that personal narratives are more powerful than fictional stories may have scientific backing. Researchers have found that fiction and nonfiction spark distinct patterns of brain activation: Stories we think are true activate parts of the brain that model actions, consequences, and the passage of time, while fictional stories activate brain networks related to mind-wandering and daydreaming. This

suggests that personal narratives may be easier for listeners to pay attention to, internalize, and relate to—they see the events as part of the real world they live in, so they listen more attentively.)

Dicks emphasizes that everyone has the capacity to tell stories about their lives—and more importantly, everyone *should* share their stories for the following three reasons:

**1) Storytelling can bolster your career:** Most professions require you to present ideas, persuade others, or build relationships. Developing storytelling skills helps you communicate better so you can achieve these ends and makes your ideas more memorable and impactful.

(Shortform note: Storytelling has such a strong emotional impact that some people may use it to manipulate others in their line of work. For example, a multi-level marketer might tell misleading stories to convince others to join their pyramid scheme. In *Unleash the Power of Storytelling*, Rob Biesenbach argues that it's thus important to use stories responsibly so that they don't harm your audience. Additionally, according to Ann Handley in *Everybody Writes*, you should avoid telling misleading stories because they can damage your reputation and, consequently, your career. Later in this guide, we'll dive deeper into Dicks's tips for telling honest stories.)

**2) Storytelling gives you greater insight into your experiences:** Stories are a chance to process and understand your life more deeply. Identifying meaningful moments and how they've shaped you enhances your self-awareness and sense of personal growth.

(Shortform note: Some philosophers espouse the theory of narrative identity, which holds that we understand ourselves through the stories we tell about our lives. By crafting and reflecting on these narratives, we give coherence to our experiences and find meaning in the events that shape us. This is why experts stress the importance of narrative therapy for trauma survivors. When survivors tell stories about their worst experiences, they can integrate difficult memories into their overall life story and empower themselves to move forward. However, some critics argue that life is too complex to fit into a neat narrative, so we shouldn't think of our lives as stories.)

**3) Storytelling facilitates intimacy:** When you share your stories with friends and partners, they can see who you truly are—and they're likely to open up to you in return. Such opportunities for mutual vulnerability can fortify all your relationships. (Shortform note: Research suggests that when people share stories with each other, their brain waves synchronize. This explains why storytelling helps you build strong connections—you're not just learning more about one another, but also experiencing a shared psychological journey.)

## Part 2: Discover Your Best Stories

---

Dicks suggests that no matter what kind of life you lead, it's likely full of stories that are worth sharing. In this section, we'll explain what makes a moment “storyworthy” and explore Dicks's strategies for identifying these moments.

## What Makes a Moment “Storyworthy?”

---

Dicks says that your “storyworthy” moments are emotionally significant events in your life—whether they’re extraordinary or mundane—that lead to transformation and discovery. Let’s break this down into three key requirements:

**The first requirement is that the moment must be yours.** Even if another person’s story seems more interesting, the audience wants to know about *your* life because personal stories feel more intimate. However, Dicks notes that it’s possible to tell your own side of another person’s story, as long as the story is still focused on you. For example, you could tell a story about how someone you know overcame a major challenge like addiction, but focus on how their journey affected you—what you learned, how it changed your perspective, or how it impacted your relationship with them.

(Shortform note: In telling stories about your life, you’ll likely use a first-person point of view, using words like *I* and *my*. First-person point of view is common in creative nonfiction, a genre that encompasses all kinds of true stories, including memoirs, journalism, and the kinds of stories Dicks covers in *Storyworthy*. Experts note that the first-person perspective creates a sense of immediacy that draws the audience into the narrative, making the story feel more personal. That’s why journalists may insert themselves into their reportage, even when their stories are focused on external events or other people. By anchoring the narrative in their unique experience, they make abstract and distant subjects feel more tangible and relatable.)

**Second, says Dicks, you must be able to talk about the moment in your own authentic style.** If you have to use overly theatrical gestures, flowery language, or unnatural dialogue to get your point across, you’ll come across as a performer—not someone the audience can form a heartfelt connection with. Dicks says the way you tell the story should reflect who you are, featuring your natural voice, innate sense of humor, and genuine emotions.

(Shortform note: In *On Writing Well*, a guide to writing creative nonfiction, William Zinsser refers to this sense of authentic style as identity. According to Zinsser, identity is what makes your work stand out and helps your audience connect with you on a deeper level. Readers (or listeners) often choose to follow a creator because they enjoy not only the stories they tell but also how they tell them. Zinsser emphasizes that your identity is what differentiates you from other storytellers—even if two people tell the same story, their distinct styles will appeal to different readers.)

**Third, a storyworthy moment must have some element of transformation or discovery.** Storyworthy moments are those that changed you by offering you a life lesson or a new perspective. Dicks argues that this transformation is what resonates most with an audience, as it gives them something to contemplate with respect to their own lives. When stories don’t feature some kind of transformation, they’re not really stories—they’re anecdotes. Anecdotes can be amusing, but they’re forgettable and unlikely to forge deep connections.

(Shortform note: In *Life Is in the Transitions*, Bruce Feiler explains why personal transformations are so impactful—they redefine how we think about and derive meaning from our lives. Feiler argues that everyone has a dominant source of meaning: agency (your sense of personal power), belonging (how you connect with others), or cause (your commitment to a greater purpose, like helping others). Transformational moments shift your dominant source of meaning, prompting you to reevaluate your identity and relationships. By sharing stories about your transformations, you can invite others to reflect on their own sources of meaning and encourage them to think about their life journeys in a new light.)

## How to Find the Core of Your Story

---

Dicks explains that it's common to assume your audience wants to hear about the most dramatic moments of your life. However, your most storyworthy moments tend to appear relatively insignificant. **These are moments where you gain some fleeting insight that creates a meaningful internal change.** For example, while stuck in traffic, you might realize that your frustration isn't really about the delay but about how you've been rushing through life without taking time to breathe. Audiences can relate to these minor moments more easily than grand, dramatic events because they mirror the subtle but profound transformations we all go through in everyday life.

## How to Identify Internal Transformations

To find the core of your story, Dicks recommends that you identify a moment in your life that resulted in a meaningful internal change. In *Life Is in the Transitions*, Feiler describes five kinds of life events you can draw from for inspiration:

- **Relationship changes:** This category includes events like the births and deaths of loved ones, marriages and breakups, and experiences like sexual abuse and addiction that affect how you relate to people.
- **Health changes:** This category includes all types of physical and mental illnesses, injuries, and recoveries.
- **Identity changes:** This category covers life events that impact your self-image and how others perceive you, like immigration and shifts in socioeconomic class.
- **Perspective changes:** This category covers experiences that shift your worldview, including major sociopolitical events, extended travel, and education.
- **Career changes:** This category encompasses work-related transformations, including career pivots, joblessness, and retirement.

Keep in mind Dicks's suggestion that you zero in on *subtle* transformations. You can use Feiler's categories to jog your memory, but be careful not to gravitate automatically to the most dramatic life events you've experienced. Instead, try to identify fleeting moments of insight that fall under each category. Here's an example for the relationship changes category: Maybe your most storyworthy moment isn't the horrible fight that led you to break up with an ex, but an offhand comment they made that helped you realize they'd changed for the worse.

Let's explore two of Dicks's strategies for identifying your most storyworthy moments.

### Strategy #1: Daily Reflection

According to Dicks, you should take a few minutes to write notes about your most impactful experience of the day, every day. Create a list or spreadsheet where you can keep these notes. Your notes don't have to be long or detailed; just write enough to capture the essence of the moment and why it stood out to you. This strategy allows you to see the meaning and beauty in everyday moments you might have previously overlooked. It also helps you see *yourself* as meaningful and gives you a sense of your place in the grand scheme of things. All of this serves as excellent storytelling fodder.

In addition, Dicks explains that this strategy can help you identify patterns in your life that you can turn into stories. For example, if you look back over your notes and see that you've frequently written about small acts of kindness from strangers, you might realize

how these moments have shaped your worldview. In this way, you can turn a singular moment into a story that reveals something about the meaning of life.

#### Strategy #2: Write by Stream of Consciousness

Dicks recommends that you set aside a few minutes each day to write by stream of consciousness. This means that you capture all your thoughts, feelings, and ideas as they occur, even if they don't make sense or aren't phrased perfectly. He emphasizes that you shouldn't judge your thoughts, edit your writing, or get stuck explaining one idea in detail. The goal is to let your thoughts flow freely, allowing unexpected connections and insights to surface. By avoiding self-censorship, you give yourself the freedom to explore your mind's raw material and tap into deeper layers of creativity.

Dicks explains that this unfiltered writing process can help you uncover memories or experiences you may have forgotten or overlooked. When you've finished writing, you can review what you've written and extract any compelling anecdotes, memories, and thoughts that could be developed into a story.

## Journaling for Storytellers

Dicks offers two strategies for discovering your storyworthy moments: daily reflection and stream-of-consciousness writing. Both of these strategies are an intrinsic part of *journaling*—the practice of writing about your thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Mental health experts have long touted journaling as an effective self-care tool, but storytellers sing its praises, too. For example, the writer Anaïs Nin stated that *keeping a diary* helped hone her creative talents and inspired many of her semi-autobiographical novels and essays.

Here are some strategies you can use to get the most out of your journal:

**Journal daily:** Dicks recommends daily reflection so you can process your life as it happens and keep track of your most memorable experiences. Other experts *echo this advice*, arguing that daily journaling allows you to explore your emotions while they're still fresh. As a storyteller, you can use these emotional details later to breathe life into your stories.

**Journal in stream-of-consciousness style:** Most journals are private, which makes them the perfect place to practice writing without judgment, self-criticism, or editing. According to Dicks, this style of writing is essential for uncovering raw, unfiltered thoughts and emotions and deeper insights.

**Review your journal:** Your journal is a record of your life story—and as Dicks notes, reflecting on your previous experiences helps you identify storyworthy patterns. However, experts recommend that you *exercise caution as you read over previous entries*. If you wrote about trauma, you might relive those experiences and feel distressed.

**Journal about your life philosophy:** Dicks explains that discovering the meaning of your life and your role in the grand scheme of things can help you tell great stories. To explore these ideas, consider journaling about your *life philosophy*—your beliefs about what it means to live well (and how your life measures up to those beliefs). The authors of *Life Worth Living*, a book about cultivating your life philosophy, argue that you can only develop one through *careful contemplation*. Your journal is a great place to reflect on your values and sense of meaning, and you can use your entries to write stories that illustrate your beliefs and how they've shaped your experiences.

## Part 3: Put Your Story Together

---

The strategies from the previous section helped you identify the core of your story—a brief moment of meaningful transformation. Now, you must combine that core with other elements that make a story great. In this section, we'll cover Dicks's advice for building your story step-by-step.

### Start at the End to Find the Beginning

---

Dicks explains that **the brief moment of transformation you identified earlier should take place toward the end of your story**. This ensures that the story builds toward a satisfying conclusion, giving the audience a clear sense of purpose and emotional payoff. It also allows you to guide the audience through your journey of transformation—but where does that journey begin?

According to Dicks, **the beginning of your story should be the exact opposite of the ending**. For example, if your story ends with a personal triumph, then it should begin by depicting self-doubt, confusion, or a challenge you're struggling to overcome.

Additionally, Dicks recommends choosing a relevant moment that's relatively near in time to the ending. If you start too far in the distant past, the story may feel unfocused or drawn out, and the audience may struggle to pay attention or make connections between the various details you include. To help your audience focus, keep your story brief and include only the most interesting and relevant details.

### How to Begin Your Story

Dicks provides a simple formula for structuring your story: First, define the ending. Then, come up with a beginning that contrasts it as sharply as possible. Many writers agree that starting with the end in mind gives your story clarity and purpose. For instance, novelist Kurt Vonnegut famously advised writers to “start as close to the end as possible” to keep their stories focused and engaging.

However, this approach doesn't work for everyone. In *On Writing*, Stephen King argues that good stories are as unpredictable as life itself, so you shouldn't write with a certain ending in mind. Instead, come up with an intriguing situation that can serve as the beginning of your story, and let the protagonist work their way out of it. This helps you develop an authentic storyline that feels true to life. Granted, King writes dark fantasy and science fiction—he can invent any ending he wants, and it doesn't have to be based in reality. This makes it easier to allow a story to unfold naturally from its beginning. However, King's advice may be applicable to personal narratives, too.

Perhaps you want to tell a story about a transformation in your life that hasn't reached its conclusion yet, like the evolving dynamics of a complicated relationship. In this case, you'd know how the story of your relationship began, but you wouldn't yet know its ending. You don't have to wait for the situation to resolve itself to tell your story. Instead, you could start with the beginning, include insights you learn as the relationship unfolds, and invite your audience to experience uncertainty alongside you. This is the structure that many stories in The New York Times's “Modern Love” column take.

### Incorporate Physical Details

---



Once you know where to begin, start thinking about the physical details you can incorporate throughout the story to make it come alive in your audience's mind. According to Dicks, **each moment in your narrative must be grounded in a clear, specific location**. This allows listeners to visualize the action as it unfolds—they can picture it as well as they could if they were watching a movie. Without physical details, your story might come across like a lecture or essay, which most people tend to tune out.

This rule applies even if you need to give the audience some historical context or explain something technical. Say you want to discuss your family history—instead of giving a list of facts about your ancestors, fold those details into anecdotes or flashbacks. For example, you could discuss the time you drank coffee with your grandmother in her living room while she shared old family stories and secrets.

(Shortform note: Incorporating physical details into your story is known as descriptive writing. To practice descriptive writing, experts recommend consulting your five senses—taste, touch, sound, smell, and sight. For example, in a story about a childhood summer, you might describe the scent of freshly cut grass, the warmth of the sun on your skin, or the distant hum of lawnmowers. If you have trouble coming up with physical details because the events in your story happened too long ago, try revisiting the scenes you're writing about—either in person or via a Google Maps walkthrough.)

## Create an Emotional Investment

---

Dicks emphasizes that stories are most impactful when they tug on an audience's heartstrings in some way. He says you can accomplish this in three ways: by zeroing in on emotional details, by building suspense, and by leveraging surprise. Let's explore each of these strategies in more detail.

### How to Zero in on Emotional Details

Dicks recognizes that you might want to tell a story about the worst or most dramatic event in your life, like the time you escaped prison or survived a plane crash. However, these events are too extraordinary for most audiences to relate to. They may feel shocked, but they won't feel connected to you. To overcome this problem, **Dicks recommends zeroing in on your emotional experience during that event**. Emotions are universal—not everyone has escaped prison, but everyone knows what it's like to feel trapped and then, suddenly, free. By focusing on your emotional experience, you make it possible for the audience to empathize with you no matter how much your lives may differ.

(Shortform note: In Wired for Story, Lisa Cron explains that a protagonist's emotional experience is the most vital part of any story. According to Cron, audiences use the protagonist's emotions to distinguish between important information and extraneous details—if the character is highly emotional, the audience knows that something significant is happening, which prompts them to pay closer attention. Here are strategies from Cron for conveying your emotional experience effectively: First, describe external signs of emotion like body language and physical actions. For example, mention how you

gritted your teeth when something made you angry. Second, reveal your inner monologue. For example, you might share thoughts like, “How could they betray me like this?”)

#### How to Build Suspense

Dicks explains that **building suspense—a sense of nervous anticipation—helps you maintain the audience’s interest in your story**. Here are two techniques you can use to build suspense:

**1) Foreshadowing:** Foreshadowing, which Dicks calls “breadcrumbing,” involves subtly hinting at developments that will unfold later in the story. For example, if your story is about how you faced your fear of heights, you might make an offhand comment early on about your hesitation to go on a ferris wheel. By dropping small, seemingly insignificant clues early on, you weave a thread of tension throughout the narrative and make the audience curious about what’s to come.

**2) Slow pacing:** When you’re approaching a pivotal moment in your story, intentionally slow the narrative’s pace by incorporating additional, seemingly trivial details. For example, if your story is building up to your discovery of a hidden letter that reveals a family secret, you might describe in detail your painstaking journey through a cluttered attic, focusing on your meticulous examination of old trunks and dusty boxes. Dicks says this slow, deliberate buildup intensifies the suspense, making the eventual reveal more dramatic and impactful.

## Lisa Cron on Building Suspense

Dicks argues that suspense is crucial for keeping your audience engaged. In *Wired for Story*, Cron explains why suspense is such a powerful attention-getter:

According to Cron, humans have an innate need to make sense of every piece of information they learn. When you build suspense, you withhold some of the information your audience needs to understand the big picture. As a result, the audience senses that they need to keep reading (or listening) to fill in the gaps.

Like Dicks, Cron recommends that you use foreshadowing to create suspense. Cron explains that when you drop small clues about what's to come, you give your audience *memories* they can use to connect all the dots in your story. Cron adds that foreshadowing is especially important when the story's protagonist—in this case, you—makes a decision that seems out of character. Your audience can rely on your early hints to understand the motivation behind that choice, making it feel more believable.

Cron also offers tips on pacing. First, she recommends using subplots to give readers some distance from the major conflict and allow them to process what's happened so far. Say you're telling a story about your discovery of a hidden letter that reveals a family secret. Introducing a subplot where you navigate a complicated relationship with a family member—like a sibling who doubts the need to uncover the past—can give the audience a chance to weigh the situation's emotional stakes.

Second, you can slow the pace of your story with flashbacks. Cron says you should only incorporate flashbacks when they're necessary for understanding what happens next. So, for example, as you dig through the attic for the hidden letter, you might insert a flashback that reveals a childhood memory related to your family's complex history.

### How to Leverage Surprise

Dicks explains that surprise is a powerful emotion that you can leverage to captivate your audience. To create a sense of surprise, Dicks recommends emphasizing contrast: Include details, actions, and events that make it seem as if the story's going in a predictable direction. Then, **follow with an unexpected turn that disrupts the audience's expectations** and redefines the narrative.

(Shortform note: In *Story*, Robert McKee refers to this technique as a *beat*: The story's protagonist takes action toward a goal, and the world changes in an unexpected way. According to McKee, you should weave beats throughout your story instead of relying on one big plot twist at the end. Constantly subverting your audience's expectations keeps them intellectually and emotionally engaged, which makes your story more compelling.)

Another technique Dicks offers for surprising your audience involves **hiding crucial information within less significant details**. For example, say your story is about how you pulled off a heist with the help of a local coffee shop owner. You might include a scene where you visit the coffee shop and have a mundane conversation with the owner, which the audience would view as mere background detail. They won't see it coming when you reveal the identity of your accomplice later.

(Shortform note: The success of director M. Night Shyamalan's films, which are known for their surprising plot twists, illustrate just how effective this technique can be. Take The Sixth Sense for example: Throughout the film, Shyamalan weaves in minor details like a character's struggle to open doors or connect with his wife. At the end of the film, the audience learns that these seemingly insignificant details are actually crucial to the plot. Spoiler alert: The character is dead, and these struggles reflect his ghostly state. Critics loved how Shyamalan used this technique to shock his audience, and the film launched his career to new heights.)

### **Keep the Action Moving Forward**

---

Dicks emphasizes that every story needs momentum—otherwise, it'll become stagnant, and the audience will lose interest. **You can create momentum in two ways:** by introducing *conflict* and by introducing *consequences*. For example, in a story about a breakup, your conflict might be the emotional turmoil and self-doubt that arise from the relationship's end. A consequence could be your decision to move to a new city, which introduces new challenges and opportunities. According to Dicks, these forces help you clarify how the various events in your story are linked. They also signify change, indicating that the story is shifting direction or that a new development has emerged as a result of previous events.

However, as your story progresses, it's vital that it remains focused. Dicks explains that a single story can't effectively convey multiple meanings; it must focus on one central theme to be compelling. To find the meaning of your story, Dicks recommends telling your story aloud without worrying about structure or polish. Doing so allows you to re-experience the moment and often reveals why it has stayed with you. Once you identify your story's focal point, make sure that each anecdote you include builds on that theme; cut out anything that seems extraneous.

## Robert McKee's Tips for Forward-Moving Action

Dicks argues that you should create momentum by introducing conflict and consequences, and one way to accomplish this is by emphasizing risk. In *Story*, McKee argues that every story should feature a protagonist (in this case, you) who risks losing what they care about most. This naturally imbues your story with conflict (your willingness or hesitance to take risks) and consequences (the results of the risky decisions you make). For example, say your story is about how you left your job to fulfill your childhood dream of becoming a musician. The conflict arises from your fears of financial instability, while the consequences might include disappointing your family or the joy of performing your first gig.

McKee also provides a perspective you can use to discover your story's central theme. McKee defines "theme" as a specific, truthful statement about the world that expresses cause and effect. So if you're not sure what the theme of your story is, you can start by asking yourself what truth you want to convey through the narrative. For example, if your story is about overcoming adversity, your theme might be, "Resilience leads to growth." McKee also recommends weaving an *anti-theme* into your story by including moments that seem to disprove the theme. This introduces a level of complexity that helps your story feel more believable, and it can also help you keep all your plot points connected to the theme.)

## Lie Strategically

---

According to Dicks, it's OK to bend the truth slightly to make your story more compelling. Memory is imperfect anyway—you're unlikely to remember things exactly as they happened. However, he emphasizes that any embellishments should enhance the audience's experience, not mislead them. For example, if you're telling a story about narrowly escaping a wild animal, it's fine to enhance the suspense by describing the animal as growling menacingly even if it was silent. This embellishment adds to the story's dramatic effect without altering the core truth. However, it's not OK to falsely claim that the animal chased you for miles if it actually remained at a distance—exaggerating the danger you were in undermines the authenticity of your story.

(Shortform note: Creative nonfiction experts are divided as to whether it's OK to lie when you share stories about your life. Some argue that the genre's audience only reads (or listens to) nonfiction because they want to learn some truth about the world—so it's not OK to embellish details, even if they make the story more compelling. Others agree with Dicks that memory is imperfect, and you can creatively improvise details you've forgotten. Still others advocate for a middle ground: Life experience is subjective, and you should strive to tell your version of the truth, even if that's not something others would recognize as factual.)

## Incorporate Humor

---

Dicks recommends weaving occasional humor into your story. It shouldn't dominate the narrative—you're a storyteller, not a comedian. But you can use humor to relieve tension or highlight the absurdity of a situation when that's called for. To use humor effectively, try juxtaposing incongruous elements—things that don't usually go together but create amusement when combined unexpectedly. For example, you might describe how you prepared meticulously for an important business presentation. But as you gave the presentation, you realized that your preteen upgraded your boring slides with a glittery unicorn PowerPoint template.

(Shortform note: Dicks suggests that you can use humor to create levity in the darker parts of your story, but what if you struggle to find humor in the situation to begin with? First, try identifying your own sense of humor. What do you find funny? Self-deprecating jokes? Satire? Witty one-liners? The kind of humor Dicks recommends, where you juxtapose incongruous elements, is known as irony. Whichever type of humor feels most authentic to you is the one you should implement in your story.)

## Part 4: Share Your Story

---

At this point, you've gathered all the elements of a good story, from a solid beginning to funny interludes. Now, Dicks says, it's time to share your story with others. In this section, we'll discuss Dicks's tips for delivering your story effectively.

### Step 1: Control Your Nerves

---

Dicks explains that it's OK to feel nervous when you share your story. It's also OK if the audience can tell that you're nervous—they might find this endearing, as it shows authenticity and vulnerability. However, if you get *too* nervous you'll find it difficult to perform.

(Shortform note: If you feel too scared to share your story, try isolating the reason you feel that way. This can help you identify an effective strategy for controlling your nerves. For example, if you're afraid people will judge you harshly based on the content of your story, remind yourself that sharing your truth can foster connection and understanding. On the other hand, if you're nervous about your public speaking skills, you could try practicing your story multiple times to build confidence.)

When it comes to controlling your nerves, Dicks offers the following tips:

**Tip #1: Use eye contact strategically.** Meet the eyes of a few audience members scattered throughout the crowd. It's too hard to connect with every individual in the audience, but if you look in the general direction of the people you single out, everyone near them will feel acknowledged.

(Shortform: In Cues, body language expert Vanessa Van Edwards explains why eye contact can help you connect with your audience: Looking into someone's eyes stimulates oxytocin production in both parties, which can enhance your ability to interpret

each other's emotions. It also makes you seem more warm—that is, approachable, empathetic, and kind. Warmth helps you earn others' trust, which some say is crucial to the relationship between a storyteller and their audience.)

**Tip #2: Don't memorize your story word for word.** This will lead to a stilted performance that comes across as inauthentic. Instead, memorize your first and final lines and the most important events that take place in the middle of your story. (Shortform note: Jade Bowler provides techniques you can use to memorize these parts of your story in *The Only Study Guide You'll Ever Need*. One technique is spaced repetition, where you practice your story repeatedly over time. It's important to space out your practice sessions, though—you should only practice when you feel like you're about to forget your story. This ingrains the story in your long-term memory.)

**Tip #3: Don't take yourself too seriously.** You want to seem confident, but you don't want to seem arrogant. If you're telling a story about a major victory in your life, it's easy to come across like a braggart—and that would prevent your audience from empathizing with you and enjoying your story. To minimize this risk, undermine yourself by highlighting your flaws or imperfections.

(Shortform note: On the flip side, you don't want to come across as overly self-critical or pathetic; the audience might be moved by their pity for you, but they probably won't be impressed by your story. If you tend to err on the side of either extreme, you might benefit from ego work, which teaches you to see yourself in a more neutral light. Ego work entails exploring and balancing your sense of self-worth, helping you recognize both your strengths and weaknesses without inflating or diminishing them. This can allow you to tell stories with authenticity and confidence, without tipping into arrogance or self-deprecation.)

## Step 2: Immerse Your Audience

---

Dicks explains that effective storytelling has the power to envelop an audience, making them feel as though they are living through the events of the story alongside the characters. This immersion creates a more emotionally powerful experience for the audience, but it can be hard to attain and easy to break.

To keep your audience engrossed in the world of your story, follow these tips:

**Tip #1: Show up, but don't show off.** Dicks recommends that you wear nondescript clothing and advises against using physical objects like props to illustrate events. Flashy clothes and props can distract your audience from the story you're telling.

**Tip #2: Immerse your audience in the story, and don't draw their attention to the fact it's a story.** For example, Dicks suggests that you avoid addressing the audience directly, and don't start by saying something like, "This tale is about the worst day of my life."

**Tip #3: Use the present tense.** According to Dicks, this helps the audience feel as if the story is unfolding in real time, which helps them more deeply experience the story as if they were actually involved in it.

### **Don't Break the Fourth Wall—Or Maybe Do**

Dicks emphasizes the importance of immersive storytelling and warns against using tactics that would pull your audience out of the narrative. The film world has a correlate to this concept: Don't break the fourth wall. The fourth wall is an imaginary barrier that separates actors on screen from the audience. When the fourth wall is intact, viewers feel as though they're part of the story, experiencing events alongside the characters. This immersion allows for a deeper emotional connection and investment in the narrative. In contrast, when the fourth wall is broken, the audience's focus shifts from the story to their role as spectators.

Like Dicks, film experts generally advise actors not to break the fourth wall by addressing the audience, looking at the camera, or using meta-narratives that discuss the plot or character motivations. However, some films like *Scream* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* are famous for breaking the fourth wall in ways the audience found entertaining and inventive. Some successful novels use this technique, too, like *Jane Eyre* and *The Catcher in the Rye*.

It can be hard to break the fourth wall in a way that doesn't feel gimmicky. If you want to avoid breaking it, follow Dicks's tips—public speaking experts agree that you should wear simple clothes, use minimal props if any, and use the present tense to help your audience focus on what you're saying. However, since the fourth wall separates the storyteller from the audience, some argue that breaking it can foster greater intimacy—so it may be worthwhile to experiment with techniques for breaking the fourth wall in your stories. For example, say you're telling a story about a time when you felt nervous. You might break the fourth wall by saying something like, "I felt more nervous then than I do now, telling this story on stage!"

### **Step 3: Choose Your Words Wisely**

---

Recall that the reason for sharing your story, according to Dicks, is to make a heartfelt connection with your audience. To achieve this, it's essential to choose your words wisely. Here are some tips to keep in mind:

**Tip #1: Avoid offensive words.** This includes graphic descriptions of sex or bodily functions, which can repel and alienate your audience. It also includes profanity. Dicks says you should save curse words for when they're absolutely necessary to get your point across, and try to come up with creative workarounds whenever possible.

(Shortform note: Dicks believes offensive words and material can alienate your audience, but that may not always be the case. It all comes down to a maxim among writers: Know your audience. For example, in an adults-only venue, telling a story that's laced with



profanity or sexual innuendo might be acceptable. Similarly, if you're a doctor speaking to other doctors, it's probably fine to include some gruesome details about the human body—your audience is likely immune to it.)

**Tip #2: Be mindful of accents.** If you imitate someone's accent, it might seem like you're making fun of them based on cultural or racial stereotypes—so as a rule, it's best to avoid using accents. However, Dicks says it's sometimes OK to mimic the language of your own culture; if your family members or neighbors have an accent that's part of your lived experience, you can authentically incorporate it into your storytelling.

(Shortform note: As you decide whether to use an accent, consider this common framework among comedians: punching up versus punching down. When you punch down, you make fun of someone in a less powerful position than you (for example, someone subjected to racist stereotypes). Audiences often receive this poorly. In contrast, you punch up when you make fun of someone more prestigious than you—for example, by mimicking someone's hoity-toity speech. Audiences are more likely to accept this kind of rhetorical move. Dicks advises punching horizontally by mimicking people of the same social station as you, but it may also be safe to punch up.)

**Tip #3: Protect others' privacy.** Dicks explains that using other people's real names in your story can lead to unintended consequences, especially if the content of your story is sensitive or potentially damaging. Using real names might also affect your relationships with these people, as they may feel uncomfortable with the publicity or misrepresented by your portrayal. To avoid these issues, consider using pseudonyms or general descriptions instead of real names.

(Shortform note: If the person you're discussing is dead or unimportant to you, it might be OK to use their real name as you paint them in a negative light. This may be why, for example, actor Jennette McCurdy felt safe exploring her mother Debra's abusive behavior in her memoir *I'm Glad My Mom Died*. But if you value a person's reputation or legacy, it's probably best to speak only positively about them or to obscure identifying information. This may include not only their real name but also details about their life, like where they live or what they do for work.)

Guided Tour