



## Tell Me a Story

Last summer, I decided to join a newly formed Classical-rhetoric reading group<sup>1</sup> with a number of legal communication and rhetoric professors from law schools across the country. The group began by reading and discussing short works by Gorgias, Isocrates, and others before moving to Plato. For each text, a different member of the reading group prepared and circulated background materials and discussion questions, and then that member facilitated the group discussion. After a few requests from the group leader, no one had volunteered for the first Aristotle text—*Categories*—so I offered to facilitate.<sup>2</sup> It was only 42 pages of text. How bad could it be?

Oh, it was bad. Even after reading all those old Greek dudes, I struggled mightily with Aristotle. I read and re-read the same page, the same sentence, even the same word multiple times. My mind wandered. I discovered an urgent desire to fold laundry. I nurtured an active hostility toward poor, long-dead Aristotle.

While preparing reading questions for the group, I developed a hypothesis to explain at least part of my struggle. Thought to be drawn from Aristotle's lecture notes, *Categories* is pure, dry, rigorously logical and agonizingly thorough explanation, almost like a mathematical proof.<sup>3</sup> Plato's works, by contrast, tend to be lively and engaging, communicating their lessons through conversations and anecdotes. And, as a student of persuasion, I know that the research is pretty conclusive: Stories persuade and educate far more effectively than do recitations of fact and logical argument. Whereas Plato's stories engaged me, Aristotle's logical argument—however rigorous and sound—anaesthetized me.

### Stories Persuade: Duh?

The notion that stories persuade comes as no surprise to the skilled trial lawyer or master politician. Each year at the State of the Union, the President, whoever he<sup>4</sup> may be, peppers his speech with anecdotes designed to justify a policy proposal or defend a decision. Historical narratives conveyed in fiction often replace the true facts about historical events and figures in the popular imagination.<sup>5</sup> Like Plato, the Biblical Jesus often favored parables to deliver key lessons.

### Stories Persuade: Science!


Why do stories persuade more effectively? Some of it has to do with how our brains work. Research shows that we activate more sections of our brains when we read stories. When we read bulleted lists of facts, we engage the areas of our brain dedicated to language interpretation. But when we read stories, we not only activate the language centers, we also stimulate the same parts of our brains as we would if we experienced an event in real life. Descriptions of odors activate our olfactory cortex. Metaphors invoking tactile imagery trigger the sensory cortex. Concrete depictions of motion stimulate our motor cortex. Stories engage more of your audience's brain and trigger the brain's regions

in the same way a real-life experience does, making your narrative seem more true.

This holds even for legal readers, who cut our teeth on Aristotelian syllogisms. In a 2009 study, Professor Ken Chestek sent various legal readers briefs constructed one of two ways: either as pure syllogistic application of law to fact or with the same logical argument interwoven with the story of the legal dispute. On the whole, the legal readers—especially the judges and experienced lawyers—found the story briefs more persuasive.<sup>6</sup>

### Control the Narrative

If you don't provide a story, your reader will do it for you. In the 1940s, psychologist Franz Heider showed his subjects a simple film depicting geometric shapes moving about the screen. All but one of Heider's subjects imposed rich stories onto the film, complete with romance, heroes, villains, and conflict. When I show the video to my law students, they, just like Heider's subjects, come up with vivid narratives framed through their own perspectives. Some see an immigration tale. Others see domestic violence. Still others see playground bullying. The human brain craves stories and, in the absence of a provided narrative, it will create a story of its own.

You want to control the narrative, so provide one in your statement of facts, and weave elements of your story throughout your argument.<sup>7</sup> Otherwise, your reader or your opponent will supply a story for you, and it may not be one that favors you! 

The notion that stories persuade comes as no surprise to the skilled trial lawyer.



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### endnotes

1. File this under “things that seem like a good idea at the time.”
2. See note 1.
3. I'm going to assume that he added the jokes and shoutouts later.
4. I look forward to the day when I need a gender-neutral singular pronoun in this sentence.
5. Wait for it ... *Hamilton!*
6. Kenneth D. Chestek, *Judging by the Numbers: An Empirical Study of the Power of Story*, 7 J. ALWD 1 (2010).
7. I'll talk more about some ways to do this in later columns, but my December 2016 column on point of view includes some suggestions.