

How to Start a Story People Want to Hear

The Story Challenge

The biggest challenge when telling a story is knowing where to start. Too many details and the listener drifts. It sounds like this:

"I was coming back from my niece's wedding in Texas back in June of 2021, and it had been a really quick visit because there was so much wedding stuff going on. I hadn't slept much, and at some point I realized I had completely forgotten I was flying Southwest, so I never checked in until I was already driving to the airport. And this was a 6 a.m. flight..."

Or it's too little setup and you don't know what's going on.

"I had a bad Southwest flight once. It was awful."

One simple solution is to start your story with "So," and follow this formula:

**"So..." + Specific Time + Person + Action Words
+ Place + Goal/Tension.**

This sets the scene and gets to the point.

"So four years ago, I was the last passenger boarding a Southwest flight and every seat was taken...except one."

In one sentence, you know when, who, where, what's happening, and why the next 90 seconds of this story might be interesting.

Story Start Formula

**"So..." + Specific Time + Person + Action
+ Place + Goal/Tension.**

- 1 "So...":** Most people naturally start stories this way. It signals you're beginning something new and keeps the tone conversational.
- 2 Specific Time:** Give the listener a timestamp. Last week? Four years ago? Yesterday morning? People pick up a surprising amount of context just from knowing when the story happens.
- 3 Person:** Tell the listener who this story is about. You? A constituent? A friend? Name the person early so the listener pictures who the story is about.
- 4 Action:** Save the listener the long backstory. Go straight to what's happening right now. Action words pull the listener into the exact moment.
- 5 Place:** Show the listener where this is happening. In the office? At the Capitol? On a plane? A simple location cue helps the listener instantly picture the scene.
- 6 Goal or Tension:** Reveal for the listener why this moment matters. What's at stake? This is the hook that makes people want to hear what happens next.

The Bottom Line

The next time you need to tell a story, think about how you will start it. Begin with "So...", then add the time, the person, the action, the place, and the tension.

Using the Story Start Formula

Example:

“So	four years ago	I	”
	<i>specific time</i>	<i>person</i>	
	was the last passenger boarding	a Southwest flight	
	<i>action</i>	<i>place</i>	
and every seat was taken...except one			
<i>goal / tension</i>			

Try It Yourself:

“So			”
	<i>specific time</i>	<i>person</i>	
	<i>action</i>	<i>place</i>	
<i>goal / tension</i>			

How to Use It

Effective stories don't need to be long. You only need 90 to 120 seconds (150–250 words) to be memorable and make a point.

The next time you need to speak and tell a story:

- Brainstorm a list of stories that would interest your audience.
- Pick the most promising one and follow the formula.
- Start by writing “So...” then add the time, the person, the action, the place, and the tension.
- Test the story out with your team or in a low-stakes situation.

