



# HOW TO TELL TALL TALES

Truthful tips about presenting preposterous stories.

By Betsy Keogan, DTM

**T**he announcement was made: “This year, instead of a Humorous Speech Contest, District 27 will hold its first Tall Tales Contest.” Everyone in the room responded with an “Oh!” and I think we may have achieved a record for the variety of ways to say that word. Some of our club members were intrigued, some were enthusiastic ... but most were confused and concerned.

What was the cause for all this dread? After all, most of us began telling tall tales on the playground. By the age of 5, we found it easy to make a claim like, “I can kick a ball all the way to Kentucky!” or “My

dog wagged his tail so fast that my dad called the TV news to issue a tornado warning.”

If you’ve been in a Tall Tales Contest, you know the challenge is to come up with something more than just an outrageous claim—you have to write a contest-worthy story that develops and supports your claim. This can be more difficult than the deceptively simple theme suggests. The members of my club are all talented humorous speech writers, but our first efforts at writing truly clever tall tales failed. We were intimidated and only two people signed up for the contest. That

changed when our club came up with a number of creative ideas. Soon, we discovered tall tales work like potato chips—once we started writing, we couldn’t stop at just one. Here are some of those ideas.

## How to Begin

▶ **Watch movies** such as *Big Fish* (2003) or *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1994) to hear a variety of tall tales being told. Your local library may have books of tall tales to use as examples, as well, but remember that your tale must be original. You cannot simply copy a story from a book and change a few minor details. Also, be sure that

your resources feature tall tales and not folk tales. They are distinctly different.

▶ **Practice coming up with ideas by using tall tales as a Table Topics theme** a month before the contest. Each participant must describe a seemingly implausible event that happened to him or her. To add an extra twist, tell the participants that they may describe a true event if they wish. Then, have the audience guess whether the story is true or a tall tale.

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▶ **Pick a random sentence from a book of famous quotations** and see what sort of tall tale you can concoct using that sentence as a punch line.

▶ **Write down five frustrating things that have happened to you recently.** List ordinary problems, such as being stuck in traffic, spilling coffee on your suit, having no time to do the dishes, and so on. Then try to come up with preposterous solutions to these problems.

### How to Develop Flavor

After watching the movie *Big Fish* or one like it, **try to copy the main character's storytelling abilities.** Notice the use of tone, speed of delivery and volume, as well as the use of language.

▶ **Play around with accents ...** for a while. Then drop the phony accent but retain some of the accent's flavor. In other words, try adding a bit of drawl in places, or colorful phrases such as "Now, there comes a time in everyone's life" or "He was a most intelligent man."

▶ **Tall tales are the perfect speeches to practice alliteration, homonyms, triads and other vocal variety techniques.** Instead of saying "Ladybugs

are found in many regions," say "From Leesburg to Louisville, the ladybugs lurk." Used sparingly, rhymes can be very effective. Instead of saying "The car was damaged," say "Repairs were extensive and expensive."

▶ **Add surprises** (for example, a song, a dance, a howl or an unexpected body movement). Remember: Surprises are like pepper—a little bit adds a lot of flavor, but if you add too much you ruin the result.

▶ **Many tall tales become livelier with a little repetition.** This is especially true for any content that describes actions that can be illustrated by humorous gestures, such as: "The bear went up and down, and up and down, and up and down the mountain."

It is funny to set up a predictable sequence of events, or a predictable sequence of logic, and then twist the final link in the sequence. Among successful humorists, the "Rule of Three" is popular. First, set up a joke. Second, reinforce the setup. Third, earn the payoff with a punch line that smashes the pattern. For example, "This porridge is too cold. This porridge is too hot. This porridge is asking to meet our leader!"

### Editing Helps

▶ **A good tall tale is about three to five minutes long.** After five minutes, the audience begins to lose track of the details or becomes overwhelmed by too many of them. You may find it painful to delete humorous lines—however, a day or two later, when you read the speech again, you will realize the streamlined version is in fact better.

▶ **If the story involves bragging, consider telling it in the third person.** For example, one member had a story about how dozens of fabulous men wanted to date her. The first time she told this tale, it bombed. Then she changed the story to be about the fabulous men who wanted to date her sister. This one change made the story much funnier.

▶ **Videotape yourself telling the story.** Even if you don't have access to a video camera, you might be able to do a limited amount of taping with another electronic device, such as a digital camera. Just taping a minute or two of your tall tale will help you see which parts need extra "oomph" and which need paring down.

▶ **Don't be too childish, and don't be too adult.** Tall tales are meant to amuse adults; childish language and too much fantasy (princesses, unicorns, elves, etc.) can make your story sound like a fairy tale. Don't start your story off with "Once upon a time" unless you are doing so ironically. On the other hand, tall tales work best when they have a certain wholesomeness. If you do want to keep adult humor in your tale—and there are times when this works—just remember: Any naughty references will be funnier if you tell them in the chastest manner possible. Strive for innocent phrasing. Whatever you do, don't wink at the audience; it may seem like a good idea but it comes across as sleazy.

Follow these steps and your club will soon enjoy writing and performing tall tales. It worked well for us. In the end, all 35,000 people in our club wrote tall tales. You believe me, don't you? 

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