

You Must Be Kidding: Tall Tales are a Tall Order

How to be the biggest liar this side of Mars.

BY CAREN NEILE, PH.D., ATMS, CL

I was late submitting this article because the icemaker in my freezer was on the blink. It just wouldn't stop pouring out ice. Pretty soon the house was so cold that our parakeet froze solid in flight. And when I tried to boil water on the stove, the bubbles froze in the pot.

A plausible excuse for a late submission? Hardly. But it does have the makings of a good tall tale. With Toastmasters fall speech contests coming up, this is a good time to highlight the Tall Tales Contest and the many aspects of this art form.

According to Carolyn S. Brown in *The Tall Tale in American Folklore and Literature*, a tall tale is “a fictional story which is told in the form of personal narrative or anecdotes, which challenges the listener’s credulity with comic outlandishness, and which performs different social functions depending on whether it is heard as true or as fictional.” In other words, because the tall tale is presented as a

“I stick to dogs, trains, and kids as subjects. Everybody knows about those things.” — Bil Lepp, award-winning storyteller

spontaneous reminiscence that happened either to the narrator or to an acquaintance—with true-life, ordinary details that build up almost imperceptibly to something outrageous—even listeners who hear it as fiction often play along and act as though they believe it to be true.

Perhaps the most common example of a tall tale is heard almost every day at docks and fishing holes throughout the land. My favorite traditional “fish tale” concerns the storyteller’s having become so attached to a prize catch that she taught it to walk, only to have it subsequently drown when she gave it swimming lessons!

If you plan to participate in the Toastmasters Tall Tales Contest, here are a few suggestions to bear in mind:

First and foremost, the tall tale must be a story—that is, a sequence of related events with a beginning, middle and end, as well as characters and action. It can’t just be a shopping list of absurd details. That said, it doesn’t have to follow a particular structure. It can be based on traditional tales you’ve heard; on actual, if unusual events; or on your own imagination.

The Art of Exaggeration

The secret to a good tall tale is exaggeration. The most common types of exaggeration include size, abilities such as intelligence or

strength, or the aggressiveness of animals or weather. But exaggeration isn’t all that’s required. The teller should also compare things, says Brown, in a concrete and comical way. That includes making animals seem human, as in the fish tale above.

Here’s an excerpt from a tall tale called “Mississippi Mosquitoes,” retold by S.E. Schlosser, on americanfolklore.net:

A visitor to Mississippi decided to take a walk along the river in the cool of the evening. His host warned him that the mosquitoes in the area had been acting up lately, tormenting the alligators until they moved down the river. But the visitor just laughed. ...

As he promenaded beside the flowing Mississippi, he heard the whirling sound of a tornado. Looking up, he saw two mosquitoes descending upon him. They lifted him straight up in the air and carried him out over the river...

You’ll notice that the mosquitoes are compared to a tornado, and the way they carry off their victim is like vultures—big ones at that!

And now, a word about performance. While it helps to be a comic actor, the best tall-tale tellers use a deadpan style that helps to lend an air of believability to even the craziest story. It’s okay to laugh at the end of the tale to assure your audience you’re not losing your mind, but you may also choose to sum up by insisting that every word you said is true, or by inviting listeners to check out the evidence.

Tall tales should come across as stories of the common people, not highbrow literary creations. It’s helpful to speak in short, simple sentences, with pauses, vocal variety, variations of rhythm and timing, and all your other good speaking skills. Make your images sharp and easy to imagine. Use comic understatement. That is, when you say something absurd, don’t overplay it; let the details speak for themselves. Overall, remember that your goal is not to inform, inspire or touch, but to amuse.

Bil Lepp: The Liars’ Liar

You don’t need to take my word for any of this. If you want to learn the truth about lying, there’s no better expert than Bil Lepp, an award-winning performer, author and storyteller. I first heard Lepp perform several years ago at the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee. He told a tale called “Buck Ain’t No Ordinary Dog” from his album *Buck Meets the Monster Stick*.



The secret to a good tall tale is exaggeration, such as embellishing the size and strength of fish, people or even violins, ships and staircases.

The story features an image I will never forget: someone hanging from a speeding train by his frozen tongue.

I asked Lepp for his advice about creating a tall tale. “My best advice is to start with something true,” he says. “Most of my tales are based on things that have happened to me, or someone I know. I start with the truth, and stay true, or plausible, as long as I can, to lure the audience in.

“As far as presentation goes, I stick with Mark Twain’s advice: You have to tell the story like you believe every word, and you don’t get why the audience is laughing. I try very hard to keep a straight face on stage.”

The most common pitfall to creating tall tales, according to Lepp, is too much jargon. “I’ve seen people write tales about sailing or flying that might be very good but are so full of technical language that Popeye and [famed pilot] Chuck Yeager would leave scratching their heads,” he explains. “Write what you know, but make sure it’s also something somebody else knows. That’s why I stick to dogs, trains, and kids as subjects. Everybody knows about those things.”

After Lepp starts his tale with a simple, believable situation or statement—such as

“I have a dog”—he becomes playful. “I’ll do a few jokes, sort of like one-liners, to let the audience know that this is supposed to be fun. After that, I set the stage for what is going to happen in the tale. Then I start my gradual exaggeration, building slowly toward where the story takes off completely from the world of possibility.”

The end of the tale usually ties back into the beginning of the story in some manner. To find out more about Lepp, visit leppstorytelling.com.

Before creating your own tale, you may want to familiarize yourself with collections of tall tales online or in libraries until you’re fairly comfortable with the form. Most of all, have fun, both during the writing and the telling of your story.

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The Toastmasters Tall Tales Contest is one of four contest types a district may conduct each year in addition to the International Speech Contest. The other three are: Evaluation, Humorous and Table Topics.

According to the *Toastmasters Speech Contest Rulebook 2014*, the subject for a Tall Tales speech must be “of a highly exaggerated, improbable nature and have a theme or plot.” In addition, humor and props may be used to support or illustrate the speech.



Short on ideas for your next tall tale?

Visit the *Toastmaster* tablet edition to access an idea generator!