

A FINAL QUESTION

What could you do in the next twenty-four hours to begin crafting your best possible cover letter?

CHAPTER 10

WORDS CREATE WORLDS

STORYTELLING THROUGH INTERVIEWING AND NETWORKING

What is a date, really, but a job interview that lasts all night? The only difference between a date and a job interview is that in not many job interviews is there a chance you'll end up naked at the end of it.

—JERRY SEINFELD, *THE SEINFELD CHRONICLES*

Susan was a French major who wanted to interview for a marketing position for a computer company. When the company came to campus, she signed up for the interview. The recruiter expressed some surprise when he looked at his schedule: he had a day full of business and marketing majors and then this one French major. When Susan arrived for her interview, the recruiter tackled his concern head-on. "You're a French major," he said. "What can you do for us?" Susan calmly looked at him and said, "You know, when I came to college I wanted to take a Spanish class, but they were full. My adviser suggested I take French instead. It's four years later: I've majored in French, I studied abroad in France, I lived with a French family who spoke no English, I worked for a French corporation translating their publicity materials, and I speak French fluently. I know and understand a language, a culture, and a country. I've already started researching your product line and customers, and I'm excited about learning how to best reach your market."

Isn't that a great story? If Susan had said: "Well, I think a French major is valuable for many reasons" or "I've developed a lot of skills with my French major" or even "Well, aside from my French major . . ." would her response have been as compelling?

What makes Susan's response so memorable and powerful is the story—the “frame” she created that *demonstrated* her knowledge, confidence, and quite frankly, her sales ability. She didn't avoid the question. She answered it head-on, weaving a thread between what she had already done with her French major (answering **THE QUESTION** the recruiter was really asking) and then pulling the thread directly into the new position she was seeking. (I don't know if she lived happily ever after, but she got the job and within a year was promoted to a marketing management position.)

This chapter is about weaving threads into stories: connecting those threads you discovered in your Wandering Map to your future employment by managing the interviews, meetings, and other encounters you will have with people who can help you move forward in your job search. Like Susan, you will now confront **THE QUESTION** on a regular basis. It will be worded in a variety of ways (Have you seen those monstrously long lists of “typical questions” asked at job interviews? Just Google “typical interview questions” and be prepared to be overwhelmed instantly), but the bottom line for most employers is “Will this person fit in our environment? Does he or she already possess the skills or have the potential to learn quickly so that he or she will be an asset to our organization and not a liability?” Through storytelling, you will be able to demonstrate convincingly to an employer just how well you are prepared for the workplace.

Before we get into shaping your stories to impress future employers, let's take a look at the interview itself. Like most job seekers, you probably haven't given much thought to the employer's perspective. You've been focusing on answering questions correctly, assembling the right interview outfit, and reading up on etiquette and table manners (you have done all that, right?!), but you haven't stopped to consider what the employer is thinking. And, as you saw in the previous chapter, one of the keys to marketing yourself is to make a connection, to get out of your mindset and into your audience's. So, just what is that employer thinking?

THE INTERVIEWER AND THE INTERVIEW

Did you know that the number one complaint employers have about college students and recent graduates is their failure to do their research before the interview? Recruiters are offended by interviewees who don't know what the company produces or does, don't have a basic understanding of the position they're applying for, and ask questions that could be easily answered on their website or in their promotional material. From their perspective, the point of the interview is to get to know you, not explain basic information about their company. The good news, of course, is that thanks to all the work you've done so far, you have an extensive and rich collection of information about yourself to share. And the better news is that thanks to the Internet, much of the company research has already been done for you.

Let's start by examining your interviewer, with the caveat that there's no one type of interviewer out there. Some organizations have professional human resources staff who devote most of their time to interviewing candidates for positions. They travel all over the United States to find the best talent for their organization and they pretty much have interviewing down to a science. They know exactly what questions they're going to ask, what replies you will likely give, and they have honed their ability to separate the sheep from the goats, so to speak. You will often encounter this type of interviewer in a typical college recruiting program or at large corporations.

It's just as likely, however, that you'll get Bob, the guy who actually works in the field and has just been told by his manager to “go interview some college kids” for an upcoming opening. Bob is usually well-meaning and sincere, and is probably very good at selling widgets or whatever he does, but he's no expert in interviewing and his questions may be odd or seemingly haphazard. Some might even be illegal, technically, because Bob hasn't been given any formal training in interviewing. Bob will ask weird questions, such as “Where's a good place to get a drink around here?” (Yes, that question has been asked at interviews.)

And, of course, there are all shades of interviewers in between with varying skills in interviewing and assessing candidates. Regardless of their training or experience, interviewers have one thing in common: they want to hire the best person for the job. They want individuals who demonstrate skills such as problem-solving, communicate well verbally and in writing, have an understanding of the industry, possess common sense, and have a strong work ethic. Ultimately, they are seeking fit: that indefinable and vague quality that says others will enjoy working with you and you'll enjoy and be productive in the work setting. Their worst nightmare is that they hire the wrong person and then are stuck with a bad employee whom they have to fire and start all over again. And no one wants to do that. In some organizations, professional recruiters are reviewed annually for their hiring record, not unlike a football coach who is judged on the ratio of wins to losses. So they are under pressure, just like you. (And here you thought that you were the nervous one during the interview!) The last thing they want are surprises, particularly bad surprises. They don't want to hire a person who can't do the job, has a bad attitude, or leaves the company within a year. Hence, all those odd questions designed to trip you up or weed you out. But no matter what type of interviewer you get, or what type of questions you're asked, your smart and well-chosen stories will tell them what they need to know and in a way they will remember. You will present them with responses that will break through their fears or concerns about your suitability as a candidate.

Let's add one more element of pressure to the interview: a typical one-day college interview schedule will likely involve about twelve interviews. Odds are, the recruiter will select two people, at best, to move to the next stage of the interview process. And that doesn't include all the other schools the recruiter may visit. (And outside of a college recruiting program, the sky's the limit. There's virtually no way to know for sure how many people are being interviewed.) In general, though, you can assume that at least five (and potentially a lot more) individuals have made it to a final interview stage for each available position, no matter what position you're seeking. So your interviewer is listening to your responses at a deeper level than you might expect and you are being directly compared to the other people the recruiter is seeing. If you need an image, think of those long

lines at the *America's Got Talent* auditions versus the number who perform on TV. Fortunately, your odds of getting the job are better than most *America's Got Talent* candidates, but it doesn't hurt to remember you're not the only candidate.

The same numbers game applies to the short encounters you might have with employers at a job fair as well. They may greet hundreds of candidates at a fair, but it's likely that only about ten or so résumés will be placed in that special pile designated for follow-up. And the decisions are based on a two-minute conversation with you in a noisy and crowded room teeming with people in suits.

Are you grasping the importance of preparing for your encounters with people who have the potential to hire you? Particularly when the economy is slow or the unemployment rate is high, employers can afford to be very selective in their hiring choices. And unfortunately, you seldom get a do-over in the interview-encounter process. Just like résumés that receive a few seconds' glance, your quick encounter with a potential employer is going to determine your fate.

Hey, what happened to that positive mindset in chapter 3? Where's the rainbow in the midst of this rain? It's you. You're going to be the person who moves forward in the process because you will be better prepared for your interview or chance encounter with the daunting amount of wisdom you've acquired about yourself, the job-search process, and the position you're seeking. You will have stories and responses crafted that will leave a lasting and positive impression on the interviewer. There's a little-known fact about career books: only about 10 percent of the people who buy them actually read them the whole way through, so if you're reading this paragraph, you've already surpassed 90 percent of your competition. You already have more knowledge and are better prepared for the process. And now that you know how steep the competition can be, just like those *American Idol* contestants, you will practice, practice, and practice to get better.

INTERVIEW SHAPES AND SIZES

When you think about an interview, what image comes to mind? If you're like most people, it's a vision of you and one other person in a small room asking and answering questions. Perhaps you get an immediate visceral sensation of anxiety. Or maybe you see yourself skillfully answering whatever question is asked. You might hear someone asking you that annoying typical opening line that's almost as bad as **THE QUESTION**: "Tell me about yourself." Or maybe you've read about stress questions such as "I've seen lots of good people today. Why should I hire you?" Or case interview questions where you have to answer strange queries, such as "How many gas stations are in Los Angeles?" Or requests for behavioral responses, such as "Tell me about a time when you solved a problem under pressure."

As mentioned earlier, it's easy to search the Internet and find list after list of possible interview questions. And that's actually a good idea. Gather up the questions and practice answering them, because you will likely get one or two of them. The problem is no list can cover every single scenario. There are simply too many questions and too many types of interviews and interviewers. Employers often have a personal favorite question they like to ask each candidate, and that question varies widely. Some like asking slightly off-topic questions, such as "What are you reading aside from your textbooks?" Others like to know what you already know about their company or position. Chaos theory has returned. The situation is too complex to be reduced to a few simple answers. That's why you have to be prepared to answer anything that is thrown at you, whether it's predictable ("Tell me about yourself.") or out in left field ("Why are manhole covers round?"). But don't worry; you'll learn how to approach these situations with confidence. You are already skilled at taking the complex (your life) and making it manageable (identifiable threads and themes). Interviewing is no different. Strong interviewing skills rely on your knowledge of yourself (features and benefits), the position, field, and organization you're seeking, as well as your ability to quickly establish a relationship.

Interviews come in basically two lengths. The shorter interview

is a screening interview and constitutes your first conversation with the potential employer. These interactions can last anywhere from two minutes to thirty minutes and take place at a job fair, in an office, on the phone, or even via e-mail. Sometimes they are called screening interviews and they rely on relatively quick answers to basic questions. Notice the emphasis on first conversation—even when you're simply answering a phone call to set up the interview, you're being interviewed. It is the first impression (aside from the résumé and cover letter if those have been part of the process) that the employer will have of you. In addition to the stories you'll be creating shortly, it's helpful to have a short speech about your plans prepared, what some career specialists refer to as an elevator speech or a sound bite.

The long interview usually takes place at the workplace, but again, it could occur over lunch in a restaurant, or at a neutral site like a hotel meeting room. A long interview is any conversation that lasts more than thirty minutes. Long interviews are more comprehensive, with questions that will dig deeper into your background and knowledge. A longer interview may last all day and include meetings with several managers and executives.

As for the style of the interview, much depends on the interviewer and the industry. Certain industries, such as investment banking and consulting, are known for case interviews where you (and perhaps a group of fellow interviewees) are presented with problems to solve in an allotted period of time. You are not only being judged on your ability to formulate an answer (and by the way, there may be no one correct answer), but also your thinking skills, and if it's a group setting, your teamwork skills and leadership potential. It's not unusual to experience some of each of these interviewing styles with one organization due to the personality of your interviewer. Some of the basic interview styles include the following:

- Directive interviews that rely on a series of preselected questions and proceed rather matter-of-factly
- Nondirective or free-flowing interviews that are more like a conversation or exchange (but be careful here—sometimes that approach is taken to make you relax and let down your guard)

- Panel interviews, where a group of current employees will ask you a variety of questions.
- Behavioral interviews that encourage you to provide examples of your skills and use your past as an indicator of the likelihood of future success. The techniques below will be particularly helpful for these interviews.
- Case interviews that present special problem-solving situations that may or may not be related to the actual job. You will need to research and prepare for case interviews thoroughly.

Last time I gave an interview, they told me to relax and say what I felt. Ten minutes after broadcast, I got transferred to an outpost so far off the star maps you couldn't find it with a hunting dog and a Ouija board.

—COMMANDER JEFFREY SINCLAIR IN *BABYLON 5* (1994)

So are you grasping the complexity and chaos of the interview process—how challenging it is to predict what questions you'll be asked or the type of interview you're going to have and how it will be conducted? While it's a good idea to develop some basic responses to common questions, your time will be much better spent focusing on two key preparation strategies: storytelling and SWOT analysis.

CREATING COMPELLING INTERVIEW STORIES

Get out the blank paper again—it's time to control the chaos and create several powerful stories that will serve you in the job search and beyond. Like Susan's story at the opening of this chapter, a good story helps you build a frame around your experiences. You get to control everything—the plot, the characters, the action, and the outcome. A properly selected and developed story will be persuasive, help you establish rapport with the interviewer, and focus your vision. Use your systems, or big-picture, thinking to go above the situation and look down upon it as you consider the story in its entirety. Replay the story in your mind as you ponder it. And remember, your story needs to be believable. A phony story will betray you.

To start constructing your stories, identify three strengths or points you want to make in your interview, for instance, your attention to detail or your ability to handle difficult situations. Then begin thinking of two instances that illustrate each point. Take each instance and see if you can create a short story—just a few sentences—to illustrate your points so you'll have at least six stories when we're done. As you build your stories, remember you only need to tell two or three in an interview. You won't answer every question with a story. Stories are powerful when they are carefully interspersed with more traditional responses to questions. If you can create two story ideas for the three key points you want to make in your interview (six stories in all), you will likely be prepared for almost any question anyone can throw at you.

Now that you have generated a few ideas for stories, let's examine storytelling in greater detail. There are three equally important steps to creating great stories: finding inspiration and ideas, constructing your stories, and telling your stories.

STEP 1: FINDING INSPIRATION AND STORY IDEAS

Where do you find stories? In general, you will be the best source for your stories. Events that have happened to you or your family, challenging times you've worked through, moments in which you achieved new knowledge or understanding, or something you observed that left an imprint are all possible fodder for a great story. Be a good listener and pay attention to your surroundings. What stories are unfolding before you?

You don't always have to invent your own stories: you can use anecdotes or small stories you read or hear about, as long as they are relevant to your situation. Every book you read and every movie you see contains a story, metaphors, or moments of understanding. Your family has probably told some of the same stories several times. What do they show about the people in them? You may need to travel into your past to create stories for your future. But don't try too hard

to come up with them: forcing yourself to think of a story can lead to some of the worst ideas and weakest stories. *Relax: Put your mind on storytelling and the stories will come to you.*

Some possible sources for your stories include:

The Wandering Map you completed in chapter 2: What stories can you tell from those experiences, both successful and unsuccessful?

The mindsets you analyzed in chapter 3: When did you use them and what was the successful outcome?

Significant events that caused you to take action

Problems or challenges you've faced

Your unique way of successfully handling a situation

A time you felt proud of yourself or someone else

Are you bursting with ideas? Suddenly recalling that time when . . . ? Then get your blank paper or notebook and jot down your ideas as quickly as possible: this is not the time to censor yourself or judge what comes into your head. Just write out brief narratives or ideas that might be worth turning into a story. Here's a sample from Jim, whose Wandering Map was described in chapter 2:

Sample Idea: The time I volunteered at a center for victims of a local flood. The site didn't have enough food for all the evacuees and no one took charge. I found a phone book and called the governor's office. I told them about the problem, and within hours food arrived for the people.

I think I could tell this story as an example of my problem-solving skills, or my ability to take charge, or my initiative even when something isn't necessarily my responsibility.

Now it's your turn to write your story ideas on your paper or in your notebook. You can use the following questions as a starting point if they're helpful:

Idea #___:

What's the basic outline of this story?

Why would I tell this story in an interview?

Is this story relevant and/or what skills and strengths does it highlight?

Write as many ideas as you can to find stories that illustrate different skills or experiences. Remember, you don't need ten stories that all show your leadership skills. One or two stories per key strength will work.

STEP 2: CONSTRUCTING YOUR STORIES

You now have anywhere from one to six ideas that might develop into useful stories. How do you craft them so that they're interesting to the listener and send the intended message? Focus on your audience: the interviewers who are trying to decide if you're the right person for the job. Why would they care about your story? How can you make them care?

Remember Susan's story at the start of the chapter? She opened her story with the fact that she began studying French. The middle of her story emphasized all the ways in which she built up her knowledge of France and the French language. She ended it by linking her experience and knowledge with the position she was seeking. Your stories will also consist of three parts: a beginning, a middle, and an end. You should carefully consider each part, keeping in mind that you want to provide enough detail to make the story interesting without bogging it down with unnecessary detail. We didn't learn about every class Susan took or every experience she had in France. We only learned the key elements of her experience. Include only characters who are integral to the story. Susan mentioned that she lived with a French family, but she didn't go into any detail about the family. She also stayed on her point and did not go off on any tangents.

Here are five questions to ask yourself as you develop your story. We'll use Jim's experience with a major flood as an example.

1. HOW DOES YOUR STORY BEGIN?

Jim: *I was watching the TV coverage of a flood near my home, and they said volunteers were needed at a local shelter.*

2. WHAT ACTION DID YOU TAKE?

Jim: *I went to the shelter's medical area and asked how I could help.*

3. WHAT HAPPENED THEN?

Jim: *Buses of people began arriving and the chaos grew tenfold. The noise level was unbelievable. Then a serious problem quickly arose: we didn't have enough food to last beyond the night. And these people were hungry—some had not had food for a day.*

4. WHAT DID YOU DO?

Jim: *Everyone was panicking about the food situation but no one knew what to do. And it just hit me: the governor was on TV talking about how he would help the flood victims, so I figured why not call his office? I found a phone book and called the number. I had to go through a bunch of people, but ultimately I reached his assistant, who promised to speak to him.*

5. WHAT WAS THE RESOLUTION OR OUTCOME?

Jim: *Within a few hours, the governor had released the food supplies from the local schools for immediate use. What a rush. I was still in a state of shock—this nobody college kid getting on the phone to the governor's office? What was I thinking? And yet it worked, and people were so happy and appreciative.*

Obviously, Jim's story isn't quite ready for prime time, and he will want to rework it so that he can tell it quickly in an interview. He'll need to identify the skills he developed and what he learned in the situation. He'll want to relate it to the job he's seeking: how would that experience or the skills he gained from it serve him in this potential job? But he has the makings of an excellent story that will fit a variety of situations.

So now it's your turn. Try taking one of the ideas you developed earlier and begin to expand it into a story. Your story might not be as dramatic as Jim's, but don't censor yourself. It's your story, and you can make it work for you. You can keep it fairly short—remember, you only have a minute or two to tell it. As you write your story consider:

What are the key points of my story?

How do I want to open my story?

What details should I include?

How do I want to end my story?

What was my reward? Did I learn, did I grow, did I receive something tangible like an award?

What skills or knowledge did I acquire and how will I now use the lessons or skills I learned?

What is the meaning or moral of my story? How is it relevant to the job I'm seeking? Have I made that relevance clear?

Start writing—and have fun! You are an interesting person, and you have lots of stories in you. You'll be surprised at what shows up on the paper if you just give yourself some time to reflect and allow the ideas to flow.

STEP 3: TELLING YOUR STORIES

Have you ever heard someone ruin a good joke just by telling it badly? The best story in the world can be ruined by weak storytelling, so this is an important skill to master. Now that you've crafted your stories, it's time to practice telling them. In general, the first time you tell the story, it will likely be awkward. You may forget parts and have to go backward, or you might include too many details or get sidetracked. Not to worry. Practice will improve all of these problems and you can learn to tell your stories with authenticity and passion. Don't try to memorize your story: it will sound stilted and flat. And if it's too well rehearsed, it may lose the personal touch and sound insincere. Just remember the key events or points you want to make and let the story flow from them.

So how do you practice? Over and over. Try telling your story to a friend and ask for feedback. Tell it when you're driving your car or taking a shower. Tell it once and then let it sit for a few days. Tell it again to the same friend and ask for more feedback. Usually when you tell a story a second time to the same audience, you cut down the unnecessary components without even realizing it.

Try watching some of your favorite comedians: they are often the best storytellers, and their stories tend to be short because they want to keep the audience laughing. Notice the rhythm and inflection in their voices as they tell their stories. Notice how smoothly their stories flow, grabbing your attention as you wait to hear the ending. What words or sections of the story do they emphasize? How do they make the last line (usually the punch line) work? Can you change the tempo or rhythm of your voice to suit your story? (Be careful not to go overboard because that might sound theatrical—like the old *Saturday Night Live* sketch with the character Master Thespian, who preened dramatically and spoke with false accentuation and flair.) Keep your delivery simple but smooth. And always make sure you have identified your reason for telling the story and that the story fits the situation.

CREATING STORIES AND OTHER RESPONSES TO TYPICAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

While there is no definitive list of interview questions, it is likely that you will encounter at least half of these as you go through the interview process:

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. How would your friends describe you?
3. Why are you pursuing this position?
4. Describe the accomplishment of which you are most proud.
5. Tell me about a challenge you faced. How did you overcome it?
6. Why do you want to work for ____?
7. Sell me the middle seat on an airplane.
8. What makes you different from other candidates?
9. Why should we hire you?

10. What strengths or weaknesses do you bring to this position?
11. How did you select your college and your major?
12. What would you like to be doing five or ten years from now?
13. Your background doesn't really fit. Why do you think you can do the job?
14. What would you like me to know that's not on your résumé?
15. What books, magazines, or newspapers do you read regularly?
16. What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?
17. Give me an example of your commitment to a project, activity, or situation.
18. Where do you see our industry going in the next few years?
19. Tell me a time you failed at something.
20. If you saw a coworker stealing something from the company, what would you do?

As you read through this list, are any of the questions particularly hard to answer? Those are the ones you should tackle first. Which of the questions most lend themselves to a story for you? For some people, the question about what friends would say about them might be answered with a short response, such as "My friends always say I'm the creative one because I have so many ideas." But for you, that question might be the start of a story about the time you were challenged by your friends' behavior and how you handled the resulting awkward situation.

Just like developing stories for your cover letter, you can use a SWOT analysis to prepare your stories for an interview. Create the SWOT diagram and, once again, identify the key strengths you hope to bring up during the interview. What are the two to three key elements you want your interviewer to remember about you? If you identify some weaknesses, what stories will you create to explain how you have overcome them or mitigated them in some way? Can you identify the opportunities within the organization that you want to mention during the interview? You will want to express your interest in some of the great programs or opportunities the organization has.

The Classics at Work

ARISTOTLE MEETS WALL STREET AND ENRON

Think your classes on Greek mythology or narrative structure are a little obscure? Think again. Greek dramatic structure is alive and well in fiction and in real life. The movie *Wall Street* follows traditional Greek narrative style as it presents a fictionalized version of money-obsessed 1980s investors, corporate raiders, and stockbrokers like Ivan Boesky, Donald Trump, and T. Boone Pickens. The lead character of *Wall Street*, Bud Fox (played by Charlie Sheen), follows the path of the flawed hero of Aristotle's tragedies. He falls at the end but not without learning valuable lessons and changing his life forever.

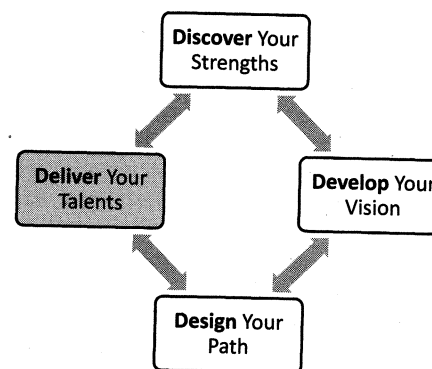
Fast-forward twenty years to a real-life Greek tragedy played out in the news by executives of the Enron Corporation in Houston, Texas. The documentary *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* proves that in the twenty-first century CE, just as in the fourth century BCE, human beings fall prey to the same errors or mistakes, bringing about their own downfall. The next time you see a scandal in the news or watch an individual's fall due to misjudgment, error, or character flaw, remember Aristotle. His teachings can help keep you, and your employer, from making a similar mistake. Storytelling is invaluable on many levels in the workplace.

FINAL QUESTION

What could you do in the next twenty-four hours to be better prepared for your interviews than your competition?

PART FOUR

DELIVER YOUR TALENTS



In this section you will “deliver your talents”—you will take everything you have learned to the marketplace.

By the time you complete this section you will have:

- ➔ Developed your go-to-market strategy.
- ➔ Created an action plan to move forward and get connected to potential employers.
- ➔ Formed an understanding of who you need to be in the future to keep up with the constantly changing job market. (Hint: You need to be a Wise Wanderer!)