

# STORYTELLING GUIDE: RESOURCE 3

## Stories About Stories: A Message from the Author



For 13-year old Mistura Bankole and 16-year old Amber Crenna-Armstrong, argumentation and advocacy always seemed to come naturally.

While working with both students, I was constantly struck by their passion for social issues and how much they cared about helping people. Each of them was driven by a personal desire to make the world a better place. As a middle school student originally from Africa, Mistura was keenly aware of the assumptions people would make about her background and frustrated with misperceptions and stereotypes. High school student Amber was already involved in climate change action on her school campus, but often felt limited in her ability to inspire others to actually make a difference. Passion was never an issue, but even their well-organized, outlined arguments somehow missed the mark in terms of communicating the depth of their connection to their topics.

As their public speaking teacher, I knew these students would be able to organize their ideas and structure their arguments effectively. I knew that once they had everything put together, they would endlessly practice because the issues mattered so much to them. Instead, I needed to expand their view of what public speaking had to entail. Traditional presentation outlines were good for some students, but I needed to free Mistura and Amber from the constraints of standard argumentation. They needed to create speech content that portrayed their personal experiences, emotions, motivations, and inner thoughts. They needed to tell stories.

While helping them rethink their speeches, I asked them questions about why they came up with each argument and

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what experiences made them feel like certain arguments were important. They immediately came to life, speaking a mile a minute about examples from their lives that highlighted the need to advocate for awareness and understanding about cultural stereotypes and climate change. As their tales continued, I spurred them on with questions about additional details like where they were, who they were with, what they heard, and how they felt. By the end, I was stunned by the beautiful, intricate, and vulnerable stories they had shared and surprised that none of these details had made it into the original speeches.

When reflecting on why there were no stories in their original speeches, both students expressed their belief that their stories would not be considered credible or important. As Mistura pointed out, “Isn’t it all supposed to be about your evidence and about how many studies you mention?” For Amber, stories came less naturally than arguments and while she recognized how stories might be useful, she needed to practice hard to express vulnerability in a conversational way. The free-flowing arc of a story was different from the structured outlines they used in school, and I had to regularly reassure them at first that it would turn out “right” in the end. We focused on articulating emotions, describing events in great detail, and delivering their stories with a pace and tone that best fit their words. Over time, I observed them relaxing into the process, trusting that their stories were as valuable as any evidence they could cite.

Their final stories resulted in speeches that not only maintained their original arguments but also effectively expressed key parts of their identities. In Amber’s case, she ended up moving away from talking about climate change and instead chose to tell her story about how changing multiple schools influenced her desire to advocate for others. While she maintained that her climate action recommendations would “make it into different speeches” she

felt proud that she could share her origin story and connect to her audience around what drove her to be interested in advocacy in the first place. The experience became more meaningful to her, and unsurprisingly became much more powerful and inspirational when she delivered it for a parent engagement night. For Mistura, talking about African philosophies of child discipline continued to be her focus, but her oral delivery significantly improved when she could start her speech by telling her personal story with her raw, unbridled passion. Stories opened the door for both students to be themselves and communicate more effectively.

My experiences with both students reminded me that students need to be reminded that telling their own personal stories can often be the most powerful way to connect to an audience. Removing the personal from a speech leaves it hollow and makes it harder to speak passionately. Stories communicate motivation, which can give an audience a window into the more human elements of an issue and inspire them to act. Once I gave them the option to tell stories and asked questions to encourage their ideas, I had to do little else except continue to encourage their excitement and ideas. Young people shouldn’t need adult permission to tell their stories, but sometimes, they do.

