In presentations, tell the story behind the numbers

A few hours after you hear a presentation, ask yourself, “What do I remember?” If you recall anything, it will probably be a story.

No matter how well a speaker serves up data, few listeners will remember it. Yet that doesn’t stop presenters from loading up on facts, charts and statistics.

Even if you design snazzy slides to convey information, most people won’t retain it. Succinct stories, by contrast, lodge themselves in listeners’ brains.

If your job is to discuss financial results or other numbers, tell a story behind the numbers. Provide context. To highlight rising sales, for instance, describe how one shopper upped his order thanks to your newly expanded product line.

The best stories capture a specific time and place. Help your audience envision someone doing something: wandering the supermarket aisle, tipping the server at a fancy restaurant, completing an insurance claim form.

Once you set the scene, draw a conclusion tied to the facts you want to communicate. When discussing a 15% increase in personnel costs, describe how a temporary employee needed to work 10-hour shifts during a seasonal surge in activity.

In addition to stories, look for opportunities to cite examples and case studies. Listeners are more likely to remember your main point if you support it well.

Some people prefer visual cues. To engage them, show photos, cartoons or even draw a picture. Make it easy for the audience to associate your visual with a related fact or data point.

— Adapted from Tj Walker’s Secret to Foolproof Presentations, Tj Walker with Jess Todtfeld, Greenleaf Book Group Press.