



# GOOD ILLUSTRATIONS

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Using stories that enlighten your message

The children and adults who spend time at your camp may not remember the message you and your staff worked so hard to craft and communicate, but they won't forget what gave that message meaning.



Photo courtesy of Camp Lebanon

Illustrations bring meaning to your programming. Stories help campers make sense of the content you're dishing out. A good story sticks around long after you've lost the sermon notes and given up on remembering what that one youth pastor said that one time at camp. ►





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A good illustration may or  
may not be entertaining, but  
it's always enlightening.



“People don’t remember what I said,” said Duffy Robbins, a leading voice in youth and family ministry who’s delivered his share of forgotten sermons. “They just remember the story.”

So, Robbins, a professor of youth ministry at Grove City College in Grove City, Pennsylvania, takes special care to cull, collect and catalog the right kind of examples, instances and personal experiences to share with his audience. It involves more than googling “good illustrations” and printing off a few possibilities.

Illustrations are a tool, so it’s wise to acknowledge and address two challenges before you wield them.

### **Uncovering Useful Illustrations**

The first hurdle is finding good illustrations, which Robbins clears by looking where most people don’t and filing away anecdotes and analogies as he finds them, not necessarily as he needs them. He hits up sources most people wouldn’t consider. “Obscure” is how he describes the literary well from which he draws his illustrations.

Are you familiar with a study of invertebrates by a New Zealand zoologist? Not likely. How about the history of dueling? Probably not, but Robbins read it and found it helpful in driving home a point with his listeners.

There are plenty of potential illustrations out there if you’re willing to dig into more than what’s trending on social media. That’s not to say you should immediately dismiss popular magazines, journals and newspapers, but audiences may be familiar with their content. Trade and scholarly periodicals, on the other hand, promise plenty of unfamiliar, fascinating fodder for jaded ears.

“I try to find and use illustrations they wouldn’t have heard about,” Robbins said. “You can force water down people’s throats, but ... if you want them to drink, you need to make it something they like the taste of.”

His talks are still tasty after decades of public speaking because he follows a few simple rules.

“Very rarely do I use the same illustration,” he said.

That requires clear and detailed record-keeping. Robbins knows what stories he’s shared when and where. Nothing will tune out a room of unimpressed teens like asking if they’ve already heard the story you’re about to repeat.

Robbins doesn’t assume his listeners are interested in what he has to say when he takes the stage. That’s where good illustrations come in.

“I walk in thinking, ‘I’ve got to earn their attention, or this is going to go badly,’” Robbins said. “That requires me to vet every illustration, every line, every application.” ►



“Good illustrations invite audiences to look through the window; bad illustrations entice the audience to look at the window.” —Duffy Robbins



## Using Illustrations Effectively

The second challenge with illustrations, according to Robbins, is figuring out how “to maximize their usefulness.” In other words, once you’ve found something that will work for your audience, the key is not to waste it.

“You can probably get away with a not-awesome illustration if you’re good at stewarding the way you deliver it or show it,” Robbins said.

It doesn’t work in reverse. You can’t get away with an awesome illustration that’s delivered poorly. In this case, a great illustration isn’t enough. You may have thought a story rocked the first time you heard it, Robbins said, but if you don’t spin it well, it will sink like a rock.

That’s why some people tell a joke and get a laugh and other people sing the National Anthem and get laughed at.

But even if the song sounds off-key, at least people know why they’re hearing about red-glaring rockets.

“Make sure you have a purpose for your illustration,” Robbins writes in *Speaking to Teenagers*, a handy manual he co-authored with fellow youth ministry veteran Doug Fields.

Good illustrations — the kinds that sink deep and settle in the soul — mean something. If an illustration doesn’t bring meaning to your message, tuck it away for another talk.

“Don’t use an illustration without knowing how you will connect it with your content,” Robbins explains in his book.

Once you’ve established a good connection, check the expiration date on any cultural references. Good illustrations don’t have a shelf life, but you also don’t want to sound like you’re hawking items off *Antiques Roadshow* as you’re trying to explain original sin.

“If you’re still using your Beatles stories, that’s an anachronism,” Robbins said. “People aren’t going to know what you’re talking about. You have to use a band that people know about.”

The same goes for movies, athletes and other public figures.

Robbins recalls wanting to use an illustration during a speaking engagement in Ireland but knowing it wouldn’t work unless his audience knew who he was talking about. So he asked around until he identified a public figure that would resonate with young Irish listeners.

“The kids totally got it,” he said.

When it comes to helping people tell the right story to the right audience, Robbins likes to point out a few storytellers in the Bible who nailed it. Nathan the prophet and Paul the preacher connected with their listeners because they understood their audience.

Nathan rebuked King David’s adultery and murder in 2 Samuel 12 by telling the former shepherd boy a story about sheep. Paul broached the philosophers’ religious idolatry in Acts 17 by bringing up their monument to an unknown god. A little lamb and an altar segued into the need for repentance and reconciliation.

Robbins says so-called great communicators may know how to share a compelling story, but they risk doing “nothing more than tell a series of unrelated stories that connect to nothing.” And when those stories tend toward the dramatic, storytellers run the risk of sidetracking their audience. Cue the tale of the toddler run over by a train or the firefighter burned while battling a blaze.

“The problem with illustrations that contain graphic details or highly emotional endings is that the listener will remember the illustration more than its intended point,” Duffy writes.

Illustrations that lean on personal experience pose a risk as well. There’s a fine line between sharing and bragging, and you could come across sounding like somebody’s Facebook feed if you’re not careful.

A good illustration may or not be entertaining, but it’s always enlightening. That’s the meaning of illustrate, after all. The word originates from the Latin *illustrare*, which means to light up or enlighten. Authors partner with an illustrator so readers can see what they’re saying.

The same goes for your programming. What you teach in large and small group settings needs word pictures so your campers see what you’re saying about who they are and who God is.

“The illustration is a window through which you’re inviting your audience to see God’s truth,” Robbins writes. “Good illustrations invite audiences to look through the window; bad illustrations entice the audience to look at the window. At the end of the day, the point of the illustration is for the audience to see God’s truth.”

So look for and lean into illustrations that open the window to the gospel. If you’re still feeling stuck and short on inspiration, Robbins suggests taking a cue from the greatest storyteller of all time.

Jesus’ go-to, after all, were stories and narratives. “I think it worked pretty well,” Robbins said. “I’m content to hang the effort on that.” ■



Danie Koskan is always on the run, whether it’s squeezing in a few miles between camp and family life or sprinting to keep up with her ski- and ball-loving boys. She and her husband, Tracy, delight in raising their three little men-in-the-making and shepherding the hearts of their staff at Camp Judson in the Black Hills of South Dakota. You can reach Danie at [runningphreak@yahoo.com](mailto:runningphreak@yahoo.com).