

THIRD
EDITION

IN THE LINE OF FIRE

*How to Handle Tough Questions—
When It Counts*

JERRY WEISSMAN

Author of *Presenting to Win*



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Praise for *In the Line of Fire*

“In my role at Cisco Systems, I was confronted with challenging questions from customers, government leaders, press, and analysts on a daily basis. The techniques used in this book, *In the Line of Fire*, are spot on; providing straightforward ways to be on the offense in all communications situations.”

—**Sue Bostrom**

Former SVP Internet Business Solutions Group and
Worldwide Government Affairs, Cisco Systems

“In an era where businesspeople and politicians unfortunately have proven their inability to be honest with bad news, I believe this book should be prescribed reading in every business school and for every management training session. In fact, I hope it is read by a far wider audience than that. It’s just what our society needs right now.”

—**Po Bronson**

Author of the bestselling *What Should I Do With My Life?*⁹

“Jerry Weissman tells the tales of the makings of presidents and kings, the dramas of the dramatic moments of our time, and in each episode he uncovers the simple truths behind what makes great leaders like Ronald Reagan and Colin Powell loved and trusted. Great truths made simple and compelling for any leader to use.”

—**Scott Cook**

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“Jerry’s book is a must-read for any presenter facing tough and challenging questions from their audience. This book provides the fundamental foundation on how to prepare, be agile, and take charge no matter how difficult the question.”

—**Leslie Culbertson**

Former Corporate Vice President Director of Corporate
Finance, Intel Corporation

“During one of the most important periods of my career, Jerry used the concepts in *In the Line of Fire* to prepare me and my team for the EarthLink IPO road show. He helped us field tough questions from the toughest possible audience—potential investors—but the same skills are necessary for every audience.

—**Sky Dayton**

Founder EarthLink and Boingo Wireless, CEO SK-EarthLink

“Jerry Weissman helped prepare my management team for our recent IPO. I sat in on some of the sessions and was most impressed with Jerry’s innovative ways of teaching and optimizing effective executive communication methods. This training, encapsulated well in his new book, *In the Line of Fire*, paid off handsomely during our numerous road show presentations.”

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“Even the greatest start encounters tough questions. Read Jerry’s book before you need it, or you’ll be in deep sushi.”

—**Guy Kawasaki**

Author of the bestselling *Enchantment, Reality Check, and The Art of the Start*

“Have you ever been faced with a tough question? Jerry Weissman shows how it’s not necessarily what the answer is. It’s how you answer that will allow you to prevail and win!”

—**Tim Koogle**

Founding CEO, Yahoo!

“Jerry’s technique is both masterful and universal because it finds common ground between audience and speaker, hard questions and direct answers, all with a very simple principle: truth.”

—**Pierre Omidyar**

Founder of eBay and Omidyar Network

“I’ve been asking tough questions for half a century and listening to variously brilliant, boring, evasive or illuminating answers. Jerry Weissman’s book will help anyone...anyone...answer even the toughest questions.”

—**Mike Wallace**

Former Senior Correspondent, *60 Minutes*, *CBS News*

IN THE LINE OF FIRE

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IN THE LINE OF FIRE

How to Handle Tough Questions—When It Counts

Third Edition

Jerry Weissman



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For Lucie—at last.

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Case Studies

In order of appearance:

IPO Roadshow Study	Murder Boards	John Stuart Mill
Kennedy–Nixon Debate	Garry Wills	Dennis Muilenburg
Tony Hayward	William Safire	Christian Sewing
Timothy Leary	Rachel Brand	Roger Lynch
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Krishnan Guru-Murthy	1992 Presidential Debate	Eric Yuan
Quentin Tarantino	Epictetus	Colin Powell
Helene Poirier	Bill Clinton	Ronald Hall
NetRoadshow	Ross Perot	Andy Kessler
David Bellet	David Rubenstein	Paul Simon
Leslie Pfrang	David Brooks	Robert McNamara
Mark Twain	General Sun Tzu	Danielle Kurtzleben
Mark McGwire	Dara Khosrowshahi	<i>Through the Looking Glass</i>
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Alan Schroeder	Giulio Ranzo	<i>Code of Hammurabi</i>
Don Hewitt	Evan Spiegel	Peter Rawlinson
Robert Bork	Chuck Robbins	

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Neville Ray	Marc Benioff	Ronald Reagan
Ariana Grande	Melanie Perkins	William Shakespeare
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Steve Jobs	Greg McDowell	Sundar Pichai
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Baptism Under Fire

*I love the urgency of what we do. I like the battles that take place,
the jousting!¹*

Mike Wallace

■ The Grand Inquisitor ■

In the late 1960s, I returned to my native New York from Stanford University with my newly minted master's degree in speech, drama, and television firmly clutched under my arm, ready to take on the world of media and communications. I was lucky enough to land a job at CBS Television as an associate producer at WCBS-TV, the local flagship station. But my job had less to do with Aristotle, William Shakespeare, and Federico Fellini, all of whom I had studied and fully intended to emulate, and more to do with research and logistics. I spent long hours into the night, every night, reading stacks and stacks of reports, screening hours and hours of archival and new film and videotape, and long days interviewing dozens of people, scouting locations, and scheduling camera crews, equipment, facilities, and reporters.

Mike Wallace arrived at CBS around the same time as I did, although he was on a very different track. He had become a local celebrity for his relentless interrogations of the guests on *Night Beat*, a late-night interview show on New York's WABD Channel 5. CBS had yet to launch *60 Minutes*, but it was clear that the network programming powers that be intended to leverage Mike's success with the *Night Beat* format. They made him a full-fledged correspondent in the elite CBS News unit, where he continued his role as The Grand Inquisitor.

We both worked in the cavernous CBS Broadcast Center on West 57th Street in Manhattan, where Mike's office was on the sleek main floor, while mine was tucked away in the back of the unglamorous third floor, overlooking the back wall of an automobile dealership. The only time I engaged with the new star was

FOREWORD

when the network deigned to lend him to our unit from time to time for a day of reporting on the documentary series *Eye on New York*.

My job was to provide the “talent,” as the correspondents were called, with background information on the story we were shooting and questions for the interviews I had arranged. Whenever Mike hustled onto the location, the belts and buckles of his requisite correspondent’s Burberry trench coat flapping in the air, the first thing he did was to ask for my list of questions. More often than not, he would scan the list, look up, and glare at me to say, “Jerry, these questions are baby puke!”²

■ Tough Questions ■

CBS soon launched *60 Minutes*, and Mike, always sharpening his inquisitorial ways, burnished his inquisitorial reputation for the next 37 years. The network ultimately produced a laudatory retrospective about “the legendary CBS News correspondent, whose no-holds-barred interview style...helped make ‘60 Minutes’ must-see TV.” They titled the documentary *Mike Wallace Is Here*, which they described as the “Four words that struck terror into the hearts of shady businessmen and corrupt politicians.”³ Mike also struck terror into the hearts of people who were neither shady nor corrupt: celebrities, entertainers, heads of state, fellow journalists—and me.

Fortunately, I survived Mike’s slings and arrows by learning how to turn up the heat on my lists of questions. Along the way, I also learned how to handle such questions. Eventually, I came over to the other side and started my own company to help businesspeople—like you—handle the slings and arrows that audiences often let fly.

I founded Power Presentations, Ltd. in 1988. To sharpen our mission to help people create persuasive presentations that produce results, in 2018 we renamed the company Suasive, Inc. Now that I have battle-tested these powerful techniques for more than three decades, I offer them to you so that you can survive and even thrive in the line of fire.

Universal Challenges, Universal Solutions

*What's past is prologue.*¹

The Tempest

William Shakespeare

This book, together with *Presenting to Win: The Art of Telling Your Story* and *Designing Your Slides* and *The Power Presenter: Techniques, Style, and Strategy to Be Suasive*, the other two books in this trilogy, culminates a complete foundational methodology to master all the essential skills in any presentation. Readers of the first two books will be familiar with the concept of Audience Advocacy[®], the overarching principle that presenters must advocate their audience's interests as much as—if not more than—their own, a viewpoint that applies to all the essential elements of any presentation:

- Rather than tell a story that is a laundry list recitation of the presenter's attributes, every step of the clear, crisp narrative must be meaningful to the audience.
- Rather than design slides that serve as standalone handouts, every image must serve *only* to illustrate the story for the audience.
- Rather than succumb to the universal fear of public speaking, the presenter must demonstrate confidence to the audience when delivering the story.
- And so here, with the focus on handling tough questions, rather than slip, slide, and spin as politicians do, every presenter must answer every question the audience asks—to their satisfaction.

In the first two editions of this book, I presented the core techniques of the Suasive methodology to handle tough questions and illustrated them with examples drawn from the presidential debates of the 2000/2004 and 2008/2012 election campaigns, respectively. For this edition, I've replaced the political examples

INTRODUCTION TO THE THIRD EDITION

with an entirely new set of case studies drawn from the business world—in particular, from the thousands of IPO roadshows and pitches for private financing that I have coached. You'll also find many new case studies of CEOs in other types of Q&A sessions—industry conferences, media interviews, and quarterly earnings calls—for the simple reason that these events, being public, were readily available for my research. However, I can assure you that every businessperson, from the most senior vice president to the newest intern, encounters the same dynamics and needs the same techniques to respond to tough questions as does every CEO. For all of them and for you, the fundamental concepts of the Suasive techniques, with some streamlining and new content, are essentially the same as in the previous editions—attesting to their enduring applicability.

Three political case studies remain: one of The Great Communicator, Ronald Reagan; one from the historic debate between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon; and another from a pivotal moment in a 1992 presidential debate. The latter two resulted in dramatic turnarounds, vividly demonstrating that how candidates handle tough questions in the highest of high-stakes exchanges has a direct impact on their immediate and ultimate fortunes.

Although the political arena has its own rules and peculiarities that set it apart from most other arenas of life, how *all* people handle *every* challenging exchange has an impact on their immediate and ultimate fortunes—whether in business, science, academia, government, philanthropy, job interviews, or even interpersonal relationships. My intent in casting this wide net is to help you understand the universal dynamics of every human exchange.

I've delivered these universal solutions in the boardrooms of some of America's most prestigious corporations and in the conference rooms of the hottest startups around the globe—Silicon Valley, New York, London, Paris, Milan, Bangalore, Jerusalem, Beijing, and Singapore—to the C-level teams of the more than 600 companies I've coached for their IPO roadshows, among them Cisco, Intuit, Dolby Labs, eBay, Netflix, Yahoo!, RingCentral, Twilio, Trulia, Talend, Mobileye, Zuora, Freshworks, Sonos, and Lyft. I've also provided the same techniques to thousands of presenters at all levels of management who have had to field tough questions when they pitched to raise private capital, launch products, raise sales quotas, publicize a press release, form a partnership, requisition head count, or solicit approval of a budget.

The techniques are now yours to learn and deploy so that you can Be Suasive, Be Heard.

■ Book Conventions ■



Throughout the book, you'll see this icon, which indicates video and audio files referenced as examples. We provide the original sources for all videos and audio for you to access on your own. All the video references are listed in Appendix A. To view select video and audio files, please visit our website, at suasive.com/videos.

Tough Questions

Case Studies: Timothy Leary • Benjamin Franklin • Socrates • Mike Wallace, CBS • Richard Scrushy, HealthSouth • Karen Tumulty, *Time* Magazine • John Boehner • Quentin Tarantino • Helene Poirier, Cisco • NetRoadshow • David Bellet, Crown Advisors • Leslie Pfrang, Class V Group • Mark Twain

Question authority.

■ Why People Ask Tough Questions ■

During the tumultuous counterculture movement of the 1960s, Harvard psychologist Timothy Leary incited his followers to “turn on, tune in, drop out” and, citing the directive of the epigraph, to question the authority of existing social and political institutions.¹ Ben Franklin, as one of the founding fathers of the United States, is said to have urged its citizens, newly independent from British rule, to question authority.² And the famed Greek philosopher Socrates developed the use of argumentative question-and-answer dialogue to stimulate critical thinking—a framework we now know as the Socratic method.³

What these three vastly different men with vastly different points of view have in common is their advocacy of making provocative challenges to the status quo.

IN THE LINE OF FIRE

Mike Wallace and his legions of colleagues in journalism and the news media are descendants of that same thinking. But all of them take their challenges to a higher level of intensity. They are trained to operate by the first principle of the press: “if it bleeds, it leads.” Journalists are also keenly aware that conflict is drama, that drama sells ads on television and popcorn in movie theaters, and so journalists invariably unleash “gotcha” questions.



(Video 3) HealthSouth CEO Richard Scrushy
<https://youtu.be/sTLUyFo8iQ4?t=118>

As a baseline, let’s examine one of Mike’s most prosecutorial interrogations: an interview he had with Richard Scrushy, the founder and CEO of HealthSouth, a publicly traded health care company (now known as Encompass Health). Scrushy had been accused by no fewer than five of his former CFOs of fraud. Mike, who was “astonished when [Scrushy] agreed to answer our questions,”⁴ began the interview by going right for the jugular:

You are supposed to be a crook. You know that. The SEC in effect says you are. Your former financial officers, chief financial officers, say you are—that Richard Scrushy inflated earnings and betrayed his stockholders, betrayed his employees.

Blinking rapidly, Scrushy replied:

There’s no evidence of any of that and—uh—many of the people have said it’s not true.

Glancing down at his notes, Mike read the evidence to him:

Tad McVeigh, CFO, until early this year, 2003, pled guilty, told the judge, “Richard Scrushy was aware that the financial statement contained numbers that were incorrect.”

His blinking now accompanied by facial tics, Scrushy protested:

This is—again—it’s not true. I haven’t—I haven’t...

With a grand wave of his arms and a sardonic smile, Mike said:

All these guys are liars, and you are a knight in shining armor.

TOUGH QUESTIONS

Scrushy pleaded:

Mike, there's 50,000 people—there are five—you have five people that have made these claims out of 50,000 people. Let me make a comment...

Mike narrowed his eyes and interrupted:

But you're in charge. Come on. You are...

Scrushy frowned and leaned forward:

That doesn't mean—okay—No, I did not. I did not! No. This—you're not right!

Referencing his notes again, Mike provided more evidence:

McVeigh told the judge you tried to justify it by saying, quote, "All companies play games with accounting."

Shaking his head, Scrushy replied:

I never said that to him, and he knows that.

Incredulous, Mike asked:

Why would these chief financial officers—what you're saying is they committed the fraud? For what reason?

Scrushy raised his eyebrows and answered:

I didn't—I certainly didn't commit fraud. People know me they know I wouldn't instruct somebody to do that.

Mike drove his point home:

What would be the motive of your CFOs to commit a fraud?

Blinking still, Scrushy responded:

I really don't want to get into the detail, but every one of them has a motive.⁵

IN THE LINE OF FIRE

Each of the flaming missiles that Mike fired at Scrushy was targeted at the same issue—his alleged fraud—and, as each of them landed, Scrushy twitched defensively in response.

Karen Tumulty matches Mike Wallace missile for missile. Now a political columnist for *The Washington Post*, Tumulty spent 16 years as the congressional correspondent for *Time* magazine. During her tenure, she badgered the veteran Representative and Speaker of the House John Boehner so often that he complained about her in his memoir:

Some reporters will try to joke around and act friendly at first to try and disarm you before they throw you the real questions. Not [Tumulty]... She zeroed in on me like a hawk spotting a limping jackrabbit from a mile away.⁶

Most reporters aspire to emulate Mike Wallace and Karen Tumulty, but many often fall far short of the mark.



(Video 4) *Quentin Tarantino Interview: I'm Shutting Your Butt Down!*

<https://youtu.be/GrsJDy8VjZk?t=269>

One who did was Krishnan Guru-Murthy, a journalist at Britain's Channel 4. Trying his best to emulate Mike Wallace, he asked Hollywood director Quentin Tarantino about his film *Django Unchained*:

Why are you so sure there's no link between enjoying movie violence and enjoying real violence?

Tarantino bristled:

Do not ask me a question like that. I'm not biting. I refuse your question.

Guru-Murthy persisted:

Why?

Tarantino told him why:

Because I'm here to sell my movie. This is a commercial for the movie, make no mistake.

TOUGH QUESTIONS

Guru-Murthy challenged him:

Oh, so you don't want to talk about anything serious.

Tarantino stood his ground:

I don't want to talk about what you want to talk about. I don't want to talk about the implications of violence. The reason I don't want to talk about it is because I've said everything I have to say about it.

Guru-Murthy tried again:

No, but you haven't fleshed it out.

Tarantino would not budge:

It's not my job to flesh it out.

Trying to be gracious, Guru-Murthy smiled wanly and said:

No, it's my job to try and ask you to.

Snickering, Tarantino barked:

And I'm shutting your butt down!

Undeterred, Guru-Murthy tried another angle:

But you have a responsibility as a filmmaker surely to explain a little bit about what you're doing.

Tarantino stood firm:

I have explained this many times in the last twenty years. I just refuse to repeat myself over and over again because you want me to. For you and your show and your ratings!

Darting his eyes away, Guru-Murthy laughed nervously:

Oh—well, no—it's not about—ah—ratings.

Leaning forward, Tarantino administered the knockout punch:

No, no, it is! It's about what you want me to say for you, for your show, this show right here, right now!⁷

Given his daily practice of barking orders at actors, stagehands, and studio technicians on movie sets, Quentin Tarantino was not about to succumb to any reporter's tough questions. But few people, businesspeople in particular, come equipped with Tarantino's bravura.

■ Why Businesspeople Ask Tough Questions ■

Businesspeople, who are not concerned about show ratings, ask tough questions for entirely different reasons. Some are disciples of Socrates. They question everything to stimulate critical thinking. During a Suasive program I delivered to a group of Cisco managers in their Paris offices, one of them, Helene Poirier, repeatedly challenged my methodology. At the end of the session, Helene came up to me and explained that she wasn't trying to be difficult, she was just doing what she had learned to do in the French education system:

*We were taught to think with the "Cartesian" method, from the principles of René Descartes, the seventeenth-century philosopher. Whenever ideas are discussed, we look for all possible angles of view: What supports it, and who, how? What goes against it, and who, how? What conclusion, opinion, decision can we rationally draw?*⁸

Other than the Socratic and Cartesian methods (the latter reads like a mission statement for reporters), the primary reason businesspeople ask challenging questions has to do with the inherent nature of presentations. Whenever you present, your goal is to get your target audience to change: to get prospective customers to buy a product or service they have never owned or to get existing customers to buy a new version of a product or service they already own.

In that highest stakes of all presentations, the IPO roadshow, the goal is to get investor audiences to change: to buy a stock that never existed. As a matter of fact, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission requires that offering companies specifically state their intentions in print. They must publish a prospectus containing a boilerplate sentence that reads, "There has been no prior public market for the company's common stock." In other words, "Invest at your own risk."

Caveat emptor.

Change is the goal in almost every exchange in business, and most human beings are resistant to change, so they kick the tires.

You are the tires.

■ Blood Sport ■

A major component of an IPO is that the company's senior management team sets out on the road, traveling around the country, and sometimes across oceans, for two weeks, pitching to investors in anywhere from 50 to 80 meetings. For many years, each meeting consisted of a live presentation followed by Q&A. With the advent of NetRoadshow, a website where anyone with a browser can view a streaming video of a company's IPO roadshow, all that changed (see Figure 2.1).

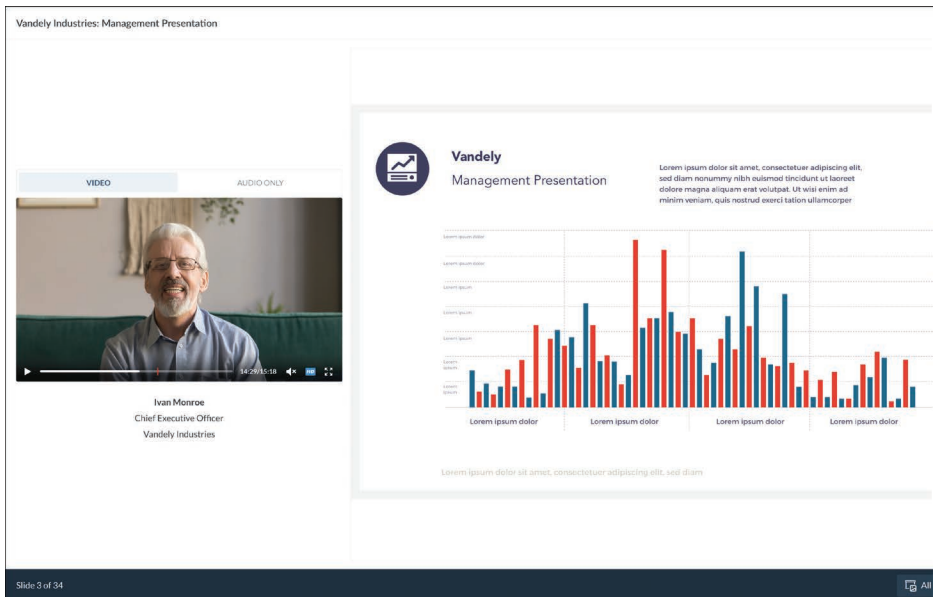


Figure 2.1 *NetRoadshow*

Now, because most of the investors will have seen the streaming version, the meetings are essentially Q&A. But the grueling two-week tour, with just as many meetings, is still obligatory because no investor will commit to buying a tranche of tens of millions of dollars based on a canned presentation alone. Ideally, investors want to meet the executives in person, press the flesh, and look them in the eye. The COVID-19 pandemic made it necessary for those meetings to take place virtually. In time, many investors adapted to the physical separation but, whether live or virtual, investors want to engage with a company's management team, discuss their business, and ask them questions directly.

IN THE LINE OF FIRE

One of those investors is David Bellet, the founder and former chair of Crown Advisors International, one of Wall Street's most successful long-term investment firms. David, who was an early backer of many successful companies, among them Hewlett-Packard, Sony, and Intel, explained his intentions:

When I ask questions, I don't really have to have the full answer because I can't know the subject as well as the presenter. What I look for is whether the presenter has thought about the question; been candid, thorough, and direct; and how the presenter handles himself or herself under stress—if that person has the passion of “fire in the belly” and can stand tall in the line of fire.⁹

No one challenges presenters seeking to raise public financing more than Leslie Pfrang. Although Leslie and her partner Lise Buyer are now the principals of Class V Group, a boutique shop that advises companies on how to navigate the complex process of going public, Leslie spent decades as a managing director at both Deutsche Bank and Credit Suisse, leading the positioning and placement of IPOs to public investors. As she puts it:

Public investors, unlike private VCs, cover and own several hundred companies. Steady as she goes is what they are looking for. They want to tuck it away, peek at the transcript once a quarter, and see that the management is performing to plan. That is it. No surprises and no drama. So, investors test new management teams with difficult questions, sometimes asking the same thing in different ways over and over, like a police interrogation, complete with the cigarette smoke. They are as interested in the way management responds under this pressure as they are the content of the answer. The ability of management to stay on message, not flail, and avoid appearing defensive is critical. If they can't take the heat, the public investor will expect the stock will be volatile and will wait. It is better to vigilantly practice tough Q&A as a blood sport and feel the pain in private than on the public stage.¹⁰

The tough questions that David and Leslie ask as investors considering a stock purchase are no different from those of prospective customers considering a new product, prospective partners considering a strategic relationship, pressured managers considering a request for additional resources, concerned citizens considering a dark horse candidate, or even affluent contributors considering a donation to a not-for-profit cause. The challenge in all these situations is how to handle their questions.

TOUGH QUESTIONS

One important caveat: All the Q&A techniques you are about to learn require that you deploy them with absolute truth. The operative word in the paragraph above, as well as on the cover of this book, is *handle*, meaning managing tough questions. While providing an answer is an integral part of that “handling,” every answer you give to every question must be honest, truthful, and straightforward. If not, all the other techniques will be for naught.

As the great American humorist Mark Twain is said to have put it:

*If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything.*¹¹

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