

WHEN DO LISTENERS LEAN IN?

How Storytellers Create Moments of Peak Engagement

Use this worksheet to identify, design, and strengthen the moments in your stories that make audiences lean in—emotionally, mentally, and physically.

What Does “Lean In” Mean?

A *lean-in moment* is when listeners stop being passive and become fully present. They’re not just hearing the story — they’re **inside it**. Great storytellers don’t leave these moments to chance. They **intentionally create them**.

THE 11 LEAN-IN TRIGGERS Use this checklist to audit your story or plan future ones.

1. Tension or Uncertainty

- A question is introduced but not answered right away
- Stakes are raised (something meaningful could be lost)
- Conflict appears, even subtly

Story check:

Where does my audience *need* to know what happens next?

2. Vulnerability

- I reveal doubt, fear, failure, or discomfort
- My emotion shows through voice, pacing, or body language
- I share what most people hide

Story check:

What truth feels slightly uncomfortable to say—but deeply human?

3. When the Story Becomes About *Them*

- I name a universal experience
- The listener can easily insert themselves into the moment

Story check:

Where will my audience think, “*That’s me*”?

4. The Turn (Shift or Pivot)

- A realization, surprise, or reversal changes the meaning
- The story moves from one truth to another

Story check:

Where does the story *change direction*?

5. Sensory Detail & Imagery

- I show the scene instead of summarizing it
- I use sight, sound, smell, touch, or physical sensation

Story check:

What can the audience *see or feel* in this moment?

6. Strategic Silence

- I pause after an emotional or meaningful line
- I allow space instead of rushing forward

Story check:

Where should I stop talking—and let the moment land?

7. Humor That Releases Tension

- Humor follows a serious or emotional beat
- Laughter creates connection, not distraction

Story check:

Where can levity open the audience up for what comes next?

8. Radical Honesty (“Too Honest” Moments)

- I say the thing that feels raw, not polished
- The moment is real—not performative

Story check:

What truth would surprise people because of its honesty?

9. Presence Over Performance

- I allow the story to feel alive in the moment
- Eye contact, stillness, or improvisation signals authenticity

Story check:

Where can I let go of perfection and be fully present?

10. Intentional Unanswered Questions

- I pose a question without resolving it
- The audience is invited to reflect, not be told

Story check:

What question do I want them thinking about long after this story ends?

11. The “Golden Line”

- A single sentence captures the heart of the story
- It’s clear, honest, and emotionally true

Story check:

If they remember only one line, what should it be?

STORYTELLER REFLECTION

The strongest lean-in moment in my story is:

The lean-in trigger(s) I’m using intentionally:

- Tension Vulnerability Turn Sensory Detail Silence Humor Honesty Presence Question Golden Line

One adjustment I will make to deepen engagement:

Final Thought

Audiences don’t lean in because a story is perfect.
They lean in because **it’s human, intentional, and real.**