



Nonprofit Storytelling Mini-Guide

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ABOUT NETWORK FOR GOOD

Since 2001 Network for Good has been instrumental at helping tens of thousands of nonprofits raise more funds by engaging supporters and donors in a more meaningful and impactful way. Refreshingly easy to use Donor Management Software, Fundraising Pages, and Personal Fundraising Coaches provide nonprofits with a complete fundraising solution, reducing their need for disparate systems, saving them time and enabling them to raise more funds to support their mission.



Stories make us more alive, more human,
more courageous, more loving.

–*Madeleine L'Engle*

From cave paintings to campfires, we've used stories to entertain, teach, connect, and keep our history alive from generation to generation.

Storytelling is the basis of everything we do. It is how we know our personal and cultural histories, how we connect to the world around us, and how we understand each other. Story inspires, informs, and motivates us.

Every nonprofit has multiple stories to tell, from your mission and organizational history to the story of the community you serve. You share your story every day—with donors, volunteers, staff, foundations, community partners, journalists.

A story that captures the imagination and motivates your audience to take action is the foundation of your success as a nonprofit leader.

In this guide, we'll explore how storytelling helps nonprofits, the basic elements of storytelling, how to tell your story, and how to use storytelling to your advantage.

How Storytelling Helps Nonprofits

Nonprofits use storytelling on a daily basis. You may not even be aware of how much storytelling influences your work. Everything about your nonprofit is a story—your mission statement, your organizational history, program descriptions, solicitation appeals. You tell a story on every page of your website, in every thank-you letter, grant application, or press release.

Your story is what attracts people to you—and what keeps them coming back. Stories build interest, awareness, and empathy. They are the basic building blocks for reaching every goal you have.

Use your story to:

- Make your case for change.
- Raise money and engage donors.
- Secure grants and sponsorship.
- Inspire advocates, donors, board, staff, and volunteers.
- Create an emotional connection to your work.
- Recruit community partners to build coalitions.
- Intrigue journalists.
- Reframe the conversation in times of crisis.
- Spread the word about successes.



Elements of Storytelling

Think of the stories that keep people coming back time and again. Regardless of the medium, great stories share a common foundation—relatable **characters** overcoming **obstacles** to achieve an **objective**.

Character: who are the people in your story; particularly the main figure (protagonist) and their opposition (antagonist)?

Objective: what do they want?

Obstacle: what (or who) stands in the way of your protagonist achieving their objective?

Character

The character your audience follows through the journey of the story is your protagonist. Whether you're telling your own story, or that of your community, personalize your work and your mission. Your nonprofit's story isn't about protecting the environment, better schools, or finding homes for abandoned animals. It's about that one person, one family, one event that inspired you to organize. People are more likely to give a charitable gift when presented with an emotion-inducing personal story. The oxytocin released in the brain as we engage with a story [directly relates](#) to how much we're willing to help others.

Objective

We all want something. What is the desire or motivation of your characters? Is it a need to change their world, to obtain something, get rid of something, restore order, or escape a threat? Most importantly, give your objective a why. Changing the status quo is hard. No one attempts it without a powerful reason. The more emotional you make the need, the more your audience will connect to your story.

Obstacle

What is preventing your character from getting whatever she or he wants? Obstacles can be internal (self-doubt, not being organized), or external (job loss, a natural disaster). Powerful stories about relatable people overcoming challenges inspire the reader (or listener) to take action. Tap into those universal human emotions and your audience will engage with you.

Telling Your Story

Stories evoke **emotion**, reveal **conflict**, inspire **action**, and offer **resolution**.

The strongest stories are simultaneously entertaining and inspiring. They make you care about those involved and keep you wanting to know what happens next. Great stories expand the way you see the world and create compassion. The key to telling any story begins with a few questions: Who are you telling your story to? Why are you telling it? What do you want them to do?

From your nonprofit's history to community programs to profiles of members and beneficiaries, you have great stories at your fingertips. Put a human face on your facts and statistics, and get to the heart of the matter.

Not sure how to start? You're not alone. Everyone gets writer's block. Don't let it intimidate you. The best remedy is to simply put something down on paper. You can polish it later.

Use this common story arc to get your creative juices flowing.

- Stasis—the current situation or status quo.
- Inciting Incident—the event that forces your protagonist to take action.
- Rising Action—the period of time between the inciting incident and the climax, when your protagonist is met with more and more obstacles.
- Climax—the peak, or turning point, of your story; typically where your protagonist faces her or his antagonist, or greatest challenge.
- Falling Action—following the climax, falling action ties up the loose ends of your story and leads to the resolution.
- Resolution—the final outcome of your story, when the world establishes a new status quo, or stasis.



Stasis

Once upon a time. The beginning of any story sets up the current situation and setting. The world is in a state of equilibrium, which has yet to be disturbed. Stasis tells us where we are, what kind of world it is, and who lives here. For example, the opening lines of *Romeo and Juliet* tells us Shakespeare's story is going to be about two well-known families in Verona.

“Two households, both alike in dignity,
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene”

Of course, we'll go on to learn about the family feud and star-crossed lovers; but for now, we just need to set the scene. It can be as literal and matter-of-fact as that. Simple, right?

Inciting Incident

What forces your main character to take action? In nonprofit storytelling, an inciting incident may be the situation or event you experienced that inspired you to start your organization. It could also be the cause for launching a new program or initiative, hosting a fundraising event, or organizing a community rally. Focus on the emotional response to the experience to create a more powerful connection with your audience.

Rising Action

This is the period of time where you build the tension of your story and propel your main character forward as they attempt to reach their goal. It's also where you introduce the obstacles that stand in your hero's way. Don't worry about making this overly dramatic. Everything from building community awareness of an issue to raising funds to launch your nonprofit can be part of your rising action. Make your audience care about what will happen next.

Climax

The high point, or climax, of your story is what you've been driving towards all along. Your hero has met obstacle after obstacle in the pursuit of their goal. The inevitable confrontation between protagonist and antagonist finally comes to a head, and either works out in favor of our main character, or ends in misfortune. Either way, your audience feels a sense of catharsis.

Falling Action

Following the climax, all of the pieces of your story are wrapped up in order to give your audience a sense of closure and accomplishment.

Resolution

We've now created a new status quo; a new stasis. The story has come full circle, and we enter a new state of equilibrium.

For nonprofits, the story doesn't end here. Once you've shared your story with your audience, what do you want them to do? Now that you've captured their hearts and minds, give them a clear **call to action** to respond to—as a donor, volunteer, or advocate.

“Once Upon a Time” Writing Exercise

In 2012, director and Pixar storyboard artist [Emma Coats](#) shared 22 storytelling tips on Twitter, including the Pixar version of this universal story arc.

Once upon a time there was _____. Every day, _____.

One day _____. Because of that, _____.

Because of that, _____. Until finally _____.

Now you try. Using the above prompt, write your nonprofit's origin story.

Tips for a Winning Story

- **Keep it conversational.** Even a written story should be in your voice and have a specific person in mind. Who are you telling your story to?
- **Give everything purpose.** If something isn't necessary, don't include it. Streamlining your story will build tension and keep your audience wondering what's going to happen next.
- **Make it relatable.** Tell a story your audience can see themselves in. What universal truth or need are you tapping into?
- **Make it specific.** Include details and descriptions that add to the tangibility of your story.
- **Make it authentic.** There's no need to embellish your story. The truth is a powerful tool.
- **Make it memorable and sharable.** Create a story that is unique, catchy, personal, tangible, desirable, and closely tied to your cause. Give your audience a way to share it with their networks, either by word of mouth or on social media.
- **Aim for the heart.** Capture your audience's emotions and imagination. Numbers don't make people act. Emotion does. Use data and statistics to support your narrative, not lead it.
- **Connect to your mission.** Whether it's how your nonprofit began, or a story about the community you serve; everything comes back to your mission. It is your driving purpose, the source of your inspiration, and the power behind your call to action.
- **Practice, practice, practice.** The most natural storytellers rehearse. Tell your story out loud to get to know how audiences react to it. This will help you discover where to pause for greatest impact, or hold for laughter. Let trusted staff read your story and provide feedback. The more you practice, the more comfortable you'll be improvising the narrative to fit your audience. Whether talking to a crowd of activists, your staff, a potential corporate sponsor, or a major donor; your story will feel spontaneous and relevant to the situation.

Donor Management and Storytelling

From donor solicitations to grant applications to town hall conversations, the golden rule in telling a successful story is to know your audience. It is also the most overlooked aspect of nonprofit storytelling. Too often, we tell our stories from our own point of view, and make ourselves the hero. It's time to flip the script. Your community is your audience. Make them the lead character in your story as well. After all, they are the reason for your work, and the inspiration behind your mission.

The more you know about your audience, the more effective you can be with your communications. Use your donor management system to gather information about your donors and members. Then use that information to segment your contacts for targeted communications. Who are they? What are their interests? Do they donate to specific campaigns or participate in specific programs? What experiences, wants, and needs do you have in common? What binds you together?

Your [donor management system](#) provides a central location to keep, and easily access, all of that information. Streamline your appeals and program updates using direct mail and email templates. Contact previous program participants for testimonials and personal stories that you can use to enhance your communications. By segmenting your contacts and sending them personally relevant information, you can confidently tell the best story for every occasion.



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