



## Five Tips for Sharing Stories that Stick (Part 1)

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“With storytelling we enter the trance of the sacred. Telling stories reminds us of our humanity in this beautiful broken world.”

– Terry Tempest Williams

As children, we always loved it when someone said, “Let me tell you a story,” or “Once upon a time...” Even though we have all grown into adults, the story-loving part of us has not disappeared. We are still more likely to remember anecdotes, examples, jokes, rhymes, and juicy tales than dry facts. Stories make the world go ‘round!

My advice to grantwriters: use stories.

Stories form bonds from one person to the next. Without a mutual sense of story, we cannot really understand each other. And to make sure your reader understands the value of a grant to your organization, you have to tell stories that briefly communicate shared values, needs, and interests.

Slice-of-life word snapshots will help put a face and voice to your work in a way that goes far beyond mind-numbing statistics. Don’t get me wrong. You definitely *do* want to include as much “hard data” as the grant guidelines call for (preferably more). But you also want to tell concise accounts of clients’ stories to crystallize your message for your readers. Even the left-brained people among us need an emotional understanding. As writers, we know that our readers will remember how we make them *feel* more than anything else we say or do.

Use stories to illustrate the context you are working in and the community needs you are addressing. Then talk about how people benefit from working with your organization and why that’s important to them in the short and long term (a.k.a. the results or impact).

Remember: your stories need not be long to convey your point. Just a few paragraphs, even a few lines, might do.

Then, when your readers (program officers, most likely) go to pitch your proposal to the foundation's board, the story that you made them *feel* is likely to punctuate the conversation and remain in the room.

Let's look at a few pointers to keep in mind.

### **Build on the Features of Any Great Story**

Think back to English class, and recall the five basic components:

1. **Memorable characters:** These are people your readers can easily recognize and identify with. They are people whom your readers truly care about. They usually include heroes, antagonists, and/or an outside narrator.
2. **A clear sequence:** Here we are talking about three phases: (1) a well-defined beginning with something to hook the reader ; (2) a middle, with a dramatic plot and theme; and (3) an end or resolution that involves your organization—maybe even with a twist.
3. **Conflict, controversy, or conspiracy:** A problem that logically or ethically troubles the main character(s), and thus troubles your reader.
4. **Interesting setting:** This includes a time and place that conveys the atmosphere or social climate you really want to depict.
5. **Point of view:** The narrative perspective can be that of your main character, the narrator, or someone else who is telling that person's side of the story.

Our culture is full of classic storylines and themes that pop up over and over again. These easy-to-understand templates surround us every day. I am sure you will recognize these examples of classic storylines:

- Good vs. evil, us vs. them, good guys vs. bad guys.
- Small, slow, or underdog force solves a big problem, finds justice, or wins a competition (David vs. Goliath, Little Engine that Could, the Tortoise and the Hare).
- Neighbors help each other in time of need or tragedy (barn raising, the good Samaritan, the Golden Rule).
- Doing one's part as a good global citizen.
- Rags to riches: from down-and-out to happy and productive.
- Triumph of hard work, education, persistence, and/or determination (the American Dream, the self-made person, or "pull yourself up by your bootstraps").
- Success from seeing beyond stereotypes.

- The 100<sup>th</sup> monkey that brings about critical mass.
- Struggle for personal identity and meaning.
- Consumerism versus the simple life.

You can plug into these pre-existing stories with details from your organization.

### **Real Life Story Example**

When he finished his ten-year prison term for bank robbery, William Green was determined to turn his life around. At the JVS Technology Access Center, he explored career options, learned to write a resume and cover letter, and practiced how to answer difficult interview questions about his past. In his new job as a prep cook for a catering company, William has become a model employee! “JVS accepted me,” he said. “They were warm and friendly and took the time to help.” (Source: <http://www.jvs.org>)

### **Give Your Cast of Characters Top Billing**

There is a treasure trove of information about your organization: facts, figures, ideas, processes, and controversies. As a storyteller, you have the opportunity to temper this often bewildering blizzard of data with the personal perspectives of the people you write about. If you do that, your readers will be able to see the real-life context in which your issue is playing out, involving individuals and communities of special interest.

The last great novel you read or movie or television show you watched no doubt centered on its characters. Your organization also centers on its “characters”—its clients. Ask yourself: how can you help your readers feel the urgency, exhilaration, relief, inspiration, surprise, humor, poignancy, suspense, or other aspects of your characters’ experiences?

Show how your characters’ lives improve as they work with you. Perhaps they learn some new information or a skill that they then use to rise out of despair. Or they could uncover a new resource (internal or external) that becomes crucial to their lives. Maybe they adopt a new attitude or forge a new relationship that allows them to find what they have long been seeking. Or they find a more effective way to make their values or beliefs a prominent part of their lives.

Whatever major change occurs in your characters, tell your readers about how your organization played a part in bringing it about.

In addition, all good characters have reasons for their actions. Focus on your characters’ motivations, and chances are good that your readers will be able to relate on a human level.

**CAUTION:** Sometimes you will find it helpful to create a composite character to represent several people at once. That's entirely legitimate—as long as you clarify somewhere that you are using that technique and not trying to misrepresent the facts.

If you have to convey ordinary or technical material, try relaying it through the story of an individual you know your readers will find compelling. For instance, show how students in your math education program apply formulas and equations in their everyday personal lives; how the details of a complex disease affect a child's afternoon on the playground; or how a new law will directly impact the families who ask for your advice every day. Use a story to follow your characters through an important time in their lives, step by step.

**Editor's Note:** Next week, Part 2 of this article will cover the use of quotes and will offer pointers on how to collect great stories. You'll also find a handy checklist to use during editing.

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