



Five Tips for Sharing Stories that Stick (Part 2)

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“Once in East Africa, on the shores of an ancient lake, I sat alone and suddenly it struck me what community is. It is gathering around a fire and listening to someone tell us a story.” – *Bill Moyers*

Use Plenty of Interesting Quotes

Break out your tape recorder (imaginary or real) and listen to the voices of your characters. They want to be heard and taken seriously, and your readers want to hear what they have to say. Using people’s actual words will infuse your piece with a real-world genuineness. We all like to overhear conversations, and using plenty of quotes can simulate that. Quotation marks are also pretty darned eye-catching!

Using quotes will add texture to your writing by introducing a variety of personal styles, tones, rhythms, etc. That variety will help keep your readers interested and engaged. You do not want to have only one sound dominate your virtual “airwaves,” lest your readers tune out.

Include both short and long quotes that illustrate how people felt or what they experienced before, while, and after working with you. Be sure to ask your interviewees: “How did you *benefit* from the experience? How did it make you feel? What *changes* did you see happen? And why is that *important* to you?” Try your best to extract the quality of their experiences.

Examples of Using Interesting Quotes

This first example includes quotes from both the organization’s direct clients and other beneficiaries of their work.

Adriana Razo came to ALAS, a program of Women’s Initiatives for Self Employment, with years of distinguished child development experience, both as a teacher and a program director. “For many years, owning a business of my own did not seem possible to me,” she told us. After conducting market

research and developing a solid business plan with ALAS, she knew it was possible.

Adriana now runs a high-quality bilingual program that focuses on arts and academics for children ages two to five. “I offer a bilingual program that provides children of diverse backgrounds a cultural connection—an opportunity to appreciate cultural and social differences amongst each other in a safe and caring classroom environment,” she said.

Sandra, a mother of one of Adriana’s students, expressed her gratitude: “I am so happy about the cultural exposure, bilingual education, and love that David gets here. I can sleep well and focus at work. My son is in good hands.” (Source: Women’s Initiative: <http://www.womensinitiative.org>.)

This second example quotes a client of the Center for Justice and Accountability, an organization that works to bring human rights abusers to justice:

“When I testified, a strength came over me. I felt like I was in the prow of a boat and that there were many, many people rowing behind—that they were moving me into this moment. I felt that if I looked back at them, I’d weaken because I’d see them again: wounded, tortured, raped, naked, torn, bleeding....Being involved in this case, confronting the (Central American) Generals with these terrible facts—that’s the best possible therapy a torture survivor could have.” (Source: <http://www.cja.org>)

Once you have finished listening, make sure to edit your quotes. At first, you may be tempted to just use everything. Instead, the quotes you choose should be tasty morsels of specific personal experiences, opinions, or outstanding facts that leap out of the speaker’s mouth into your story and off the page. Vague generalities (e.g., Mario said, “The museum was great!”) do nothing for you. In general, only include quotes that add to your story, enabling you to say more than you could as an observant narrator.

Get to the point quickly and with pizzazz—especially if the person used any interesting or colorful language. You can rearrange quotes to flow more logically or to bring out important points sooner than the speaker did. Feel free to quote people using ellipses (“...”) when you want to fast-forward to the best sound bites. If you need to, clarify the statements by cleaning up the grammar.

Example 1

“Low-income teens from the industrial core of the tri-city area came to the Richmond Marsh to help restore its native plants that had evolved to coexist

with local wildlife. They spent all day and transplanted seedlings, pulled out bucketfuls of weeds, and picked up litter. It was a great opportunity for them to learn about the natural environment. A lot of these kids have never before been beyond the city streets,” said Gary Pollock, the Natural Science curriculum director.

Suggested revision:

Low-income teens from the industrial core of the tri-city area helped restore the native plant habitat in the Richmond Marsh by transplanting seedlings, pulling out bucketsful of weeds, and picking up litter. “A lot of these kids had never before been beyond the city streets,” said Gary Pollock, the Natural Science curriculum director. “This was a great opportunity for them to learn about the natural environment.”

Example 2

“Your non-violent communication and conflict resolution classes were so helpful to my students! Their behavior changed dramatically over the course of the year. You taught them to sit down and listen to each other. They used to settle disputes with fistfights and screaming matches and tried to bring weapons with them to school. But with the new peaceful mediation skills they learned, they have begun to realize that violence helps no one,” explained a seventh-grade math teacher at Carter Middle School.

Suggested revision:

A seventh-grade math teacher at Carter Middle School explained what happened: “Your non-violent communication and conflict resolution classes...taught [my students] to sit down and listen to each other. They used to settle disputes with fistfights and screaming matches, and tried to bring weapons to school. But with the new mediation skills they learned, they have begun to realize that violence helps no one!”

Always Be on the Lookout for Great Stories and Quotes

So, where do *you* come across powerful stories and quotes?

Every day, your organization improves people’s lives. And every time that happens, a potential story is born!

Of course, you will want to conduct personal interviews with your characters. But remember that people in anonymous settings often feel more comfortable saying

what they really think. So written evaluations can yield great quotes, too. Overheard comments can work the same way (and most of us love to listen in on other people's conversations).

In addition, when seeking testimonials you may want to offer sample quotes from others. Sometimes folks are willing or even eager to share their experiences, in their own words, but first want to hear what others have said.

What if you, the grantwriter, don't have much direct contact with your organization's clients? Staff meetings are great places to dig up the stories you need. You can make it your practice to get on the agenda for ten minutes a month to ask colleagues about a recent positive interaction with clients. Conversations with co-workers around the water cooler, at lunch, or after work can also be goldmines for raw material.

Always keep an eye and ear out for stories (or even jokes) that others in your organization are telling. Build a stockpile of these little gems that you can polish. You may want to use a storybank record to help you keep track of your stories, where they came from, and what they are about. You can set up a simple database or spreadsheet for this purpose, with categories such as date, program, theme/storyline, characters, number of quotes, and source. (By the way, if you are also responsible for any other communications work at your organization, your storybank record will serve you very well!)

Review this Checklist

Once you have identified and written stories that fit into your grant proposal, you can use this checklist to make sure you have covered the bases. You can also ask a colleague to review your piece with these points in mind:

- The story has a clear beginning, middle, and end.
- Memorable characters jump off the page.
- Concise quotes advance the story—speaking about both results and importance.
- The story takes place in an interesting setting (time and place).
- It has a compelling plot with conflict resolution.
- The piece emphasizes shared values and interests with your readers.
- The story is easy to read and understand.
- I felt _____ (inspired? empowered? hopeful?) _____ after reading it.

Try seasoning your proposals with spicy and savory stories and see what happens.

Dalya F. Massachi is an Oakland, CA-based writer, editor, and writing coach who has focused on the social sector for over 20 years. For more information about storytelling as a best practice please check out her award-winning book, *Writing to Make a Difference: 25 Powerful Techniques to Boost Your Community Impact*. You can also visit her blog for free tip sheets and Writing Wednesdays teleseminars: www.WritingToMakeADifference.com