Storytelling Resource Guide

Why Use Stories?

Telling the story of your organization can be a powerful strategy for reaching community members, donors, funders, and other important people and groups. Some authors suggest that stories are **10 times more memorable** than facts alone.* This guide describes the process of creating relevant and accessible stories that resonate with the audiences you want to reach.

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* Heath, C. & Heath, D., *Made to Stick,* Random House, 2007.

Storytelling for Nonprofits

Agencies can use stories in a variety of ways, including as outreach designed to:

- **Build brand or mission awareness**: A story can powerfully illustrate the critical role your organization plays in addressing or solving a challenging issue in your community (or the world);
- **Raise funds**: Stories can clarify how donor dollars are used and can powerfully illustrate why those funds are needed;
- **Recruit participants or volunteers**: Stories illustrate how participation in your programming offers the promise of change, support, growth, or opportunity; or
- **Spark advocacy and action** around issues important to your organization: Stories demonstrate the real-life impact of policy efforts; they provide a "face" for advocacy efforts.

Interested in some good examples of storytelling across a range of issues and nonprofits? Please see the Appendix (page 14) for storytelling video resources that we feel are particularly effective.

Choosing a Story

- **What story is your organization trying to tell?**

  To begin, think about your goal in telling your organization's story. Who is your audience? How do you want them to feel after hearing the story? What action do you want them to take?

- **Who can tell this story from the heart?**

  When crafting your story through video, one option is to write a script that will be used as voiceover (that is, the words are recorded by an unseen speaker while viewers see photos or footage that illustrate what's being discussed). A second option is to tell the story through an interviewee's first-person account. The voiceover option allows you to choose each word for maximum impact and clarity. The first-person narrative makes the story personal and meaningful. In the examples in the Appendix, the videos from Saved by the Scan and No Kid Hungry are built on first-person narratives. The CAA SAAC video is scripted. The International Rescue Committee video combines scripted elements and first-person narrative.

  Choosing a story that reflects your organization's mission can be challenging, especially if you're partnering with families with a variety of lived experiences. In

order to represent your organization authentically, you'll want the story to reflect the population you serve. Sometimes one story can represent many, as in the Saved by the Scan example in the Appendix. Or you may choose to include multiple voices, as seen in the No Kid Hungry and International Rescue Committee examples.

As you're considering the elements of your organization's story, remember that you don't have to tell the *whole* story. Decide on a key message that can be shared in the time available. Videos on social media are often very brief, with as little as 30 seconds to tell a story. Videos on an organization's website can be a bit longer—around 2 minutes.

Ethics of Storytelling

There are a range of ethical issues to consider when partnering with community members, staff, donors, and others as storytellers. Here are just some of the practices you will want to consider as you begin.

- **Be aware of power differentials.** Participants may feel unspoken pressure to share stories when requested by experts, program leaders, or others they perceive to hold more power. Explain that participation is completely voluntary and will not affect a family or individual's access to services, position in the organization, etc. Even after someone agrees to participate, let them know that they can decide what part(s) of their story they are comfortable sharing publicly.
- **Let participants know how their stories will be used.** Many organizations share the story with the storyteller as a matter of courtesy before releasing it. This allows creators to correct any factual errors and prevents interviewees from being surprised by the material once it's released. It's less common for organizations to promise interviewees final approval, which can lead to delays at a critical time in the process.

  As you are promoting the story, maintain your feedback loops with participants to explain, for example, how their contributions were shared on social media or with decision-makers, government leaders, or others. Provide updates on how their participation supported your organization's mission.
- **Shift the lens away from solely stories of struggle**. Be mindful of how stories featuring community members may reinforce existing biases. While it is true that stories of struggle are powerful and can provide compelling support for a program, policy, or investment, it is critical to offer a balanced perspective. **Eliciting storytellers' strengths, capacities, and successes is also powerful, and it puts a holistic and authentic frame around their experience.**

- **Obtain legal permission from storytellers to record, edit, and share their stories. Organizations should seek out formal legal guidance when crafting permissions documents.**

  A legal document (known by various names, such as talent release, photo release, or consent form) gives official permission to use a person's image or video recording. It protects both parties (the interviewing organization and the interviewee) by spelling out how the story (video, photo, written anecdote) will be used. In addition, a separate permission form should be required for each child under the age of 18.

  Some guidelines to consider when developing your permissions document:

  - Ensure that the permissions document is written in Plain Language (4th-5th grade reading level) and professionally translated into families' home languages.
  - Have a staff member sit with the interviewee, review the document, and answer their questions. Give them time to review it on their own, with a staff member available for future questions, as well.
  - Describe the purpose of the video and where it may be shown.
  - Describe who will own the interview footage (typically the interviewing organization).
  - Include permission (and the option to withhold permission) to use the interviewee's name and/or biographical information. Agree on how the storyteller will be identified in the story when it is released publicly.
  - Specify any additional requirements; for example, if the interviewee will have an opportunity to review the completed video before publication.

The Pre-Interview

If you're telling the story of one family, you'll want to arrange a time to chat with potential interviewees before committing to an on-camera interview. A pre-interview is not an audition. Rather, it helps establish a relationship of trust and also provides ideas about specifics you'll want to touch on during the actual interview.

If you're pre-interviewing more than one family for a single spot, let them know that you're gathering information on how best to tell the organization's story. Though not all families will appear on camera, the ideas they contribute will help you figure out what questions to ask and what points of view to include. Once you've selected your storyteller—and they've agreed—contact those not selected to thank them for their time and ideas.

Preparing the Interviewee

An interview is an unfamiliar experience for many people, and a big part of your pre-interview preparation is letting participants know exactly what to expect.**

- **Explain the purpose of the video and why you're asking a family to participate.** For example, "We're creating a 5-minute video for social service providers that explains some of the challenges grandfamilies face, and you've been great at describing your family's experiences. Would you consider being interviewed on camera for this video?"
- **Create realistic expectations by guiding the interviewee through the process.** Being the subject of an interview (in any medium) can be intimidating. Interviewees may have many worries. For example, they may be afraid that they will not be good at telling their story or that they will be misrepresented in some way. Knowing what to expect can be helpful in allaying people's concerns. Below are some of the common questions you'll want to discuss.
    - **How much time will the interview take?** This varies, but 20 minutes to an hour is a good estimate. If you think you'll need to rearrange the room or use extra lights for video recording, it's good to plan time for that before beginning.
    - **How much of the interview will be used?** The knowledge that a half-hour interview will be used to create a one-minute piece can be freeing for an interviewee. It's helpful to know that not every answer needs to be awe-inspiring. (If you're interviewing a number of people for a short piece, let interviewees know that you'll combine answers to tell a whole story.)
    - **What kinds of questions will you be asking?** Interviewees sometimes request a list of questions so they can practice answers in advance, but it's often more helpful to offer general information about the topics to be discussed. Spontaneous answers are usually more engaging than prepared ones.
    - **What if I don't want to answer or I make a mistake?** No worries. It's totally fine for an interviewee to "pass" on a question or take a moment to regroup or change their answer. Only the best moments will end up in the finished piece. Let participants know that you can edit out their pauses or "thinking time."

** Portions of this section have been adapted from *Applying Trauma-Informed Principles to Work with Family Advocates*, which was written by Rebecca Parlakian and published by ZERO TO THREE.

- **When will I get a chance to see the finished product?** This is often unknown at the time of recording. Provide a ballpark estimate— "early spring"— and promise to get back in touch closer to the date. Be sure to provide your contact information in case they have questions in the interim. Emphasize that you will be in touch along the way to share the development of their story, and make sure to follow through on that promise.

- **Discuss how families will be identified.** This issue can be addressed in the permissions document, the pre-interview, or both. Individuals appearing on camera may choose to be identified by first name or first and last name; they may choose to have their location or role mentioned, or they may prefer to keep these details private.

  In written materials, a storyteller's privacy can be preserved by using their first name, last initial, and hometown, or by using an alias (identified as such). However, if your organization serves a very small community or if the family member has a specific concern (e.g., an open child welfare case, ongoing legal proceedings, a history of intimate partner violence, etc.), even these identifiers may feel too risky. Collaborate with participants to find an approach that works for them.

- **Describe your organization's policy if social media commenters are critical of the participant's story.** It is best practice to assign a staff member to monitor comments and delete those that are critical (but unrelated to the issue), cruel, or of a personal nature. Let participants know that you pledge to delete any negative or disparaging comments quickly. Be ready to offer support following the family's participation, if needed.

- **Be an active listener as families share their stories.** Sometimes participants may be surprised by how the re-telling of their experiences can bring up strong feelings or even trauma reactions. Staff members can remind interviewees that they can stop sharing, take a break, shift the focus of the story, or even pause their participation. Staff listeners can observe families for cues that they may be feeling overwhelmed and notice aloud, "I can hear what an upsetting experience that was for you. Does it feel okay to talk about it? Would you like a break?" Being an attuned listener is an important way staff can provide safety, build trust, and demonstrate collaboration. If a storyteller appears particularly upset by sharing their story, you might ask if they would like to be connected to local counseling resources as an additional support. Be sure to follow up the next day to check in and thank them again for participating.

The Interview

When creating a story based on one or more first-person accounts, the answers to your interview questions become the story's narration. You'll want to start with a list of questions such as those that follow, tailoring the list to capture the important details you discovered during the pre-interview.

- State your name and your job title [if responding in a professional capacity] or role [if a kin caregiver]. [Ask the interviewee to spell their first and last names, so you have the correct spellings on record.]
- Describe your life when you first connected with [name of organization]. What brought you there?
- What would you like people to know about [issue]?
- What are the most challenging things about [issue]?
- What's the most rewarding thing about [current role]?
- How did your involvement with [name of organization] change your life or the way you thought about things?
- What skills and insights did you develop through your relationship with [organization]?
- If you could give a shout-out to one person who's been especially helpful to you and your family, who would that be, and why?
- Anything else you'd like to say or share about your relationship with [organization] that I didn't ask about?

Before beginning, explain to interviewees that they should include your question as part of their answer to ensure that their response has the appropriate context when the interviewer's question is not heard. For example, if the prompt asks the interviewee to "Describe the impact of the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network," the interviewee's answer should begin "The Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network's impact." (If the interviewee responds, "It's had a great impact on our ability to connect with caregivers," viewers won't know what "It" refers to.)

As you listen to the answers to your prepared questions, ask follow-up questions as needed. Interviewees frequently add details when given an opportunity to do so. It's helpful to pause between one question and the next to allow this to happen naturally. Being an active listener, as advised above, encourages an interviewee to add more details.

Another important skill for the interviewer is the ability to respectfully keep the story on track. Families often have many layers to their story and many experiences (good and bad) that have contributed to where they are today. It can be easy for a strong story to get lost in a sea of details. Interviewers might listen to the story in its entirety and then ask an interviewee to condense a long, detailed narrative: "Can you describe again the part about how your grandchild came to live with you, in two or three sentences?" This is one way to elicit a shorter version of a longer story; you can also consider editing the longer version by removing extraneous details or tangential stories.

The Call to Action (CTA)

As you develop your story, keep your end goal, or call to action, in mind. What do you want the viewer to do after hearing this story? You can use text on screen, perhaps paired with a voiceover, to make the next step clear. The table below provides examples of calls to action.

CTA Purpose	Example Language
Fundraising	▸ Support families by giving this holiday season. ▸ Make a donation. ▸ Transform [name of group, for example, *grandfamilies'*] lives today!
Inform Viewers of an Issue or Resource	▸ Learn how the [program] can help you. ▸ Click to learn more. ▸ Subscribe to our e-newsletter! ▸ Follow us on Instagram.
Spark Greater Engagement and Involvement	▸ Come volunteer with our team. ▸ Register for our grandfamily support program today! ▸ Tell your elected officials [insert].

Without a CTA, the video you create is a powerful story. With a CTA, the video you create is a powerful tool to uplift the mission of your organization.

Technical Tips

You've gone to a lot of effort to select your interviewee and prepare them to tell their story. These tips will help ensure that you'll end up with the best recording possible.

- **Eliminate distractions.** Choose a quiet location with an uncluttered background. Listen for humming computers and buzzing lights and turn them off when possible. Put a sign on the door ("Please do not disturb. Recording in progress.") to reduce the likelihood that you will be interrupted. If recording in a busy setting like a school or social service agency, consider posting someone outside the door to remind those passing by that a recording is in progress. Ask questions again if the answers are disrupted by noise.
- **Make sure the interviewee is sitting so that light is illuminating their face.**
- **If recording on a smartphone, hold the phone horizontally rather than vertically.** The interviewee's head and shoulders should fill the frame, as pictured. If you intend to identify the speaker and their title with onscreen text (known as a "lower third" for its placement on the screen), make sure to allow enough space below their shoulders. Also consider the placement of subtitles, if you'll be including them.

- **If using the camera on a phone or computer, the lens should be slightly above the interviewee's eye level.**
- **Maintain consistency in interview style.** It has become common to record interviews over video chat, such as through Zoom. In video chats, interview subjects often look directly into the lens on their computer. When conducting in-person interviews, it's typical for the interviewer to sit next to the camera (across from the interviewee), which allows for a natural conversation. Either is okay, but it's good to be consistent if interviewing more than one person.

Editing

You will undoubtedly finish your interviews with much more material than you'll ever use. An editor is a sort of sculptor who pares away the unneeded parts of the material to reveal something amazing hidden within. If you're lucky, you'll have a staff member who is good at this, or you'll have set aside some money to hire a professional.

Some general guidelines if you're doing the editing yourself are below.

- Have your interviews transcribed. Some software allows AI transcription, or you can hire a company to create a transcript that's inexpensive and AI-generated. These won't be perfect, but you'll be able to search the document for topics you want to address and refer to the time codes (written in minutes and seconds from the beginning, e.g., 10:23) to locate these quotes.
- Transcriptions are just a guide. You'll note that something that looks great on paper may not sound great on video. Or you'll see a great place to end a quote on paper only to find that the person's voice goes up at the end—not a good place to cut because they haven't finished their thought. It's helpful to listen to the video in its entirety and highlight the quotes you're thinking of including.
- Use your highlighted transcriptions to move your favorite quotes around on paper, creating an order that tells the story. If you've interviewed more than one speaker, try intercutting between them, letting one person set the stage, with the next adding on to the first thought.
- Refer often to the outline you created before the interview took place. This will help you decide what to keep and what to cut when you create video clips from your recordings.
- Note that you can use title cards (text on the screen) or a voiceover to set the scene or move the "plot" along when the story as told becomes too detailed.
- Where possible, make sure to include the warm and unexpected moments you noticed when recording.
- If you've interviewed several people and feel obligated to include them all, try choosing the best quote from each of the least strong interviews first. You'll have more choices in the stronger interviews.
- Video editing is an iterative process; your first edit won't be your last. Your first "rough cut" is typically longer than the final product, with each version a little shorter than the preceding one. Once you have a general idea of the story, it's easy to spot and remove the parts that aren't contributing.
- Not sure if the parts are working well together? Ask your feedback crew for their thoughts early in the process.

Getting Feedback

Ask a small group—perhaps three people—to provide feedback on your story at different points in its development. Make sure to include reviewers from your target audience, rather than relying on coworkers or others already familiar with your story.

Use questions like the ones below to guide the process of eliciting feedback on your story.

1. What did you think about the story's length? If you feel it could be shorter, what could go? If you feel it could be longer, what detail would you like to see added?
2. Was the narrative clear and compelling? If not, what parts of the story were unclear or didn't work for you? What could be changed or added?
3. Did we show how [the organization] played a role in this story? If not, what additional details are needed?
4. Was there any part of the story you didn't understand? If so, which parts? For example, did we use jargon or complicated terminology? Did the story move too fast or jump around too much?
5. Was it clear what action we wanted you to take by the end? If not, what needs to be added/changed?
6. Any other thoughts on ways to strengthen the impact of this story?

Encouraging Others to Share Your Stories

In order for a story to achieve its goal, your target audience needs to **see** it, **engage** with it, and **take action**. To maximize the likelihood that all three of those steps happen, share your story widely and **make it easy for viewers/readers to share the story with others**. Below are some ideas for how to do that, as described in a presentation by marketing leader and strategist Laura O'Connor.

Your Method of Sharing or Audience	What to Ask/Invite Others to Do
Personal or Mass Email	▸ Share it with a friend, ▸ Forward the email to their network, ▸ Include it in their e-newsletter, and/or ▸ Share it on social media.
Social Media	▸ "Like" or otherwise react to it, ▸ Re-post or share it, and/or ▸ Comment on it.

Other Agencies or Nonprofits	▸ Include it in their e-newsletter, ▸ Share it on social media, ▸ Include a version of this story on their website (offer to adapt it for their use), and/or ▸ Contact your organization to invite the featured storyteller to be a speaker at one of their events.

Create a dissemination toolkit for partner organizations. Generate some suggested social media posts to go with your story(ies), including both text and images. Prepare text for newsletters, too. Offer a link to an online drive where partnering organizations can easily download your stories and images for posting on their own social media channels and sharing through their newsletters. If you wish, include a blog post or short article that partners can post on their websites and promote. Share this toolkit with organizations in your community with whom you partner frequently.

Capturing the Impact of Your Stories

How do you know if the stories you've developed are reaching the goals you set out to achieve? By collecting meaningful data on the reach and impact of these resources. This section offers introductory guidance on how to do that.

First, from the outset, be specific about ***who* your story is supposed to reach** (target audience) and ***what* you want them to do** when they see your story (call to action). Your target audience will change depending on the story's call to action. For example, if the call to action seeks to increase donations, the target audience may be past and present donors who are best reached by email. If the call to action is about attracting new participants for agency programs, the audience you're trying to reach may be found on social media platforms that cater to specific target audiences.

Second, select the data points that will help you establish the impact of storytelling for your organization. To track the reach and impact of your story, collect data in a selection of the areas identified in the following table, once again informed by guidance from marketing leader and strategist Laura O'Connor.

Qualitative	Quantitative
Who is interacting with your content on social media? Who isn't? (Are you reaching your intended audience?)	How many views or webpage visits did your content get? If you shared your content through an e-newsletter, how many opens or click-throughs did your newsletter get?
What are the comments? Are they substantive?	How many social media engagements (likes, comments, posts, re-posts, hashtag uses) did your content produce? How many new followers did you get?
Who responded to email campaigns? What did they click on? What didn't they click on?	What trends did you notice over time—like increased numbers of followers or increased comments/engagement?
Did anyone take action in response to your "call to action"? What actions did they take?	How many individuals used the story's unique link or QR code to take action?

Keep in mind that a story may work well on one media channel and not perform as well in another. For example, a 60-second video might do well on Instagram but not perform as well when shared as a link via an e-newsletter. Doing occasional A-B tests (testing the same resource on different communication channels) can offer insight into how your audiences prefer to connect. You may also find that different groups prefer different channels—for example, Facebook may be a great dissemination tool for community-based calls to action, but LinkedIn may be better for outreach to colleagues at peer organizations.

Concluding Thoughts

Authentic storytelling is a powerful way to share your organization's mission with volunteers and potential participants, funders and policymakers. Storytelling is an essential human experience. We recognize our shared humanity by making space for people's stories, by seeing them, and in turn, allowing ourselves to be seen. We wish you wisdom and joy as you embark on your storytelling journey.

Appendix: Examples of Effective Stories

These videos helped inform our understanding of what makes a story powerful. Note that they include sensitive topics. Please allow yourself time and space to respond and regroup.

- **International Refugee Committee:** What If You Only Had Five Minutes to Pack?
  - This video asks viewers what they'd pack if they had to leave their homes with little notice and concludes with first-person accounts from refugees. It does an excellent job of helping viewers identify with the experience without getting mired in blame or politics.
- **No Kid Hungry/Share Our Strength:** Food is the Key to it All
  - This video features great testimonials from educators on the realities of childhood hunger. It is uplifting despite the direness of the problem.
- **Saved by the Scan:** Milli's Story
  - This video shows what prompt screening meant to one cancer survivor. It offers a poignant and to-the-point testimonial.
- **CAA SAAC:** Mental Health PSA
  - This video pairs mental health statistics with black and white images of people, mostly unseen, writing words associated with the pain and stigma of mental illness.

The Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network: A National Technical Assistance Center (Network) helps government agencies and nonprofits in states, tribes, and territories work across jurisdictional and systemic boundaries to improve supports and services for families in which grandparents, other relatives, or close family friends are raising children whose parents are unable to do so. For more information, please visit www.GKSNetwork.org.

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Because we're stronger together®

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