



The Nonprofit Advocacy and **Storytelling Guide**



Introduction

Storytelling is a tried-and-true technique in advocacy campaigns, lobbying efforts, fundraising appeals, and other activist or social movements. Good stories told well capture our emotions and spur us to act or speak out. When combined with data and the larger context of a struggle or challenge, personal stories from the people directly affected by an issue are one of the most powerful tools that nonprofit organizations possess to create change.

This guidebook gives a step-by-step, hands-on approach to creating powerful stories for advocacy with a focus on vulnerable populations. It incorporates ethical storytelling principles and a client-centered approach to strengthen the storyteller and the organization. You will have several practical tools that will help you improve your advocacy immediately.



Remember whose story it is. – Bruce Shapiro, author and executive director of the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma

First Principles

Social advocacy aims to leave a world better than it started. But when working with the stories of clients or others in vulnerable situations, advocates should follow grounding principles:

- 1. Do no harm.** Help storytellers understand what they are getting into.
- 2. Put people first.** Storytellers' needs beat the advocacy mission's needs.
- 3. Center storytellers.** Honor their voice, power and agency.
- 4. Sharing their story is a privilege.** Respect what they have given you.

”

Journalists should never, ever, make their subjects or sources feel powerless – Jina Moore, former East Africa bureau chief, The New York Times

Goals

As part of your advocacy plan, storytelling needs to connect with your organization's specific goals and objectives. A story without goals is untethered to a larger meaning.

Common goals in a storytelling initiative might include supporting the organization's messaging or fundraising; amplifying the voices of the real people affected by policy; drawing attention to the big picture that you're seeking to reach; evoking emotion and empathy in your audience; and explicitly connecting stories to specific solutions.



Who are vulnerable populations?

Vulnerability is part of telling any personal story. But in this guide, we're talking specifically about people who are especially vulnerable because of their circumstances or situations. The problems they have encountered or handled are larger challenges for which your organization has solutions.

These might include:



The framework



Because stories enable us to communicate our values not as abstract principles, but as lived experience, they have the power to move others.
– Marshall Ganz

The “Self – Us – Now” model created by labor organizer and Harvard lecturer Marshall Ganz has proven extremely helpful for organizations building stories from the ground up. Known as “public narrative,” the approach is simple but adaptable to an endless number of story types. The three touchstones of self, us and now are interconnected and together create a structure upon which your advocacy stories can rest.

Self

The stories shared will help others understand the problem and solution. Focus on the primary choices that were and are made.

Now

The primary challenge or problem being faced, and the actions needed to solve it.

Us

The story’s appeal to the audience through shared values and experiences.



Learn more about Marshall Ganz and his Public Narrative approach [here](#).

Story elements & arcs

A story isn't just a collection of facts or a linear "this-happened-then-this-happened" list. A story has problems to solve and obstacles to overcome to spark audience interest. A story has six basic parts:

When interviewing or coaching a storyteller, you don't need to refer to all those items explicitly – but you can map the story with that structure in mind, and their narratives will be received better and be more memorable for the audience.



These ideas can help:

- 1. The hero**, or main character. In advocacy storytelling, this is likely the person sharing their personal story.
- 2. The location and time** in which the story is taking place. This is important for context.
- 3. The incident or action** that launches the story's events.
- 4. The rising action** details the character's journey, a growing conflict, or an expanding problem. This is the stage in which tension often rises and the stakes get bigger.
- 5. The climax or turning point.** This is the dramatic point at which the character defeats the opponent, solves the problem, or overcomes the challenge.
- 6. The falling action**, in which conflicts are resolved or the character recognizes or learns something important.
- 7. The resolution**, including how the story concludes, wrapping up loose ends, and any long-term impact on the main character.

Essential elements

Advocacy storytelling has items that should be included in any story:



- 1.** Simple language. You don't want to overwhelm or confuse your audience with technical terms, jargon, or complex descriptions of programs or projects. Keep it basic.
- 2.** Empathy. The stories should show care for and connections with people in similar situations.
3. Data. Carefully chosen data can help highlight the scope and scale of the problem or the importance of your solution. Use data sparingly and selectively and connect it to main story points.
- 4.** The big picture. Ensure that the story contains the necessary context for the audience to understand the depth of the problem. This can be shared by the storyteller or in introductory text.
- 5.** A call to action. What do you want the audience to do after hearing the story? This can be shared directly by the storyteller or by your organization. Ensure that the desired action is connected to the story.

Best practices working with vulnerable populations

Storytellers have **control and power and agency** over their story, including what they share, how they share and when they share it.



As an organization preparing to use someone else's story for your purposes, you are entering into a partnership with that person – not a transaction. Follow these important practices:

- Their informed consent is critical. Ask permission to use especially sensitive material. Explain the possible impact.
 - Follow up with the teller. Send a thank-you note or other personal token of appreciation.
 - Their decision to share is voluntary, not coerced or compensated, and they can withdraw that permission at any time.
 - Use a release form – typically for media or publicity purposes – that explains in plain language how their story and likeness will be used.
 - If desired, obscure the teller's identity so they're not identifiable. That may include using a first name, initials, changing their name or altering key details. It might mean editing a photo or video to cover their face or other identifying elements.
 - Help the storyteller understand that once their story is shared in public, it's out of their control how others may use it – especially if the media amplifies the message. What they can control is the story itself. Ensure that they are fully aware of the broad implications and the bigger picture.
 - Vet the teller through your internal records, online searches or public social media checks. Ask politely about anything in their backgrounds that might embarrass them or your organization.
 - Have the storyteller review and approve the final format, including headlines, photos, captions and the ultimate design.
 - The stories should ultimately focus on growth and solutions to a person's individual problems. Work with the storyteller to shape a narrative that helps your organization and recognizes the power and strength of the person. Remember that people come first.
-



Concerns & benefits

Be alert for harm to the storyteller. When people share a painful or troubling time, they make themselves vulnerable again. The act of recounting their struggle and story may re-traumatize them, leading to feelings of shame, embarrassment or lack of control.

If the storyteller is a client, they may feel implicitly pressured to participate or expect special treatment if they do. People who have left their old situation may fear they will cause disappointment if problems reoccur. And if stories are shared widely, the person could be reduced to the worst time in their life. Storytellers must go into advocacy projects with their eyes wide open and with support from your organization's experts.

Recognize that stories can benefit the storyteller. Telling a personal story can help someone recognize that they have control of their narrative. It may help the teller develop a stronger sense of confidence by finding their personal voice.

Storytelling can also be an altruistic and activist act of giving – realizing that their experience can help someone else in similar situations by inspiring others to action and solutions. The act of sorting through events, especially with the assistance of a skilled interviewer, can make sense of someone's life experiences.



The National Alliance for Mental Illness notes that telling a personal story about mental health can help the teller connect with others, reduce stigma in society, propel change and advocate for reforms, and show others that recovery is real and possible.

READ +

Gathering the story

When we focus almost exclusively on extracting information and facts, we can lose sight of the real person on the other side of the table, observes retired law professor Laurie Shanks. That's critically important for lawyers and other human services professionals – social workers, counselors, teachers, medical practitioners – who are entrusted with the details of a person's challenges and problems and relay them to other audiences.

"What we do as lawyers, inside a courtroom and out, is function as the 'teller' of our client's story," Shanks says.

She outlines several tactics for face-to-face interviews:

1. Make eye contact, shake hands and introduce yourself.

2. Explain why you're taking notes and who will have access to them.

3. Ensure that the client understands why the information you're gathering is important and how it will be used.

4. Pay attention to your tone and body language.

When asking questions and drawing out facts and the context of the teller's story, you need a plan. Think deeply about the stories they might share and how you will respond or react. Practice positive, nonverbal body language that you can use instead of interrupting. Plan your questions. The next section offers approaches you can adapt and use.

When you get into the interview, ask open-ended questions – don't restrict yourself to queries with "yes" or "no" answers. Let them finish their thoughts. Be respectful of their experiences. Be conversational, not overly formal. Ask permission to discuss sensitive, vulnerable topics.



Interview questions

THE PERSON

- What would you like people to know about you? _____
- What or who has inspired or motivated you? _____
- When and how did you recognize that the world was treating you differently? _____
- How has your voice been silenced or quieted? _____
- What's your fondest memory? _____
- Where do you see yourself or your family in one year? _____

THE PROBLEM

- What was the impact of X on your life – physical, social, financial, spiritual, mental? _____
- What impact did X have on others – partner, children, family, friends? _____
- What has surprised you about X? _____
- What barriers do you face to accomplishing X? _____
- How has X limited your opportunities? _____
- What choice did you make, and how did it make you feel? _____
- What was the result of the choice? _____

THE SOLUTION

- What services do you use or receive? _____
- How do those services help and why are they important? _____
- What would change things? _____
- How has the organization helped you? _____
- What is the organization's relationship with you? _____

THE TAKEAWAY

- What do you want people to understand about yourself, others like you, or X? _____
- If you could speak with other people/target audience about X, what would you tell them? What would you want them to know or feel or do? _____
- Would you like to add anything? _____

Building the story

Once you have recorded the person's words – whether jotted on a notepad, on video, or on an audio recording – the next task is to write or assemble that narrative into a polished story. This should be done as soon as possible after the interview

so the content and context are fresh. Understand first how you will primarily use the story – writing a social media series is much different from writing a donor letter – to save time and energy.



Center the storyteller. Focus on the point of view and perspective of the people in the story, not the rescuers or helpers from your organization.

Draw a mental picture. Use words to show each part of the story. Don't just tell what happened.

Avoid simplifying. Ban tropes and stereotypes from your story. Eliminate euphemisms – spell it out plainly.

Focus on the choices made. A choice is often the turning point in a story and adds dramatic tension for the audience.

Emphasize emotions over data. Use numbers sparingly and selectively to support the personal story.

Build up to the takeaway, the main message you want the audience to leave with. What key parts of the story address that?

Connect with the right context. Explain the policy or larger issue at stake.

Read it back. Ensure that the storyteller can review and change the final format of their story. Allow plenty of time for this step. Don't push or hurry them along.

Plan the presentation. Think about the other elements that support the words and help shape the story – photos, videos, headlines, captions, color schemes. How will you incorporate them for maximum effectiveness?

“The thing that I ask journalists to do is, at the end of the story, when you’ve finished your product, do a check and say, ‘If this was my aunt, my father, my mother, someone I loved, is there anything I would change in the tone?’ ” – Elana Newman, research director for the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma

Speaking the story

Personal stories can be incredibly powerful when featured at public events or in legislative testimony. Storytellers who are comfortable with sharing their stories this way can be especially effective in changing minds or perspectives. Here are seven tips for effective public speaking:



1. Practice and rehearse. The more a speaker is familiar with their topic, the more effective they are at conveying the messages behind it.

2. Don't read notes. Through repeated practice, a strong speaker should internalize the story and be able to tell it with only an occasional glance at their notecards or outline.

3. Make eye contact. Look at the people in the audience directly and hold their gaze for good lengths of time.

4. Speak clearly and slowly. There's no need to rush; a speech isn't a race. The slower you go, the more you sound calm and in control.

5. Stand up straight. If a lectern is provided, don't slump or grip it tightly. Keep your hands out of your pockets and don't slouch or bounce on your feet.

6. Body language matters. Use casual but authentic gestures or head nods to emphasize points or connect with your audience.

7. Save time for a Q&A. If your speaker is comfortable with handling open-ended and impromptu queries, a question-and-answer period can be highly effective to create connections between the speaker and the audience.



Sharing the story

Who is your audience? That's one of the most critical questions in storytelling. Who are you trying to reach and what do you want to persuade them to do?

Legislators can make laws and policies. Donors can give money and provide resources. The media can spread your messages. Take time before you start a storytelling campaign to know your target audience and understand its needs.

Also consider your audience's level of understanding about the topic and terminology; pre-existing biases; and their overall exposure to the issues involved. Your story may need to explain key information before going too far afield.

Don't forget your internal communications. Solid stories can inspire even the most dedicated employees or volunteers.



Stories can be shared in a variety of channels and avenues, including:

 Social Media

 One-pagers

 Guest columns

 Action alerts

 Signs

 Newsletters

 Annual reports

 Q&As

 Video clips

 Media interviews

 Press releases

 Slide decks

 Blog posts

 Letters to the editor

 Websites



Thanks and acknowledgements



Thanks to the work of the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma (dartcenter.org); the Ethical Journalism Network (ethicaljournalismnetwork.org); Laurie Shanks, clinical professor of law, emerita, at Albany Law School; The Arc of the United States (thearc.org); the National Alliance on Mental Illness (nami.org); and Marshall Ganz, public policy lecture at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government (marshallganz.usmblogs.com).

