

STORYTELLING FOR NONPROFITS

How to present stories that attract donors,
win support, and raise money.





About this Guide

Everyone in your organization needs a good story.

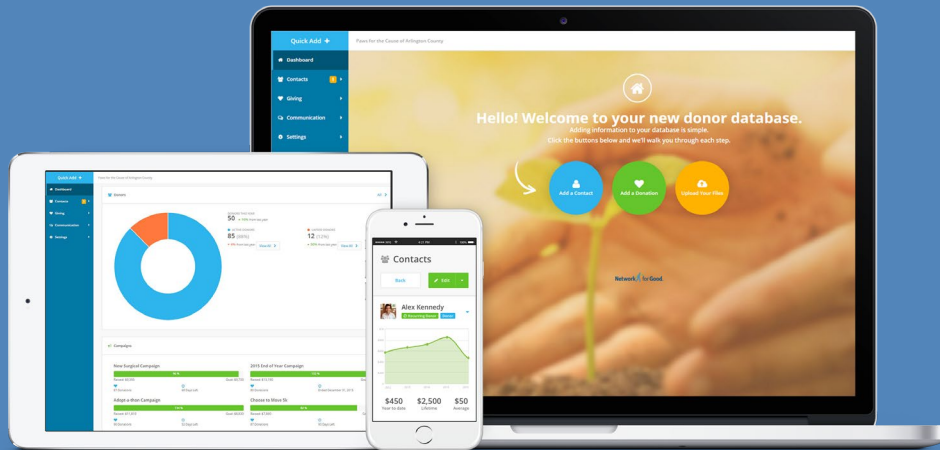
To intrigue a journalist. To inspire a donor. To motivate staff. To spark an advocacy revolution. To land a corporate sponsorship deal.

Stories are the basic building blocks for reaching our goals.

As fundraisers, it's not enough to arouse sympathetic emotions. We need to motivate people to act on those emotions and to vote with their checkbooks. We need to overcome the painful feelings that come with acknowledging the presence of suffering in our world. Research shows that this is all possible, though it's not always easy. The most powerful tool in a fundraiser's bag is to tell a great story.

Strategic storytelling can be done. Let's start doing it together!

TELL GREAT STORIES, RAISE MORE MONEY



Network for Good is helping 6,000 emerging nonprofits create more successful fundraising campaigns; we want to help you, too.

Network for Good combines fundraising expertise with simple-to-use technology to provide smarter fundraising software with all the support and coaching you need to get the most out of your investment.



**FUNDRAISING
PAGES**



**DONOR
MANAGEMENT**



**FUNDRAISING
COACHING**

Our suite of tools includes everything you need to grow results, not expenses. Schedule a time to talk with a fundraising consultant today!

SCHEDULE A DEMO NOW

Storytelling Basics

Storytelling is the single most powerful communications tool you have available, bar none. But many good causes tend to have problems telling good stories even though people have been communicating through stories for thousands of years.

So, what makes narrative so powerful?

Stories help us remember.

When you have facts you want people to remember, it's much more likely they will be remembered if you share those facts within a story.

Stories influence how we decide.

In 1990, researchers conducted a study on how jury members came to conclusions. Resarches found that most jury members constructed their own story based on the facts offered in the case. Then, they compared the stories they constructed with the stories the lawyers presented. The jurist would side with whomever's story matched their own the closest.

Stories link us to our sense of generosity.

Studies also show that donors tend to give twice as much when presented with a story about an affected individual as opposed to reading statistics about the scope of a problem.

Hopefully, you realize your organization should be telling stories. Stories make a cause relatable, tangible, and touching. So how do you write one? What is the structure of a well-told story?

Screenwriting guru Michael Hauge boils all great stories down to three elements:

1. Character

Character is our protagonist. Hollywood can make us feel empathy for such unlikely protagonists as fish (Nemo) and aliens (Avatar). But how do they do it?

Roughly 99% of the time, the protagonist of a good story is a single individual. Try not to focus on an idea or an organization, but rather on one relatable character (or a personified entity, as Shel Silverstein did in *The Giving Tree*). A team led by Deborah Small of the University of Pennsylvania found that people are twice as likely to give a charitable gift when presented with an emotion-inducing personal story that focuses exclusively on one character's plight.

This American Cancer Society appeal email featured a message from Michelle Lawrence, a cancer survivor.

American Cancer Society THE OFFICIAL SPONSOR OF BIRTHDAYS! [DONATE](#)

Take the Matching Grant Challenge

Your gift could go twice as far. Donate today and your gift could be doubled.

[Help finish the fight against cancer and renew your support before May 16.](#)

[DONATE NOW](#)

Michelle Lawrence
Cancer Survivor

Dear Caryn,

There has never been a better time to renew your support of the American Cancer Society.

That's because a very special donor has pledged to match donor contributions made by May 16, for dollar, up to a total of \$100,000.

I know firsthand the impact your gift can have, because when I was diagnosed with ovarian and uterine cancer, I was scared to death. I was dealt a rough hand, and I cried every morning for months.

But because of American Cancer Society programs, I did not have to face cancer alone. And if you donate today, your gift will go twice as far to save the lives of people like me – and help finish the fight against cancer.

[Support people like me in our fight against cancer, and you could DOUBLE the impact of your gift, dollar for dollar!](#)

It was a long road to recovery, from a complete hysterectomy to six rounds of chemotherapy. But I had help along the way: American Cancer Society programs like *Look Good, Feel Better* and their **24-hour information line** gave me the knowledge, support, and hope I needed to fight back.

Today I am cancer-free, thanks in part to programs made possible by people like you.

2. Desire

Desire doesn't necessarily mean lust or greed; it can also lead to a burning need to change the character's world: to obtain something, get rid of something, restore order, or escape a threat.

Don't forget about desire when writing your story. While character and conflict are definitely important, they can't shine without their third musketeer. As fantasy writer Mark O'Bannon writes, "Desire must be clear, specific, and definite."

Vanessa and John

Occupation: Before Katrina, Vanessa ran a beauty salon and in-home childcare center; John was a retired commercial truck driver.

Vanessa and John's Wish: Sunday family dinners in their own home; a stable place to raise their grandchildren.

Barrier to Rebuilding: Overwhelming medical bills and the death of their daughter, Ebony, in 2009.

Current Residence: Rental Property

500 FOR 500



The St. Bernard Project clearly illustrates desire with their profiles on families. Vanessa and John's desire is to have a home where they can host Sunday dinners.

3. Conflict (or Barrier to Desire)

Conflict simply refers to the obstacles that arise and prevent the character from getting whatever he or she wants. Powerful stories are about suffering and hardship. Readers respond best to conflict they can identify with, but that doesn't mean your readers need experience living in a war zone. They just need to be able to relate to pain, illness, or loss.

West End Intergenerational Residencies used client stories with stock photos to show the impact of donors' dollars. In this story, this family wasn't thriving because Leticia had experienced domestic violence, homelessness, and eventually lost her job.



2016 ANNUAL APPEAL

Kenny and his mother Leticia, a single parent and domestic violence survivor, were referred to West End after she lost her full-time job and spent time in NYC's shelter system. Leticia worked with WIR program staff on a variety of goals, including job readiness skills. She also utilized WIR's foster grandparenting program throughout the interview process, which enabled Leticia to pursue steady work while knowing Kenny was in a stable and nurturing environment. We're thrilled to share that Leticia was recently hired full-time as an Office Manager, and she and Kenny will be leaving WIR for a home of their own shortly!

Please visit our website to make a contribution this holiday season to support our young mothers and their children at West End Intergenerational Residence (WIR).

www.westendres.org

To make sure you cover all of the basics of story structure here are the beginnings of six sentences that can help you with the process.

- **Once upon a time ...** This starts the story off and introduces our protagonist.
- **And every day ...** This will set up how life was before the challenge.
- **Until one day ...** This begins the action of the story with the challenge and the goal.
- **And because of this ...** This introduces the barriers the protagonist faces.
- **And because of this ...** There could be several barriers that need introduction.
- **Until finally...** This ends the story with the resolution.

Premium Storytelling Fuel: Emotion



Storytelling is the language of emotion.”

—Mark Rovner, founder of [Sea Change Strategies](#)

Nicole Lampe, the digital strategy director of [Resource Media](#), says that audiences often experience information overload and ask themselves, “What does this have to do with my life?” What touches her are things she can connect to her home, family, friends, and community. Many times, those emotional connections are established through stories.

One of the fatal flaws in nonprofit storytelling is a lack of emotion. That’s ironic given that donors and constituents are engaging with organizations in a fundamentally emotional way. Karl Iglesias, an eminent Hollywood script guru and the author of *Writing for Emotional Impact*, says:



Good writing is good writing because you feel something. It’s why a great movie can be three hours long and you don’t even notice, while an awful 90-minute one can stretch into eternity. ... The experience of emotions is the most compelling reason we go to the movies, watch television, read novels, and attend plays and sporting events. And yet, emotional response is a subject too often overlooked. Emotion, not logic, is the stuff of drama. Emotion is your screenplay’s life blood.”

First, focus on the fact that, above all, you are in the happiness business. Your primary job is to find the emotional core of your mission and to connect it with the people you wish to reach.

But my supporters are logical, smart people, you might say. They love to hear statistics and see evidence for why they should donate to my cause!

While it’s great that your supporters are intelligent and motivated, research shows that no matter your audience, an emotional appeal will still win over more donors.

Which of these stories is more compelling to you?

Story #1

Any money that you donate will help Rokia, a 7-year-old girl who lives in Mali, a country in West Africa. Rokia is desperately poor and faces a threat of severe hunger, even starvation. Her life will be changed for the better as a result of your gift. With your support, and the support of other caring sponsors, Save the Children will work with Rokia's family and other members of the community to help feed and educate her and provide her with basic medical care.

Story #2

Food shortages in Malawi are affecting more than 3 million children.

In Zambia, severe rainfall deficits have resulted in a 42% drop in maize production since 2000. As a result, an estimated 3 million Zambians face hunger. Four million Angolans—one-third of the population—have been forced to flee their homes.

More than 11 million people in Ethiopia need immediate food assistance.

If you answered Story #1, you are like most people, according to a study by University of Pennsylvania's Deborah Small and her colleagues. They found that individuals give more to identifiable victims who have an emotional appeal than they do to a faceless, statistical group. But those donations diminished when readers began to think analytically about the protagonist. Donations for statistical victims—stories containing characters and statistics—are always consistently low.

In an interview with Perla Ni of [GreatNonprofits](#), Small said:

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The more vivid the story—through narrative or through imagery—the more emotionally arousing. And emotions are what triggers the impetus to help. The more surprising finding is that showing statistics can actually blunt this emotional response by causing people to think in a more calculative, albeit uncaring, manner."

Researchers also found that when people have a personal connection to a cause (or know someone who does), that can lead them—and others—to be more supportive.

In a different study, participants were told two different stories about a college student:

1. In one case, the student had a parent who suffered a heart attack.
2. In another case, the student had a parent who was diagnosed with cancer.

The participants were then asked how they would react if the student invited them to a volunteer event. When the event was directly related to the student's personal experience, people were sympathetic and said they would have a hard time saying no. When the event was not personal—that is, the fictional student whose parent suffered a heart attack was advocating for a cancer society—the effect was not the same.

Emotion is power. Remember:

1. Focus on the fact that, above all, you are in the happiness business. Your primary job is to find the emotional core of your initiative and connect it to the donors you wish to reach. Give them the opportunity to feel great by doing good.
2. Don't talk in numbers or statistics. A cerebral case for your cause is less effective than a heartfelt story.
3. Personal connections and stories have a big effect on a person's inclination to help. If you've got 'em, use 'em.

After you've got the attention of your audience with your story, don't forget to include a strong call to action. When you're telling stories for fundraising, this call to action is...donate! Include your call to action in all your appeals and especially on your online donation page.

Collect Your Stories

Far better than organizational jargon or sterile statistics, stories help donors (and future donors) learn an organization's personality. Stories help donors feel engaged in your work and see the difference they can make in a real person's life. They empower the organization and its supporters to continue advancing its mission.

But getting good stories is easier said than done. Here are a few tips learned from interviewing hundreds of people who received help from charitable organizations.

Start with the end in mind. Do your homework. Get the "story behind the story" from the program manager before you ever pick up the phone. Think of the story you want to end up with and backtrack from there to draft your questions.

Never use the word "interview." The word "interview" makes people feel like they're being interrogated by Woodward and Bernstein. It can cause anxiety and stage fright. Instead, ask if you can "chat for a few minutes about the assistance he/she received."

Talk less, listen more. Use the first minute or so to make the interviewee feel at ease and express your thanks. After that, zip your lips. Closed-ended questions will give you just what you might expect: one-word, dull answers. Ask questions like "what did the help mean to you?" and give people time to think about and respond to the question. Resist the urge to fill dead air as some of the best responses come when the interviewee is given the floor.

Veer from the script. As mentioned above, a list of questions is always a good idea. But that said, it's a starting point. Listen closely to the interview, and be ready to jet off in another direction if needed. Use probing questions to get more in-depth answers.

Get approvals. After you've drafted the story, give the interviewee a chance to review for accuracy. Most make no changes, but it's better to know any problems before publishing it. Keep a paper trail, you might need it.

Be prepared for anything. Interviewing for nonprofits is unique. You're talking to people who were, or are, in crisis. Don't be surprised if you encounter hostility, tears, and any other emotions. Listen and be empathetic, but never say, "I know what you're going through." Most importantly, stay calm no matter what's thrown at you.

Positive Impact Tied to Storytelling

Because storytelling impact is hard to measure, many nonprofits are hesitant to make storytelling a priority. However, survey participants from our 2015 [State of Storytelling in the Nonprofit Sector](#) research shared anecdotes about the positive changes they have seen from storytelling. We hope they will inspire your organization to embrace storytelling!

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Web traffic has improved greatly since we introduced more success stories, but much of our fundraising is face-to-face, so it's hard to quantify results financially.”

“

Personal visits to donors where we updated them on the work of the organization and stories about our youth resulted in a huge increase in our year-end gifts!”

“

In a face-to-face, they can see the impact, and the money is given within a week or two of the meeting.”

“

Amazing. It probably helps that we've also used matches. But we got checks—nice-sized ones—from members who had NEVER before written a non-membership check.”

“

The engagement we receive on Facebook when utilizing storytelling is tremendous!”

“

Twenty percent improvement in year-end giving.”

Why Bad Stories Happen to Good Causes

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I find that most people know what a story is until they sit down to write one.”

—Flannery O’Connor

Storytelling is a craft. If you’ve never tried to write a story, it can be humbling and difficult, but it can also be joyous and rewarding. Trying to write a story will help you get better at spotting good stories, which in turn will help you write better ones.

A great place to start is to identify your character, his or her desires and conflicts, and build from there. But watch out for these common problems along the way:

Fear of emotion

While people might not be afraid of emotions, organizations usually are. Nonprofit staff members tend to be a very left-brained lot: highly educated, literate, rational folks. Try not to look down on emotions like passion, love, fear, or rage as noise that needs to be minimized or hidden.

It feels good to give because giving is mostly emotional and irrational. It feels good to speak up. Rage—at wrongdoing, at injustice, at suffering—has been the linchpin of social change movements since the beginning of time. Ever wonder why your online activists keep sending letters to Congress? It gives them the feeling of having done something.

We appreciate your support during the past disasters, and we urgently need your help now!

Please return the above reply form, along with the most generous donation you can make, before January 14th. Just \$19 can provide a hot meal, warm blanket, and comfort kit containing basic necessities to a disaster victim.

How could this letter from a nonprofit have been more successful with a story and emotion instead of statistics?

(Source: Future Fundraising Now)

Bad casting

You've probably heard this story before: "Something bad happened. Our organization fixed it and saved the day. The end."

When an organization is cast as the hero of a story, the appeal of the individual is ignored. Many organizations are fantastic, but they probably can't pull at a reader's heartstrings. Try casting someone who benefited from your organization as the hero, such as a cat that was given a new home or a child who received a new pair of shoes.



Since Amanda started the therapy program, she has gained upper-body strength and improved her posture, learned many skills, and developed greater independence. She can dress herself, brush her teeth and hair, and play by herself. Now we hear all the time, "Let me do it!"

The "everyone can do it" myth

Good storytelling is really hard. Hire writers, or engage your organization's very best ones, to craft your most important narratives. Remember, it takes time to craft a great story. Keep trying, and ask others for feedback and advice.

It's storytelling, not stories telling

More is not always better. In fact, more can be worse if you haven't worked out your organization's central narrative. A multiplicity of stories may confuse rather than inspire readers, so think about what your central narrative is. It's the story that expresses the heart and soul of what you do. Your central narrative may even be the story of how your organization came to be founded.

Happy ending syndrome

If an organization wants to send out a call to action, to organize or to rabble-rouse, it needs to tell stories that don't always have happy endings. Nonprofits can ask constituents to step into the narrative and help craft the ending. If you already have a happy ending, why should your donors help? Or, if your story does have a happy ending, how can you use it to tell supporters how their donation was used or how their volunteer effort made a difference and inspire them to keep giving?

Tell Your Story with Visuals

A picture is worth so much more than 1,000 words! They inspire, organize, and express things incredibly fast and with great emotion. Don't forget them when sharing your stories, especially with email. If you need a better email tool to send appeal with great images, [talk to us!](#)

Find inspiration

Look to other organizations you admire and see how they are using images. Here are a few

- [Gardens for Health International's](#) website has beautiful images of their work. Most of their images are action shots with high color contrast that leave the viewer feeling positive.
- The [St. Anthony Foundation](#) has a great collection of photos from their Willing to Serve campaign (including some famous faces).
- The [Arts Council of New Orleans](#) never misses an opportunity to take pictures at community events showcasing the arts in their area.
- Public radio station [90.7 KSER](#) has a unique way of highlighting their staff members and behind-the-scenes moments with images on their Facebook page.



To recruit volunteers and supporters, the St. Anthony Foundation in San Francisco used Facebook to showcase a collection of images featuring current volunteers, local famous faces, and their clients posing with their dining room's newly branded cafeteria trays.

Organize your ideas

Organizing good examples and the images you have available helps set an expectation for the kind of images you want:

- Start a [Pinterest](#) board and collect images you admire. When the time comes to work with a photographer, show them the images you've collected.
- Think about the work your organization does. How can you capture that in an image? Are there any upcoming events that would serve as good photo opportunities that can help tell your story? Would an on-site photo shoot or a series of pictures of your fieldwork do a good job of illustrating your mission?

Getting started

When moving beyond inspiration to taking and choosing photos, don't forget the basics:

- Use photos to help tell your story.
- Choose photos that grab the attention of the viewer (Human faces are best!).
- If you can't take your own images anytime soon, use stock photos.

Sharing stories that have pictures

Before you start publishing images online, sharing them with the media, or adding them to your annual report, be sure to have the following:

- Photographer's name (Don't forget to give credit!).
- Caption to accompany the image. (Captions are read more often than blocks of copy.)
- Relevancy. Images need to enhance your story, not distract or confuse.

Storing your photos

Once you have a solid collection of photos that represent your work, what do you do with them? Here are suggestions for storing and managing photos:

- Your organization's shared drive is one place where you can keep images. Photos stored on a shared drive are accessible to everyone in your office and, unlike a desktop computer, can be recovered if your organization's system crashes.
- Another great option is to store images online. Consider using a free or low-cost tool such as [Amazon Drive](#), [Box](#), or [Dropbox](#).

Get More Mileage from Your Stories

Stories are evergreen content, and considering how much time can go into creating them, it is wise to think about how you can use this content more than once. Volunteer Lubbock shared it's strategy for getting more milage from their stories:

Our redesigned website, VolunteerLubbock.org, launched in November. We added a story piece as a main content feature. Since launching, we've been able to connect those stories through social media, and I've also been using them in email to donors. For example, before a visit, I might send an email that says, 'I thought you might like to read this great story,' or, 'We have a story up about this project you are interested in.'

"Ever since we started using stories on our website—and more and more in our donor communications—we're starting to see a steady uptick in total donors and donor giving."

The strategy here is to have a "home base" for your stories (your website), and then to share those stories with a link back to your website. This is great for social media content, emails, and other communications. Not only does it provide you with a content stream of content, but it also brings people to your website.

Storytelling Resources from Our Blog

[Your Storytelling Questions Answered](#)
[6 Types of Stories That Spur Giving](#)
[The 5 Cs of Great Nonprofit Storytelling](#)

Some Examples of Great Storytelling

[Nashville Rescue Mission's newsletters](#)



ARNOLD
PALMER
HOSPITAL
For Children

[Arnold Palmer Hospital for Children](#)

[YMCA's annual report](#)



ecojustice
[Ecojustice](#)

Cancer Care Connection: This organization hosted a walk-a-thon and asked participants to submit selfies about why they were "walking away from cancer." Here are three examples:

[Example One](#)

[Example Two](#)

[Example Three](#)



[Community Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma:](#) This food bank features hunger stories on their website. These stories focus on one person/one family, their struggle with hunger, and how they've benefited from the food bank.

Telling Your Nonprofit's Story

Are you telling a compelling story on your nonprofit's website and donation page? Answer these questions to assess the quality of your stories.

On your homepage...

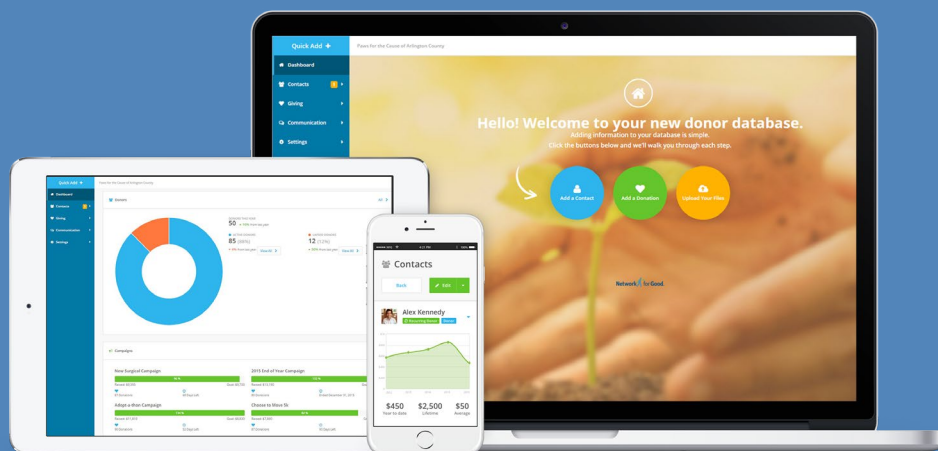
- Do you have a story that's front and center or the start of one?
- Does your story have a clear protagonist that is a person or a character - and *not* your organization?
- Do you have a large picture with the face of a person or an animal that triggers emotions?
- Does your story inspire supporters to donate?
- Is your story unique and a little unpredictable?
- Does it create a sense of urgency? Is there something important at stake?
- Is there a lesson in the story that is connected to your organization?
- Do you keep numbers and statistics to a minimum?



On your donation page...

- Do you have a call to action on your donation page that relates to your story?
- Do you keep the story going by assigning real value to donations, such as "Donate \$100 to feed a child for one year?"

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Our suite of tools includes everything you need to grow results, not expenses. Schedule a time to talk with a fundraising consultant today!

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