A Changemaker's Guide to Storytelling
How to Engage Heads, Hearts and Hands to Drive Change

We live in story like fish live in water. We swim through words and images siphoning story through our minds the way a fish siphons water through its gills. We cannot think without language, we cannot process experience without story.

– Christina Baldwin, Storycatcher: Making Sense of our Lives through the Power and Practice of Story

Humans are hard-wired for storytelling. We make sense of the world around us through narratives—they form a core part of our culture, belief systems, organizations and personal identities.

New media and online distribution channels make sharing our stories easier than ever. What makes great stories so powerful is their “stickiness,” their ability to draw our attention and engage our hearts and minds. The best stories spread good ideas like wildfire and inspire us to take action. And that's precisely what makes storytelling such a powerful tool for social innovators.

Anyone who has a new idea and wants to change the world will do better by telling stories than by any amount of logical exhortation.


Telling your story is a transformational experience for both you and your audience. It encourages (and sometimes forces) you to clarify where you came from, where you are at the moment and where you want to be in the future. Storytelling is about making sense of the wild world around us, connecting with people and inspiring empathy. Telling an authentic story can make your ideas accessible and acceptable to others and invite them to become part of your evolving journey to effect positive social change.

Everyone has a story. This guide will help you tell yours.

Five Key Ingredients of a ‘Sticky’ Story

1. Know your core message.
   o Why are you telling this story (raising awareness, fundraising, advocacy…)?
   o What is your main message? Try telling your story in six words or less to get at its core.
   o Look at Puppies are Not Toys by ASPCA for a good example of this.

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2. Know your target audience.
   o Who are you trying to reach?
   o You can tell the same story in an infinite number of ways and on nearly an equal number of media. Make sure your story addresses your target audience and clearly states “what’s in it for them.” Capture their attention quickly. Surprise them. Teach them something.
   o Speak to their interests and worldviews. Enable your audience to find themselves inside the story and make it their own.
   o See how Follow the Frog by Rainforest Alliance does this effectively.

   o Establish an emotional connection with your audience—inspire empathy. Being vulnerable, authentic and truthful makes you more relatable and enables you to gain their trust.
   o Through which voice(s) do you want to tell your story? (Tip: If you're writing, write the way you talk.)
   o Which perspectives do you want to include?
   o What is the overall tone of your story? How do you want your audience to feel during the different parts of your story?
   o The Story of Mama Hope by Mama Hope provides a good example of being authentic and vulnerable.

4. Make it concrete.
   o Make it concrete, visual and jargon-free. Paint the scene. Use sensory information and human actions. Engage the five senses—sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell. Use simple language. Be pithy, but know when and where to add color.
   o The following excerpt from the chapter “A Day in Samoa” in Coming of Age in Samoa by anthropologist Margaret Mead illustrates this well:

   *It is high noon. The sun burns the feet of little children, who leave their palm leaf balls and their pin-wheels of frangipani blossoms to wither in the sun, as they creep into the shade of the houses. The women who must go abroad carry great banana leaves as sunshades or wind wet cloths about their heads. Lowering a few blinds against the slanting sun, all who are left in the village wrap their heads in sheets and go to sleep. Only a few adventurous children may slop away for a swim in the shadow of a high rock, some industrious woman continue with her weaving, or a close little group of women bend anxiously over a woman in labour. The village is dazzling and dead; any sound seems oddly loud and out of place. Words have to cut through the solid heat slowly.*

5. Make one clear ask.
   o What action do you want your audience to take? How can your audience become part of the evolving story?
The ‘true’ story is not the one that exists in my mind… The story in my mind is nothing but a hope; the text of the story is the tool I created in order to try to make that hope a reality. The story itself, the true story, is the one that the audience members create in their minds, guided and shaped by my text, but transformed, elucidated, expanded, edited, and clarified by their own experience, their own desires, their own hopes and fears.
- Orson Scott Card, American Science Fiction Writer

The Narrative Arc

Every story has a beginning, middle and end. Describe the central conflict or challenge you hope to address to inspire hope through your solution. The following questions can be helpful in planning your story.

**Context** - setting the stage
- Who is your audience?
- Where/when is your innovation applicable?
- Why should your audience care?

**Conflict** – introducing the central challenge
- Describe the social, environmental, or political climate.
- What is the need, problem or challenge you are trying to address?
- Why is there a need for your solution? What are the deeper social causes of the problem?

**Climax** - the turning point or “aha” moment
- What is your solution? How did you get to your “aha” moment?
- What’s unique or transformative about it? How are you seeing the central challenge in a new light? How is it different from the standard approach to this problem?
- How and why does it address the need you identified?
- How are you involving the beneficiaries and surrounding community?

**Resolution** – resolving the central challenge
- What are your plans for your social venture? What is its broader significance?
- How can your audience become part of the evolving story of your social venture, or the social cause it relates to? What can they do to help?
Types of Media for Storytelling

Once you have distilled the core components of your story, you can tell it using a variety of media. Choose the media that best allows you to engage with your target audience. Explore the examples below for inspiration and best practices.

The Written Story
These stories are primarily text-based but may include some images.
  - Story of Change: Rob Hopkins and the Transition Network by Ashoka Fellow Rob Hopkins
  - Story of Change: Ken Banks and kiwanja.net by Ashoka Fellow Ken Banks
  - Story of Change: Karen Mattison and Timewise by Ashoka Fellow Karen Mattison
  - Story of Change: Mohammad Al-Ubaydli and Patients Know Best by Ashoka Fellow Mohammad Al-Ubaydli
  - Story of Change: Lily Lapenna and MyBnk by Ashoka Fellow Lily Lapenna
  - Junior Smart: Story of Change
  - Charlie Murphy: A Story of Change by Ashoka Fellow Charlie Murphy
  - The Road from Garbage to Gold, Ashoka Fellow Albina Ruiz’s story by Beverly Schwartz, author of Rippling
  - Creating an Empathy Movement, Ashoka Fellow Mary Gordon’s story by Beverly Schwartz

The Digital Story
These stories can include a variety of media such as full-motion video with sound, animation, photographs, text, and audio. Try to keep your videos 1-3 minutes in length. Production quality is far less important than having a clear, authentic message.

Classic Full-Motion Video with Sound
  - African Men, Hollywood Stereotypes, by Mama Hope
  - Solid Women by Fonkoze

Narrative and Imagery
  - Mountaintop Library Expands Horizons in Nepal by Room to Read
  - Sasha Chanoff- Ashoka US Fellow by Ashoka
  - Ashoka Fellow Jason McLennan on the Future of Green Building by Ashoka
  - One In 8 Million by New York Times
  - Trailer of Burbax, Ethiopia by A Glimmer of Hope

Animation
  - The Girl Effect by The Girl Effect
  - Water Changes Everything by charity:water
  - Why Glasses? by Vision Spring
Call to Action and Annotations
  o World Water Day by charity:water

“Choose Your Own Story”
  o Read the Signs - Human Trafficking Interactive Game Help by Crimestoppers UK

Using Mobile Device/Low Tech
  o It's In Your Hands by Watershed Management Group
  o Rippling Impact Nigeria by Youth Venture

Audio
  o StoryCorps Audio Stories

Online Storytelling Resources
For detailed guides and information on creating compelling stories using various kinds of media, check out the following resources.
  o OEDb's Writing Resources
    o Provides resources and tools around all aspects of writing including style, grammar, organization, and references.
  o See3's Video Resources
    o Offers advice on what types of camera to use; where to get good, cheap equipment; video editing software; hosting videos; inexpensive images and music for videos; online video tools; training staff to learn how to shoot or edit video; and getting video releases.
  o Into Focus: Benchmarks for Nonprofit Video and a Guide for Creators by See3, YouTube and Edelman
    o Illustrates best practices in effective nonprofit video.
  o Vimeo's Video School
    o Lessons and tutorials on video creation.
  o Lynda Tutorials
    o Video courses on storytelling, video production, photography, and more.
  o Stanford d.school’s Storytelling and Visual Communication Studio resources
  o Animoto
    o Simple video creation service (online and mobile) that allows you to use your own pictures, video clips, words, and music.
  o YouTube Nonprofit Program
    o Provides nonprofits with video tools such as linkable annotations, call-to-action overlays, and exclusive YouTube Channel features.
  o Transom Tools
    o Offers free tools and resources for voice recording.
  o Narrativ
Free course on the art of storytelling.

Books on Storytelling

Digital storytelling
  - Details the history and methods of digital storytelling practices, covering the entire story creation process.
  - Provides advice on digital storytelling and includes examples of effective stories.

Storytelling techniques
  - Traces seven basic story plot types throughout the arts and humanities.
  - Explores six principles for creating messages that stick.
  - Covers 15 storytelling axioms to influence people to believe in your message.
  - Includes practical storytelling techniques and explores how story transforms relationships.

Changemaker stories
Spreading Your Story

Use technology to advance your story

- Share your story on Changemakers. Also consider spreading your story through your website or blog, email newsletters, YouTube, Vimeo, Facebook, Twitter, Google+, SoundCloud, Pinterest, and other communications.
- Send your story to known supporters who can then share your story with their networks to maximize its reach.
- Choose a compelling headline to make your story more shareable. Check out Upworthy for examples.
- Consider entering your digital story into contests such as DoGooder Awards and TechSoup Storytelling Challenge.