



Story workbook

Improving Fundraising Through
The Art of Storytelling

i.d.e.a.s.™

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**A Program Designed for
UCF Center for Public
and Nonprofit Management**

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How to Find and Use Stories for Fundraising

1. In your many years of experience with your organization, you have undoubtedly had a wide array of experiences that potentially could become powerful fundraising stories. Here's a series of questions that may prompt you to remember events and anecdotes that can be turned into usable stories:

- a) What has been your organization's biggest setback, and how did you overcome or solve the problem?
- b) Who are the people in your organization that you admire the most? Why?
- c) Which of your staff members has impressed you the most? Why? What have they done to win your admiration and respect?
- d) What stories have you heard within the organization that made the biggest impression?
- e) What is the most outstanding story that you have ever heard that expresses your mission and values?

2. Your co-workers can also be a source of important stories which you can add to your organization's repertoire. First, to find these stories requires that your staff knows that you're in the market for a good tale that illustrates an important organizational value and involves some degree of heroism. Second, ask each of your staff members, from secretary on up, if they have a good story for you. And, on a regular basis seek new stories. It's a good way to stay in contact with all your staff.

3. If someone brings a story to you that's usable, **write up the story and distribute it around the office.** It's a great way to recognize the hero of the story as well as reinforce your organization's values, vision, and concerns.



How to Create a Good Story

There are many things to consider when taking a raw experience and turning it into a teaching story that can be told and shared with others. First of all, you must establish the time of the story in order to facilitate transporting your audience to a different world, with different values, and a different place. For example, “When I was a boy, my father and I set out on a trip across the country in our old Model T Ford” Or, “When I worked in the Sarasota office, there was another technician named Jeb Smith. I never met anyone more committed to getting the job done right. In fact, once he”

It’s also important to establish the place of the story and the personalities involved. And what’s the mood of the story, e.g., distant, intimate, humorous, wishful, fanciful, suspenseful, etc? Also, to turn good anecdotes into stories that can enable learning requires that you convey events through conversations and actions rather than straight narration. Here are a few suggestions:

1. **Start with a dramatic opening** or an heroic deed. Few listeners can resist a story with a good beginning.
2. The best teaching stories are usually true. **Try to verify your facts.**
3. Expand on the anecdote and develop it into an extended story. But keep it succinct and short, something you could tell in two or three minutes.
4. Try to have your story **illustrate one theme or idea.**
5. Have your **story unfold according to events**, not explanations descriptions or summations.
6. **Keep plot details simple and easy to remember.**
7. Remember that a **character is best revealed through his or her actions.** Also, use real names.
8. Remember that the story itself is the important thing—**let events speak for themselves.**



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9. Give the anecdote **an ending that satisfies** the listener's sense of justice.
Give it a **good title**.
10. **Project the image like a film in your imagination.**
11. **Share the story with a friend or colleague** and evaluate what worked and why. What didn't work? Why?
12. **Refine the story** based on these evaluations.



Creating a Good Story, continued

Story Development as Dictation

When we write or develop a story for telling, it should feel like taking dictation. Some may think of this as being seized by the inspiration of the Muses, or centering in the heart, or relaxing into a state of heightened creativity. Whatever it's called, the experience is characterized by listening, alertness and receptivity, an awareness of entering into relation with something greater than our conscious will. In this sense, we don't have to make ourselves write as much as let ourselves write. Whatever this something greater is, it is the source from which the vision, the understanding, and the words finally flow. Developing a story, then, is more an act of following than leading, the vocation not of the demagogue but of the scribe.

The Story's Predicament is the Material for a Good Story

A story has a precipitating event, a conflict, a resolution of conflict, and a point. But what precipitating event? Which conflict, and how to resolve it? And what is the point? Whatever form the story takes, it must be imbued with the life you or the story's contributors know, the life that has moved you or them to this point, or it most assuredly will not move the reader. You don't need to fabricate drama. Every life has drama; the gift you can bring to the story is to discern this drama and expand, accentuate, and articulate it in an edifying way.

Conflict: An Essential Ingredient

A story needs a through-line that's anchored in a central conflict or predicament. This conflict should build, as opposed to being random or episodic. Someone offered this formula for plot structure: Get a hero. Get the hero up a tree. Throw rocks at the hero. Throw bigger rocks at the hero. Get the hero out of the tree. The resolution of the conflict (hero comes out of tree) gives the story a climax.



Without a through-line, a story wanders aimlessly, somewhere between the living and the dead. Without conflict that builds, the emotional impact is as flat as last year's seltzer. Come from somewhere. Go somewhere. Make a lot of trouble along the way. Get there.

At the Heart of Things: The Universal in the Particular

The art of developing or writing a story is a matter of vision—specifically, the ability to recognize the universal in the particular. Imagine being almost run over by an ambulance that came tearing down the country road. The ambulance could represent, in a sense, the double-edged sword of technology. How ironic it is irony that the very things that we depend on to save us may end up killing us. Can you see how this “point” goes even beyond the context of technology, to a farther reaching import. This is a good example of the universal in the particular. Because the universal resides in the particular (holographically), your predicament is your material, and if you can make your vision coherent enough, like the laser light used to create a hologram, you will discern the universal theme or themes in your particular experience, or that of someone whose story you are creating. You have to learn to listen for the truth currents coursing through people’s experiences. A good story beats with its own life; it has heart, rhythm. You find this rhythm by looking honestly and willingly at the here and now, and reporting what you see with as little judgment or censorship as possible. Forget all the lofty and “important” ideas and words. In this sense, all good writing is journalism, even if it takes the form of poetry, fiction, an essay, a screenplay, or a children’s book. The life you or someone else really lives moves through what you write or tell, which is why it can move your readers, leaving them glad that they read what you wrote. Listen for this heartbeat while you’re writing, and keep true to its simple rhythm, always moving forward, on to the next beat. Don’t let yourself get stalled in images or judgments about “writing”



or “the truth.” “The truth” is not the truth. Real truth—the truth that touches the reader because it conveys something universally human—is always at the “heart of the matter,” which means always in the relevant particulars. From this angle of vision, everything is mirror and metaphor.

The Story is Contained in the Details

Forget about grand ideas. Don't give me profound; give me valuable detail. Focus on the nervous tic of your math teacher in the third grade. Or the way you used to cook corn right out of the field in an open fire on your uncle's farm—the way that smelled. Or the fear of waiting for test results from the lab and being put on hold for three minutes. Once you're on track with the details, the particulars of experience, see if you can arrange them to capture something universal. The framing of the valuable particulars so as to convey the universal is the art of writing. Valuable detail is the key, as distinct from meaningless trivialities that don't contribute to the general sense of direction and purpose of the piece. Avoid the “fly on the salt shaker” syndrome. Find a balance between grandiosity (macroscopic) and irrelevant detail (microscopic) to hold the reader.

The Story's Structure

Every story has a premise. For example, what would happen to the use of the internet if the government decided to tax all transactions as well as place a tax on every email that is sent? This could lead to a story reminiscent of the Boston tea party, or could go down very different imaginal pathways. A good story also has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

The Beginning, or the Precipitating Event: Something happens to launch the series of events that unfold in the forward motion of the story (plot). This event should be identified early in the piece. In a short story, usually the first few paragraphs establish the precipitating event or situation, sometimes the first few



lines. It can be subtle, a precipitating psychological shift, or more obvious, triggering some external change. This is called the “beginning.”

The Middle, or Character Arc: The Precipitating Event sets into motion a chain of causes and effects that carry the protagonist seamlessly through some significant change or changes. This is called the “middle.” In this sense, the main character is a living map of the plot, the medium in which the story is humanly impressed. If a character does not “arc,” does not go through some important change, the story is likely to leave the reader flat.

The End, or Resolution: Resolution does not mean that everything gets wrapped up neatly in a forced conclusion that leaves the reader without questions or wonder. Resolution does mean that the vision being presented, the premise, the theme, the point, have been presented fully. Resolution will rarely be philosophically or morally conclusive, but will instead offer a dramatic conclusion. This is an important difference. While dramatic resolution brings the conflict to completion, it also may raise questions for the reader that remain unanswered by the piece. When the writer does this skillfully, she has come upon the part of the story called the “end.” It is important to recognize this and not write past it.

Plot

Don't let plot bury your story.

What Plot is Not. . .

- a series of essentially unrelated episodes or scenes
- fragments that create mood or stir the senses but lack focus and direction
- anything gratuitous: sex, humor, weirdness, violence, intellectuality, character quirkiness, drama.
- arbitrary conflicts—with or without resolutions—that don't serve a larger



context of conflict and resolution.

What Plot is. . .

- through line
- the story's sense of its own identity
- confident, decisive forward motion the thread that strings the dramatic beads of the story together
- a meaning-arc that gives the reader a sense of closure and completion
- the soul of the story (words are the body)

Capturing the Reader's Attention

If it's a written story, it is essential to bring the reader into the story right away, to create a world with an emotional atmosphere and gravity that puts the reader's feet on the earth of what you have to say. Without this, he or she won't care a whit about your characters or their dilemmas. Detail, to lay a claim on the reader, has to be honest.

Heart-honest. Relevant. Rooted. It has to point somewhere and stay true to itself. This somewhere is a compass heading you never abandon.

Some Pointers:

Good writing is built on the power and beauty of economy. As Churchill said, "Use the shortest word that will do the job." Don't WRITE, just write. No purple prose, no neon twilights. Simplify. Experiment with underwriting. As the saying goes, "Less is more." Believe it.

Identify in a single sentence, the theme or point to your story. If you can't state it clearly in a sentence, you're not ready to start writing. The idea may change, evolve during the writing. Often your characters will redirect you. Still, have a good idea of where you want to go before pulling out of the driveway.



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Language is music, which means that good writing doesn't just "say," it "plays." Short, staccato sentences convey suspense. Long, winding sentences carry the reader along and draw him in gently and gradually. Experiment with the rhythms and cadences of your native tongue. Mix up sentence length. Feel the emphasis, the punctuation, the rim-shots and violin passages of a phrase. Play with this, and keep it all simple.



How to Learn and Tell a Story

1. **Learn the plot first.** Fix in your mind the major sequence of events.
Visualize the events, the scenes, the characters.
2. If it helps, **write out the story first, in outline or finished form.** Your Story Prompter sheet can provide all the information you need to map out the story in preparation for telling.
3. Some people find it helpful to create a storyboard of the main action in order to better learn the sequence of events. We call this "comic strip memory."
Take two 8½ X 11 sheets of paper and using both the front and back divide each side into four squares. You'll have sixteen total squares. In each block draw small stick figure sketches of the major scenes. In this way you will be able to see the story from beginning to end in just a glance, and you will have developed iconic or picture images in your brain that are easier to remember than verbal or scripted forms.
4. Try telling the story in rough form, using your own words, and not paying attention to details, and the smoothness of telling. Do this with a friend, colleague, or into a tape recorder. It sometimes helps to record the story verbatim on a tape player and listen to it several times before attempting to learn it. Keep your rough storyboard in front of you, and glance at it from time to time if you need help remembering where you are in the story. Ask your partner for feedback at the conclusion. (Below are some suggestions for how to give feedback. You may want to coach your telling partner in how to give constructive feedback before you begin.)
5. There are no prescribed ways to tell a story. The same story can be told many different ways, all effectively. A lot depends upon your audience. I recommend that you experiment to find what is both most comfortable for you and best fits your own personal style; and, what is best received by your audience.



6. Start off at a walking pace. That way you've got room to speed up and slow down, as the story requires. Loudness, or softness of voice, can be used for emphasis at times, in addition to changing the pace or interjecting pauses, but don't overuse it.
7. After getting feedback you might want to cut out certain parts of the story and embellish other parts. A rule of thumb is to cut tedious lengthy descriptions of thoughts or emotions. Use metaphors to describe emotions instead of technical, psychological words. Those parts that your listener particularly enjoyed, stretch out. Notice which sections of the story need further development. Avoid side-trips unless they add suspense or help to paint the picture of an important character.

Guidelines for Feedback:

1. **Give positive, specific feedback** about: Parts of the story you liked and the parts that you thought were very clear; and, ways the person told the story, e.g., their voice tone, use of eye contact, use of appropriate emotion, etc.
2. **Ask for clarity** on points you didn't understand. For example, "I didn't understand what happened when"
3. Suggest parts they might want to cut or stretch.



Making Your Organization's Mission & Values Real

In the space on the next page, list out your organization's mission and stated values. If there are some implicit values that are not visibly articulated, list those as well.

Now, choose one of those values and think of a story about yourself or someone else in the organization that as fully as possible expresses the essence of that value. In a moment, you'll have a chance to share that story.

Now, take a few moments to think of a story for each of the values. In the space below the value, write a brief logline that will help you remember the story for future telling.

In the movie business, a logline is a short phrase or sentence that works as a shorthand to describe a story. Your logline answers the question: What is your story about? Here are three questions to ask yourself as you write your logline:

Who is the main character and what does he or she want?
Who or what was standing in the way of the main character?
What makes this story unique?

Here are a few examples:

- ✦ Value—service; Logline: An hourly employee of our organization drove 100 miles on her day off to ensure that a family would have their child's medication.
- ✦ Value—innovation; Logline: On her own time, and without permission of her manager who would have disapproved, Sally Blake spent her lunch hours developing an electronic bypass to allow patients to securely access their own medical records.



My organization's mission, values and stories

Mission: _____

Logline: _____

Value: _____

Logline: _____

Value: _____

Logline: _____

Value: _____

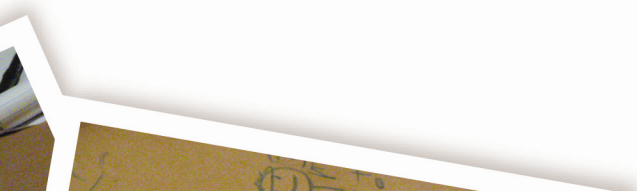
Logline: _____

Value: _____

Logline: _____

Value: _____

Logline: _____



Your Organization's Angels & Heroes

List 5 angels or heroes below who have made a difference for your organization and the people you serve. Now, choose one of those angels or heroes and think of a story about that person and how they made a difference for someone else. In a moment, you'll have a chance to share that story.

Now, take a few moments to think of a story for each of your angels or heroes. In the space below their name, write a brief logline that will help you remember the story for future telling.

Angel 1: _____
Logline: _____

Angel 2: _____
Logline: _____

Angel 3: _____
Logline: _____

Angel 4: _____
Logline: _____

Angel 5: _____
Logline: _____



Understanding Your Audience

Who are the key audiences that you must be aware of when you go out into your community to deliver your message? What story are they living in? Can you broadly describe each of these audiences?

Audience 1: _____

Audience 2: _____

Audience 3: _____

Audience 4: _____

In the space below identify an individual from one of those audiences who could potentially be a strong supporter of your organization. Give them a name. What are their key concerns and why does the work of your organization make a difference to them. What is it about a specific story that you might tell that would resonate with their story and background?

Write 2 to 3 paragraphs. Be sure to tell us about this individual and helps us understand why they'd want to help. (use the back if necessary)



Matching Stories to Your Audience

Now, consider each of your audiences and which story you tell best meets their profile, needs, and background, and is most likely to motivate them to support your organization.

Audience 1: _____

Story Logline: _____

Audience 2: _____

Story Logline: _____

Audience 3: _____

Story Logline: _____

Audience 4: _____

Story Logline: _____



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