

Top Tips in Story-writing

Why do we tell stories?

Examples include:

- To create an emotional connection
- To build trust
- To communicate shared lessons, values and experiences
- To influence others
- To teach something new

The role of stories in development is to position our work as part of a larger story which is meaningful to our audience. That means you can't just repetitively talk about the activity or programme. We need to tell our stories about how people's lives are impacted because of what we do, and, importantly, what we supported them to do for themselves.

Remember, it is important for storytellers to keep in mind that they are representing people, not abstract concepts. It is essential to be open to telling the story in a way that represents the subject's point of view.

Features of a great story¹

Great stories have a protagonist or subject, a struggle, and a resolution of struggle. Data and statistics alone do not change minds, a data point only becomes meaningful when we evoke empathy and understanding.

Some stories will be about a community, but remember, stories are most impactful when they are specific about one or two individuals. These individuals can represent the wider community. If you particularly want to write about a community rather than individuals, then this may work better as a case study.

¹ Adapted from Storytelling Handbook: The Basics of Storytelling, Smithsonian Institution, Museweb Foundation

“Storytelling is about capturing an experience, in a narrative form, with a beginning, middle and end. Ideally, a story conveys some personal journey. By including dramatic situations, conflicts and dilemmas, and characters we can root for, great storytelling makes an individual, unique experience feel universal and conveys universal truths.” Ethan Gilsdorf

A story has three structural elements: A beginning, a middle, and an end.

The beginning sets the tone and mood for the story. It introduces the person that the story is about. The beginning also shows a key event or incident which has impacted on the person, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, an accident at work, or a mental health crisis.

The Middle should move the story progressively forward to a final action. This means you provide a set of key examples which move the story along. For example, “this happened, and because of that, this happened, and then this happened too....”

The middle of the story presents a chain of logic connecting the beginning to the end. Each event and action must be relevant and in keeping with the subject and tone of the story.

The End is usually a reiteration of the core assertion of the story. All or many issues are hopefully, or at least temporarily, resolved in the end of a story.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of endings in stories:

- Closed End. One where all the questions raised in the story are answered and all emotions evoked are satisfied.
- Open End. One that leaves some or many questions unanswered and some emotions unfulfilled. In non-fiction, the mood of the story must be determined by the events of real life and cannot be controlled by the storyteller. The storyteller must judge the mood of the ending after studying the conclusions the story has come to based on the turn of real-life events.

Conflict and change are key to story-telling:

Conflict moves a story forward. People try and attain their goals in the face of opposition and obstacles. For example, the lack of healthcare workers with sign language, or stigma towards people with disabilities, or even self-stigmatisation, or lack of confidence. People might not overcome all or any of the conflict, key to story-telling is to reflect their journey.

Stories could also show or reflect the changing power of the subject. In the change processes were they any power structures, norms and behaviours that were challenged?

Change is when something becomes different. Change must occur in a story. In the beginning, the inciting incident introduces change to the character’s life. In the middle, the character must face conflict and, when they do, things change around them and possibly within them. In the end, something must have changed from the beginning and this change lead to the resolution.

How to write a story

The subject of the story, the individual featured, should have an opportunity to tell their story in their own words, rather than the story-teller simply writing up the story from project reports or interactions during activities. Engaging the person directly ensures that they give informed consent for their story to be shared, and gives them agency in how to present it. The story-teller can agree things like whether the person is OK to be named, or whether the story should be anonymised.

Example interview guide²:

- Confirm you have consent
- Tell us a bit about yourself
- How did [the challenge that happened eg COVID-19] impact your life or business
- As a person [mention their specific relevant characteristic, such as person with a disability/mental health condition], how did [the challenge] specifically impact you and people like you
- What did you do with the [name grantee] / what was your interaction with [name grantee]
- How did [the intervention] make a difference in your life?
- How do you feel these days? What lasting changes have there been for you, if any?

The story-teller can interview the person and encourage them to share their story. This can be through informal conversation, or it can be filmed or audio recorded. Higher levels of consent are needed for filming or recording, because it is harder to anonymise the story-teller.

² This is a basic example, see our guidance on interviewing for more examples

Storytelling template for use in writing³

Overview The Title of the Story: The Name of the Storyteller: The Name of the Listener:	
Place: The precise location where the action occurred	
Context: The scene in time (year) and space (country)	
Characters: The actors, their attributes, and roles in the story. For example, their gender, disability, position, etc	
Challenge: The problem or task that triggered the	
Action: The sequence of events before, during, and after the turning point	
The Turning Point: The moment the change happened	
Conclusion: The ending including the moral, lesson learned, or message	

Duty of Care

Share the story with the individual featured, are they OK with it? This is especially important if they are named.

³ Adapted from Asian Development Bank 2017 O. Serrat, Knowledge Solutions, DOI 10.1007/978-981-10-0983-9_91. **Open Access** This table is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 IGO license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/igo/>) which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the Asian Development Bank, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

Think carefully about what the person has shared, do we have any duty of care regarding the content and the individual? For example, have they revealed a stigmatised condition, or accused a family or community member of maltreatment? Have you ensured that the individual understands that their story will be public? Have you discussed with them how to get support and stay safe if they receive backlash after telling their story?

Once you are ready to share the person's story with the wider world, you have a responsibility towards the individual featured, this is especially important when telling stories around stigma and advocacy.

Remember: when you write up the story, it should sound like it came from a real person. Think about how you would relay a story to your friend or parent, and write like that. Development jargon can be put to one side, and everyday language, cultural expressions, and idiomatic turns of phrase used. You should quote or closely paraphrase the person featured in the story.

Other resources

Important anti-stigma toolkit from Time To Change, challenging mental health stigma, including stories from Ghana: <https://time-to-change.turtl.co/story/conversations-change-lives>

Some examples of story-telling in international development:

<https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2017/09/4-projects-taking-a-human-centred-approach-to-international-development-storytelling>

For great resources on storytelling for film and digital, see here: https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/programs_campaigns/brss_tac/sa_mhsa-storytelling-guide.pdf



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