

The Ultimate Guide to Effective Storytelling

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Storytelling has become an essential aspect of marketing and communication for nonprofits. Stories have the power to engage, inspire, and connect with people on a deep level. This means that organizations can use them for a variety of benefits, and that those that learn how to tell stories effectively give themselves a competitive advantage.

In this ultimate guide, we explain everything you need to know to make storytelling work for your nonprofit. We will start with a common definition of what storytelling actually is as well as why it's so important for organizations to get right. We will then move on to how exactly you can improve your storytelling for nonprofits, and provide resources to help you with the entire process.

- What is Storytelling?
- Why is Storytelling for Nonprofits Important?
- 9 Ways to Improve Storytelling for Nonprofits
- Resources for Better Storytelling
- Conclusion

Let's dive in.

WHAT IS STORYTELLING?

Let's first start with a definition of storytelling. While storytelling can mean different things to different people, here is a basic definition that most would agree on:

Storytelling is the art of conveying a message through a narrative or a sequence of events.

It is the way humans have been communicating since the beginning of time. A good story has the power to captivate an audience. Through the narrative it shares, a story can hold a person's attention, make them feel something and (critically) get them to take a specific action. In our context, storytelling for nonprofits is all about communicating the organization's mission, vision, and impact.

This can take many forms. We will dive into specific tips later, but let's first explore some specific reasons why storytelling is so powerful.

WHY IS STORYTELLING FOR NONPROFITS IMPORTANT?

Storytelling is critical for nonprofits because it is an effective way to connect with people on an emotional level. Research shows that people are more likely to remember and act on information presented in the [form of a story](#) rather than facts or statistics.

This reality of stories has a number of positive implications for a nonprofit. Here are four of the most important effects that a good story can have:

Creates Emotional Connections Stories have the power to evoke emotions and create connections with people. By sharing personal stories of people impacted by the nonprofit's work, organizations can create empathy and emotional [connections with their audience](#).

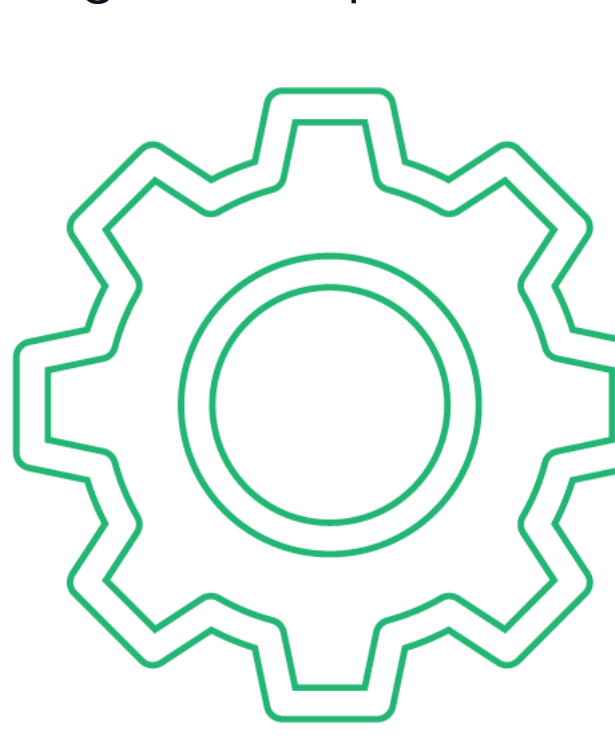
Increases Engagement: A good story holds an audience's attention. Because it's interesting, it will get people to listen better than just about anything else.

This attention is essential for nonprofits to effectively communicate their message and inspire action (also one of the main effects).



Builds Trust: People will only support organizations that they trust. Thankfully, sharing stories of a nonprofit's impact and success can help build trust with supporters, donors, and volunteers. Give potential donors tangible examples of a nonprofit's work, and share them in story format, and you are on the road to success.

Inspires Action: Perhaps most importantly, good stories get people to do something. Effective storytelling for nonprofits can create a sense of urgency and demonstrate the impact that individuals can have. This has a direct effect on an audience's motivation, which can lead to more frequent action (no matter what that action looks like).



Now that we know why storytelling is so important for your nonprofit, let's see how to actually improve it. Below you will find nine of the most reliable ways to make your storytelling better, more engaging, and more interesting to your audience.

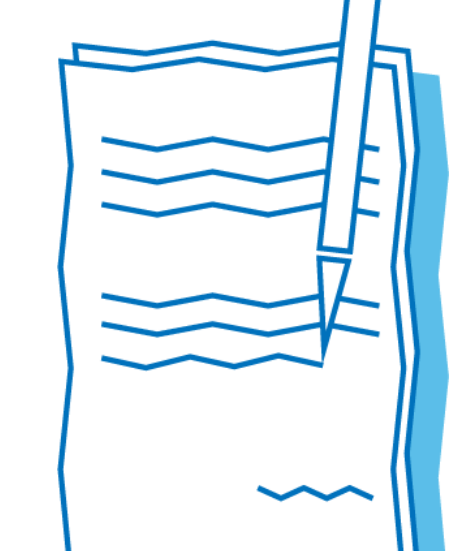
9 WAYS TO IMPROVE STORYTELLING FOR NONPROFITS

1) Know Your Audience: Just like many marketing strategies, successful storytelling requires first and foremost knowing your audience. Who are you talking to? What does your audience look like, and what conditions in their life might make them interested in any story you have to tell?

Before creating any story, it's essential that you research and understand who you are actually speaking to. This is an essential part of any kind of [audience building](#). More importantly, it's how you ensure that the story you are crafting is actually one that will work with your audience. Consider their values, beliefs, and interests - then tailor your story to resonate with them.

2) Craft a Compelling Narrative: A compelling narrative has a clear beginning, middle, and end. It takes the audience on a journey that means something - not just a description of things that happened. Think about what story you want to tell and how to structure it to engage your audience emotionally. This narrative ensures people actually pay attention long enough for you to influence their behavior.

It might be worth your time to consider how stories are often told. The Hero's Dilemma and Three Act Structure, for example, are just two common methods. Putting your story in a common framework organizes your narrative in a way that your audience will appreciate.



3) Show, Don't Tell: One of the most common mistakes people make in storytelling is the overuse of details. Think of an amateur writer who packs a scene description full of as much information as possible; it's exhausting to read. In many ways, storytelling is the same. Nobody wants to read a story that drowns them in background detail before it even gets started. That's why you need to rely as much as possible on showing in your stories rather than telling. How do you do this?

Descriptive language that not only paints a picture in your audience's mind, but also immerses them in the story. Your audience is smart - *showing* them details of a story rather than telling is not only more effective, but also more respectful of their time.

4) Use Emotion: A story without emotion is not a story; it's simply a series of events. The people in your audience are full of a wide variety of emotions - treat your stories much the same. Storytelling should tap into the happiness, sadness, anger, or fear that your audience experiences throughout their lives. Only then will you be able to connect with people on a deeper level.

As for the exact emotions you should have in your story (and where to include them)? This will be highly dependent on the story you are trying to tell. Is it a happy story about one of your organization's clients? Or maybe a sad story about some of the early challenges a beneficiary has faced? These will be two very different narratives. Either way, be sure to read up on [using emotion effectively](#) in stories.



5) Keep it Simple: Simple stories can often be the most effective. Think about book or movie plots that simply got too complex. How did you react? If you are like most people, the overly complicated plot made the story too complex or difficult to follow. Odds are that you felt your attention slipping, or even worse, stopped paying attention altogether.

The way to prevent this problem is to keep your stories simple. Avoid the trap of thinking that a story worth telling has to be complicated - it doesn't. Avoid using jargon or complex terminology that could confuse or alienate your audience. Think about it: this is probably exactly what your favorite books or shows do. You can explain the general plot quickly, and most people listening would immediately know what it was about. This should be the approach you take with your storytelling.

6) Create a Connection: If you are using storytelling in your marketing, you need to connect with your audience. This is how you inspire emotion in people and get them to take the desired action (whether purchasing something or donating to your cause). Indeed, [creating a connection](#) is one of the most important things we try to establish in most of our marketing. So - how do you do it effectively?

Anything that demonstrates the similarity of you and your audience is a good place to start. For example, try highlighting shared values or experiences. This will make your story feel personal and more relatable. Do this consistently throughout all of your storytelling, and you show people why they should remember your organization when it comes time to donate.



7) Include Conflict: Life is messy. Things don't always work the way they should. Bad things happen to good people, and despite the best plans, sometimes stories can take a turn for the worst. Thankfully, conflict can make your audience more engaged and invested in the way your story unfolds.

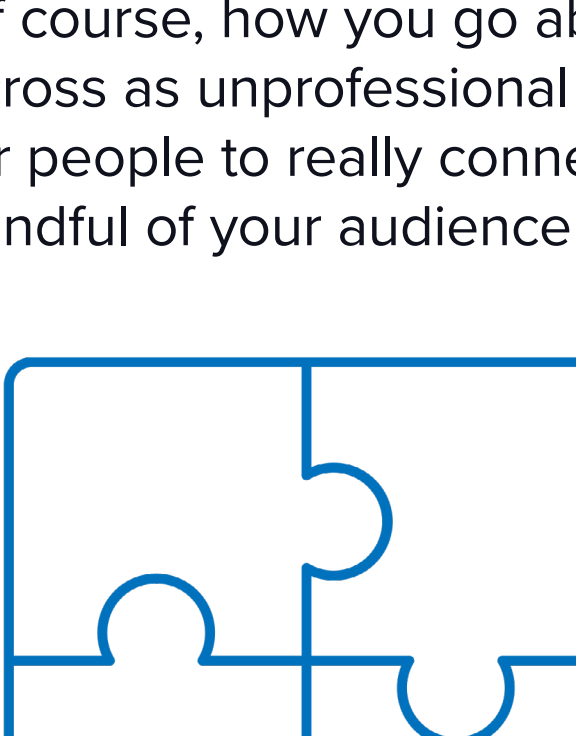
Indeed, this is the [role of conflict](#) in your storytelling. It creates tension and drama, and can help keep your audience interested. Try focusing on a challenge or obstacle that your organization has faced, and show how you overcame it. People don't want to just see a positive outcome - they want to see everything you overcame to get to that point. Of course, try not to include too much conflict. If it's truly true, it can come across as overly negative and not inspiring to people that otherwise might donate to your cause.

8) Use Humor: People want to laugh. It makes a story more enjoyable and interesting. When used effectively, humor can also make your story more relatable to your audience. Nobody is perfect, and sharing things in a humorous way reminds everyone that your organization is made up of real people. Humor can take many forms. It's up to you to reflect on how your organization can use it most effectively in your marketing.

Of course, how you go about [using humor](#) makes all the difference. Use it too much and your organization comes across as unprofessional or, even worse, uncaring. Too little, and your organization might seem a bit too serious for people to really connect with your mission. Regardless of how you choose to use it, here's the golden rule: be mindful of your audience and use humor appropriately in your storytelling.

9) Make it Relevant: Lastly, a factor that should hang over all of your storytelling efforts: relevance. What does your story have to do with the person that is consuming it? Why should they care? If your story is irrelevant to the person reading or listening to it, there's not a lot you can do to keep their attention. The fact is, an irrelevant story is fighting an uphill battle and will almost certainly fail to engage your audience.

This is where relevance is key. Your story should be relevant to your audience and the work that your organization does. Why should your audience care? What about your organization's mission impacts normal people, and why should your audience listen to what you have to say? Use your story to illustrate the impact that your organization has had and how your audience can get involved.



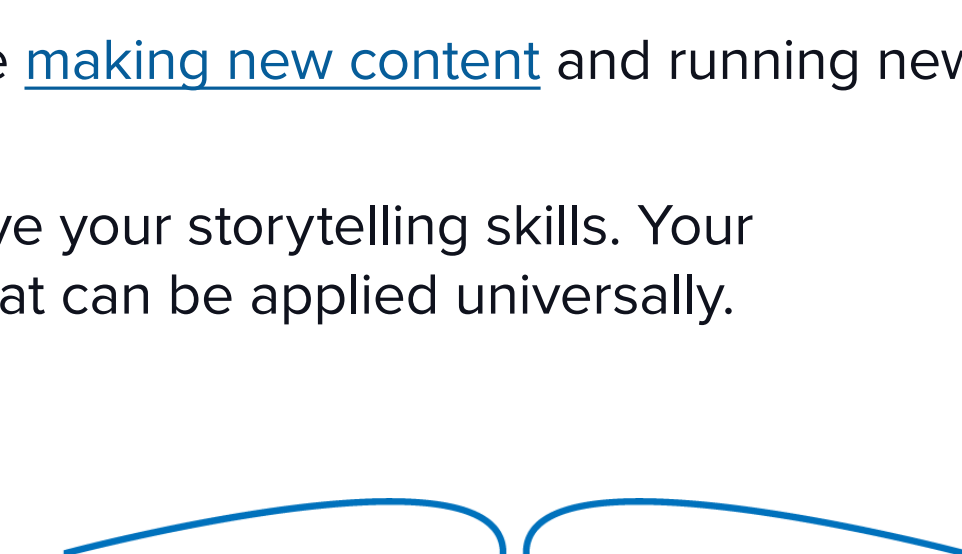
RESOURCES FOR BETTER STORYTELLING

The steps above are a great plan to follow when hosting a virtual fundraising event. Here are some "best practices" that you might also consider:

Good storytelling for nonprofits is a constant learning process. And if you are [making new content](#) and running new campaigns that in mind, here are the best resources you can use to improve your storytelling skills. Your organization's stories will be unique, but these resources have information that can be applied universally.

StoryBrand

This organization offers a framework for businesses and nonprofits to clarify their message and create effective storytelling. StoryBrand provide workshops, online courses, and consulting services to help organizations create clear and compelling stories that resonate with their audience. Looking for the most important information to implement immediately? Check out the [StoryBrand book](#).



The Moth

The Moth is a non-profit organization dedicated to the art of storytelling. They host live events around the world where people can share their personal stories. The Moth also has a podcast, radio show, and YouTube channel where listeners can hear captivating stories from a diverse range of people.

TED Talks

Always informative, TED Talks are known for their engaging and inspiring storytelling. Many of the talks feature speakers sharing personal stories that connect with the audience on a deep level. Watching TED Talks can be a great way to learn from some of the world's best storytellers and get inspiration for your own storytelling.

Pixar in a Box

Not as well known as these other resources, but every bit as impactful, Pixar in a Box is an online curriculum created by Pixar Animation Studios and Khan Academy. It offers free courses on various aspects of filmmaking, including storytelling. These courses are designed to help people learn the storytelling techniques used by Pixar and apply them to their own projects. A great chance to learn from the masters!

CreativeLive

Lastly, CreativeLive is an online learning platform that offers courses on a variety of creative topics like storytelling. They also have courses on writing, filmmaking, and human psychology. This makes CreativeLive a great resource for anyone looking to improve their storytelling skills in a more structured way.

CONCLUSION

As a nonprofit, storytelling is one of the most powerful tools you have at your disposal. Done right, it can get people to pay attention, clarify your organization's mission, and inspire emotion in your audience so that they choose to act. Of course, that is the caveat: you need to do it right.

One last thought: anything can be a story. Always be on the lookout for material that would be of interest to your audience, and think of ways that you could tell a story about it. Connect it to your organization's main cause and you are in business!

We hope our ultimate guide to the craft can be helpful. Be sure to download the PDF version of the guide for handy reference. Happy storytelling!

Are you an enterprise, nonprofit or small business looking for help on your website? Give us a shout! We provide a free consultation. Email us at info@lughstudio.com or call us at (718) 855-1919!