

# STORYTELLING and SOCIAL CHANGE

A guide for activists, organizations and  
social entrepreneurs

Paul VanDeCarr  
Working Narratives

"I know from experience that when two people sit down to tell stories from their lives and to listen, something happens. Together maybe they learn, they forgive, they cry, they remember. Something in them moves, even if it's just a tiny bit. *Storytelling and Social Change* offers valuable guidance for people who want to use the practice of telling and listening to stories to make a positive difference in their communities."

—Dave Isay, founder and president of StoryCorps

"Storytelling can be a part of everything that organizers do. Conducting research. Doing political education. Building Coalitions. Closing the gap between what people believe and the policies we want to push. *Storytelling and Social Change* looks at how we can use stories to do all those things better."

—Rinku Sen, president and executive director of  
Race Forward



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# ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is for anyone who wants to create social change, and who wants to learn how storytelling can help.

The guide is divided into four color-coded sections. The **STRATEGY** section is about how to use storytelling to best effect. The **STORYTELLING** section offers ideas on how to tell a good story. The **METHODS** section covers some techniques in storytelling. And the **STRUCTURE** section looks at how to incorporate storytelling into your everyday work.

Please visit [www.workingnarratives.org](http://www.workingnarratives.org) for an online edition of this guide, and for information on workshops, speaking engagements, online courses and more. Contact the author at [paul@workingnarratives.org](mailto:paul@workingnarratives.org).

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# INTRODUCTION



## **Making social change is hard.**

Just think of yourself for a moment: How likely are *you* to change some belief of yours? Will you change your opinion on guns, abortion, pollution, health care, homelessness?

Let's say your beliefs do change on one social issue, say, homelessness. How likely are you to do something about it, given that you've got limited time and money?

Even if you donate to a homeless organization, how equipped is that group to combine everyone's support to make a substantial change? Is it part of a movement that can face up to the larger economic forces that make people homeless in the first place?

There are material conditions you're trying to change. The hunger and hard sidewalk that your local homeless person encounters every day—that's *physical*. So is the violence many women face, or the climate change that threatens us all. That's not to mention things such as mental-health care and religious freedom, which are no less real for being less tangible.

Those hard truths seem like a pretty tough match for something as quaint as storytelling. And yet, our beliefs, our *stories* are what govern our actions on all these issues. Change the story, and you change the world. That's the theory, anyway.

There is a seductiveness to storytelling. It appeals to the obsession with technology and media that many of us have. You make a video, put it online, and get some views and comments. What's not to love? Besides, it seems so much easier to "change the story" than to "change the world."

“You write in order to change the world, knowing perfectly well that you probably can’t, but also knowing that literature is indispensable to the world.... The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you alter, even by a millimeter, the way...people look at reality, then you can change it.”

—James Baldwin

It’s not.

Stories may govern our actions in the physical world, but the relationship is two-way. Our material needs influence the stories we tell. Problems with the food supply [may have contributed](#) to the rise of Nazi ideology or to the anti-Tutsi hatred that peaked in the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

Or consider more everyday circumstances. If you want but are denied a seat on the subway or a promotion at work, might you not tell yourself stories about the people who get those seats or those jobs? Regardless of whether those stories have some truth to them, the point stands: The [material world](#) and the [stories](#) we tell about it are interrelated.

Still, in order to make any change, people must join together. They must talk with one another to figure out what change they want to make and build relationships to do it. And those relationships are conducted in no small part through stories.

Seen in this light, storytelling is not just a form of publicity but also a means of organizing. It’s not just you telling a story to a passive audience, such as making a web video that induces viewers to chip in a few bucks to your group. (Though that’s valid too.) Rather, storytelling goes in all directions. People respond to your stories; they may contest them or mash them up; they may build solidarity by sharing their own stories through an exchange that you organize.

Storytelling of this sort is a creative endeavor. Every time we tell a story, whether it’s when making a speech or taking pictures, we create something. We discover ourselves and each other and what we can accomplish together. Sometimes the stories we tell *are* the change we make, and they change us just as much as they change the audience. By creating, we stay hopeful and strong, we testify. That’s every bit as important to social change as are the discrete tactical matters of targeting audiences and testing messages.

A single story won’t change the world. But the practice of storytelling might alter its course by a millimeter. Changing the world through stories is as hard as by any other means. It’s not magic, it’s not fast, and it’s not easy. But it’s essential.

# WHY TELL STORIES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE?



Storytelling is exciting in theory, but once you do take a look at your already over-crowded calendar, it can quickly feel like one...more...thing. But if you keep in mind how storytelling strengthens everything an organization does—from recruiting supporters to running programs—it begins to look less like a burden and more like an opportunity. Why tell stories?

## **Because you know from personal experience that it works.**

Think about the past two or three hours. During that time, you've probably heard, told, or thought of many stories. Maybe you listened to a radio news report, wrote a grant proposal, went to a 12-step meeting, attended a religious ceremony, watched a web video, had a therapy session, or fantasized about a vacation. Or you may have plotted a course for how your group will apply pressure to the arc of the moral universe. Story is sometimes described as a powerful "tool," and it certainly can be that. But for a moment, think of stories less as a discrete instrument or product and more as a fundamental aspect of human consciousness; they're an essential part of how we think, feel, remember, imagine, relate—and create change.

**The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.**

—Muriel Rukeyser, *“The Speed of Darkness”*

### **Because the research tells us it works.**

Studies of people’s brains while they’re watching a movie show that “the brain doesn’t look like a spectator, it looks more like a participant in the action,” [writes](#) Jonathan Gottschall. “That’s why our hearts race when the hero of a story is cornered—why we weep over the fate of a pretend pet like Old Yeller. Stories powerfully hook and hold human attention because, at a brain level, whatever is happening in a story is happening to us and not just them.” And neuro-economist Paul Zak’s lab studies [indicate](#) that people listening to a story with a classic dramatic arc release more brain chemicals associated with empathy—and that, in turn, prompts more generosity. Even [DARPA](#), the research and innovation arm of the Department of Defense, has acknowledged the importance of storytelling in a “security context.”

### **Because it builds community...and it’s fun.**

We do nonprofit or activist work because of the change that we’re working for, but also because it helps us form a community. Statistics and lists of facts can communicate information, but stories communicate meaning and emotion, which are what motivate people to act. People don’t relate to issues, they relate to other people—in other words, to their stories. And once we understand one another, we can identify our shared vision for a better world and work to make it a reality. Besides, telling stories is fun and creative. Life has enough meetings, conference calls, lectures, bullet points, and fact sheets.

### **Because stories help people understand the political nature of their own experience.**

If one person tells a story about her own entanglement with the criminal-justice system, audiences might just see her as an individual who got a bad break. But as other people share their stories on this topic, patterns emerge—say, that African-Americans are targeted way out of proportion to their numbers in the population—and the social nature of their experience emerges. And by uncovering the social nature of problems, groups can then formulate action to solve those problems.

### **Further exploration:**

- [“Making the Case to Invest in Story,”](#) by Neill Coleman on [HatchForGood.org](#).
- [“This Is Your Life \(and How You Tell It\),”](#) by Benedict Carey in the [New York Times](#).

# HOW DO WE DEVELOP A STORYTELLING STRATEGY?



Credit: Nation Inside

One of the most common questions people ask about communications is, “How can I make our new video go viral?” And another one: “How can we get a story about us in the newspaper?”

Trying to get in the paper or make a popular video is driven by a valid desire—to tell people about the valuable work you do. But such questions put the cart (tactical matters about particular media) before the horse (your strategy to achieve a goal).

## What do we want to achieve?

A strategy is a carefully considered plan of action to achieve a goal. Your goal should identify some change that you want to make, rather than the way you make that change. Your goal is not to get in the paper or have a viral video—your goal is to create jobs or end human-rights abuses. To develop a storytelling strategy, identify your big goal and then your SMART objective(s).

- **Specific:** Identify a discrete need. “End poverty” is vague, while “increase employment among low-income mothers” is more specific.
- **Measurable:** Set a target number and have the means to measure progress. “Create 500 jobs in high-growth job sector” is measurable so long as you have the means to count the jobs you help create.
- **Attainable:** Your objective can be ambitious, but it should be plausible, given your capacity and the nature of the problem.
- **Relevant:** Your objective should be closely tied to your mission and should come at the right time.
- **Time-bound:** Part of making your objective measurable is knowing when you plan to achieve it. “Create 500 jobs in our city within one year” is a time-bound goal.

“Raising awareness” is almost never an end goal, but rather an intermediate goal, because people must first know about you before they support you. But ultimately you want their support or participation, not just their awareness.

## Who can help us achieve our objectives?

Whatever your goal, you'll need people to help you out. And those people—your audiences—must be clearly defined.

There's no such thing as a "general public" in storytelling for social change. If you're aiming at a general public, you're not being strategic. There are only target audiences you've identified who can help make the change you want to see, or who you work with to decide what that change looks like in the first place.

If your goal is to create 500 new jobs in your city, you may need government officials to fund the project, employers to provide jobs, and job candidates to sign up. You have to communicate with each group of people to enlist their support or participation.

Specify—or "segment"—your audiences as much as you can. In the example above, "government officials," "employers," and "job candidates" are a good start, but even those are broad categories. Get more specific. Maybe you're looking for employers in a high-growth field such as health care; or maybe your target job-seekers are young single mothers, because when they have jobs, the whole family benefits.

There are two kinds of audiences—the people who will make the change you want to see, and the people who influence them. If you're looking for policy change, the people who make the decisions are policymakers, and the people who influence them might be voters, or campaign donors, or union leaders. If you're looking to affect people's behavior—to get them to stop smoking, for example—then smokers themselves are the ones who make decisions, and the people who influence them might include their parents, their peers, or celebrities they admire.

## How do I reach my target audiences?

As mentioned above, many people want to know how get into the *New York Times* or other big media outlets. However, the more important question here is "How do we reach the target audience we've identified?"

Let's say you want to rally high school students' parents around your cause; maybe a parents' magazine or a popular PTA blog would be your best bet. Sure, a nod in the nation's newspaper of record can't hurt, but it's a question of where you put your resources.

The means of reaching your target audience may not even be a media outlet; it might be street theater or conference speakers or Meetup groups. In all likelihood, you'll be using various media to reach your target audience. Your stories can be adapted to different media or venues.

## And what stories do I tell them, or ask them to tell?

Once you know how to reach the people who will help you make the change you're working for, what do you say?

A good story—or at least an effective one—is one that activates your target audiences. And that topic is covered elsewhere in this guide.

The question is more complicated than that, however. Storytelling is multidirectional. You tell stories to your donors. Your donors talk to you. Journalists write articles about your partner groups. People post on Twitter and Facebook about you. Audience members at your documentary film screening will share their stories during the Q&A.

Your job as a communicator is not only to tell stories. It is also to listen and to enable other people to tell stories in such a way that it helps make the change you want to see—or helps you figure out what that change looks like.

For now, the larger point is that good social-justice storytelling is guided by strategy, and developing a "story strategy" requires that we back up and ask bigger questions that, at first blush, don't have to do with a particular story.

## Further exploration:

- [Smart Chart](#), from Spitfire Strategies, is an excellent free online tool that walks users through the process of creating and evaluating a communications strategy.
- [Now Hear This](#), from Fenton Communications, is a guide on advocacy communications with plenty of illuminating examples.

# HOW IS STORYTELLING USED FOR SOCIAL CHANGE?

Broadly speaking, we can think about the functions of storytelling as being to Learn, Organize, Educate, and Advocate—and thereby effect change in public attitudes, behavior, culture, and policy. These four functions often overlap, and most of the organizations profiled here use storytelling in more than one way.



## WHERE CAN WE TELL STORIES?

“The currency of story is not truth, but meaning.”

—Patrick Reinsborough and Doyle Canning

When you're fighting for change, you come up against raw power: people with money, corporations, armies, lobbyists, political posts, media outlets. People in power also have ideas, which they communicate in no small part through stories.

To counter those stories, we must first examine them, using a “[narrative power analysis](#),” a term coined by Patrick Reinsborough of the [Center for Story-based Strategy](#) and former staffer Doyle Canning. They present the example of a neighborhood group fighting a commercial development. A “traditional power analysis” might identify decision-makers (e.g., city council) and the people who influence them (e.g. lobbyists, voters). A “narrative power analysis” would aim to reveal the ideas supporting the developers’ drive to build.

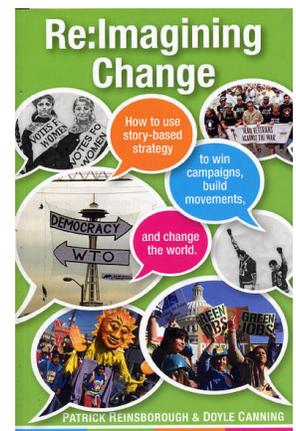
So, the authors continue, if the developers’ narrative frame is “bringing jobs to the neighborhood,” then local activists might “organize those same small businesses that the developer claims to represent” or “organize a jobs fair to show that there are other ways to create employment.”

Social-change stories can be told in or about the places where the social problem is occurring. Canning and Reinsborough have identified five types of “[points of intervention](#)”—“specific places in a system where a targeted action can effectively interrupt the functioning of a system and open the way to change.” Those systems can be physical (such as a sweatshop) or ideological (racism).

Canning and Reinsborough say that the “five types of points of intervention are points of production (for instance, a factory), points of destruction (a logging road), points of consumption (a retail store), points of decision (a corporate headquarters) and points of assumption (a foundational narrative or a place of symbolic importance).”

Any of those points of intervention can be targeted with what we might call a “storytelling action,” such as doing street theater, distributing leaflets with printed stories, making speakers available to give their accounts to the press, or installing art that recasts a public space.

“Identifying different possible points to target,” write Canning and Reinsborough, “is a great first step to help design actions that connect to large campaign and social change goals.”



Credit: The Center for Story-based Strategy

### Further exploration:

- [Re:Imagining Change: How to Use Story-Based Strategies to Win Campaigns, Build Movements, and Change the World](#), by Patrick Reinsborough and Doyle Canning.

# HOW DO WE DO RESEARCH TO SUPPORT OUR STORYTELLING?

Storytelling is hardwired into our brains, right? So why would anyone need to do research to support it? This line of thinking seems to suggest that what stories you tell and how people will respond to them is strictly a matter of intuition, maybe even biology. Not so. Research can complement whatever instinct you've developed and help you answer the following questions:

## Which audiences are worth my time?

Audience research can identify the people whose minds you can actually change, the people who are primed to take action on your behalf, and the decision-makers whose buy-in you'll need to achieve your goals. If you're aiming to change state law, are there particular legislators who are open to persuasion, and what voting bloc or media outlets do they care about? If you need to generate a large number of signatures, what are the demographics of people who are ideologically aligned but not currently involved in your work? **Recommended research types:** stakeholder and peer interviews; public-opinion-survey crosstabs.

## How do key audiences feel about my issue?

Once you know who you want to reach, it's time to use public-opinion research to figure out, as specifically as possible, where they stand on your issue. Are you persuading people who are on the fence, or are you mobilizing people who already agree? What matters to them? Data on public opinion can also be used to show decision-makers that there is existing support for a given cause and that speaking out is a political win. **Recommended research types:** surveys; focus groups; audience interviews.

## Which messages will work?

Through framing and messaging research, you can learn how your target audiences will respond to specific arguments, which elements of the story to emphasize, where to begin, and which events to give a central role. Say you're planning to float a story out to a target audience, but you're not sure how it will be received. Conduct some research then revise to emphasize the elements to which they respond most strongly. **Recommended research types:** focus groups; online surveys; live tests.

## What else is happening on our issue?

In its outstanding communications tool kit, *Vision, Values and Voice*, the Opportunity Agenda recommends doing research to discover who else is working on your issue and how your communications can best complement theirs—or counter it, if you're looking into the opposition. It also helps you find out what stories have already been tried and how (un)successful they've been. Also track media coverage of your issue, which can be complemented by a thorough analysis of the dominant frames, arguments, story lines, and spokespeople. This research serves as an evaluation of your communications impact and can also uncover potential partners as well as sources and reporters likely to cover you in the future. **Recommended research types:** Google keyword tracking; media analysis.

“It is not the job of a good message to say what is popular. It is the job of a good message to make popular what we need said.”

—Anat Shenker-Osorio in her talk “[The Audacity of Audacity](#)”

### What is our reach?

If a story hits the web and no one clicks, does it make an impact? Whether your coverage is in the papers, on TV, or online, understanding your reach is critical to allocating resources. **Recommended research types:** media planning; Google analytics; and similar online tools.

Communications research can be time-consuming, expensive, and, if it sits on the shelf, useless. Keep an eye out for pitfalls, though, and you’ll keep costs down and maximize the value of any research you do.

### Don’t reinvent the wheel.

Start with secondary research to understand what other people have learned. The Opportunity Agenda has high-quality [media](#) and [public-opinion](#) research, as does the [FrameWorks Institute](#) (on framing), [Political Research Associates](#) (right-wing groups and ideologies), the [Pew Research Center](#) (public opinion), and [MDRC](#). Even if you don’t learn everything you need to know, you’ll be able to narrow your research questions.

### Be realistic.

Research takes place in a controlled setting, but social change takes place in a messy world where people are busy and have competing priorities. In its [Discovering the Activation Point](#) guide, Spitfire Strategies recommends trying a “live test”—that is, a trial run of different communications methods and messages to see which works best. You might test out different stories on YouTube and see which gets the most views; different subject lines in your fundraising emails and see which gets the biggest response; or different methods of reaching your target audiences.

### Do participatory research.

Instead of making stakeholders the passive subjects of your research, invite them to become participants. In so-called “participatory research,” people get to define the research questions and help gather data and analyze it. This means you’re getting people more invested in your organization and its work for the long term. The micro-giving platform GlobalGiving has a [Storytelling Project](#) to gather what it calls “micro-narratives” to assess needs and strengths in the countries where it works.

### Further exploration:

- [Vision, Values and Voice](#), a communications tool kit by the Opportunity Agenda.

## HOW DO WE REACH NEW AUDIENCES?



Credit: Sundance Institute

Try “segmenting” your audiences on a 1-to-5 scale, from active supporters to active opponents. Once you have a sense of who these audiences are, you can begin to create tailored storytelling strategies for them.

### **The 1s: Engage your active supporters more deeply.**

One way to grow stronger as an organization is to engage existing backers on a deeper level. The [Skoll Foundation](#) developed the concept of a “funnel” of engagement, moving people to progressively greater commitment. First, a person might see a Skoll-funded documentary film on PBS; then she visits the film website and signs up to see the film again at a house party and discuss it with others; then that group might be invited to make a donation to the social enterprise featured in the film or sign a pledge to take further action. Skoll learned that it was important to create a logical progression from one level of commitment to the next. The key is to provide opportunities for people to become more deeply involved, rather than just having them do more of the same. It’s great to have your active supporters sign petitions once a month or give a year-end donation; the trick is to get them to do those same things more often, or to take on bigger commitments.

### **The 2s: Invite passive supporters to participate by sharing their stories.**

It’s the new media paradigm: Instead of the passive TV viewers of an earlier era, we now have engaged web users who can easily comment on news stories, share videos on YouTube, and donate to Kickstarter campaigns to fund social-justice documentaries. And why wouldn’t they? It’s fun to create media and get involved in a cause. Efforts like

the [It Gets Better Project](#) or the [Nation Inside](#) network invite users to upload their own audio, video, or text stories or comment on others'. By contributing stories, people become personally invested in the issue themselves, whether it's LGBTQ youth suicide or mass incarceration.

### **The 3s: Use pop culture and shared values to reach people who aren't yet supportive.**

The [Harry Potter Alliance](#) redirects fans' energy to take action on problems that might concern a real-life Harry, like hunger or human rights. And the organization gets coverage in popular media that eludes other groups. (Learn more in the chapter on piggybacking on pop culture.) Shared values are especially important in reaching people who are not fully informed on your issue. For example, in talking about equal opportunity in higher education, tell a story that leads with the shared value of "equal opportunity for all and the importance of diversity in 21st-century education," and you've engaged your audience on a deeper level; if you start by talking about affirmative action or a particular legislative measure, you're more likely to get audiences arguing with you, zoning out, or getting lost in the policy details.

### **The 4s: Neutralize the effect of your opposition.**

The best you can usually hope for with the passive opposition is that they remain passive, but there can also be a value in simply showing up. Gay-rights activist and politician [Harvey Milk](#) spent much of the last year of his life, 1978, fighting a California state ballot proposition that would have banned gays and lesbians from teaching in schools; he gave speeches and interviews and took part in debates in many places where people were passively, if not actively, opposed to him. Here was a reasonable middle-aged man who had served in the Army and worked on Wall Street; even where he didn't move people over to his side, he neutralized some opposition simply by sharing his experience and being a real-life gay person who put a face on the issue of gay rights.

### **The 5s: Leverage your active opponents' force in your favor.**

You've got only so much time in a day. Instead of going the probably fruitless route of getting active opponents to change their minds, you can use what organizer Saul Alinsky called "political jiu-jitsu." Activist-pranksters Mike Bonanno and Andrew Boyd [suggest](#) forcing your opponents into a "decision dilemma" so that "all of their available options play to your advantage. When activist group the Yes Men, impersonating a spokesperson for Dow Chemical, announced on BBC TV that the company was apologizing for the Bhopal disaster and allocating \$12 billion to compensate the victims, Dow's stock plummeted. Dow had to issue a statement saying they were NOT apologizing for the Bhopal disaster and would NOT be compensating the victims." Score one for truth.

### **The 1s through the 5s: Spend time trying to reach your target audiences.**

If you want people to lay their eyes and ears on your stories, you must dedicate time to sharing those stories. Garth Moore, the U.S. digital director of ONE, [suggests following the "40/60 rule"](#) for content: "40 percent of your time should be spent creating content, while the remaining 60 percent should be spent promoting content. Why? Because it's more fruitful to spend more time marketing a few good stories than it is writing a huge mass of stories." To do this, he recommends building audiences on social media; cultivating relationships with influencers, bloggers, and content curators (such as Upworthy or BuzzFeed) to promote content; and taking advantage of paid promotional opportunities on Facebook and Google. Telling stories can be valuable for all sorts of organizations. But that's only half the story. Working to build an audience for those stories is just as important.

#### **Further exploration:**

- [Beyond the Choir](#), a report and other resources on the guiding philosophy of Active Voice Lab, a team of communications experts focusing on story, strategy, and sustained impact.

## HOW CAN WE PIGGYBACK ON POP CULTURE?



Credit: The Harry Potter Alliance

I spend a fair bit of time every day watching—or thinking about watching—cat videos and movie trailers. In other words, the kind of stuff that advocates like you (and me!) don't want me watching. You'd rather I spend time on your important issues, like health care or human rights. Maybe you can have it both ways—by piggybacking on pop culture to carry messages about your issue.

### **Redirect people's energy for pop culture in service of social issues.**

The [Harry Potter Alliance](#) (pictured) doesn't hector readers of the best-selling books to stop wasting their time on such fluff and instead pay attention to important issues. Rather, they redirect fans' energy to take action on problems that might concern a real-life Harry, like [child slavery](#) or [Wal-Mart's labor practices](#). And through its Imagine Better Project, the group applied that same idea to other pop-culture phenomena. They energized fans of the 2013 Superman movie to work on immigration reform, for example, given that the hero is an undocumented immigrant from the planet Krypton. "I call it 'cultural acupuncture,'" says HPA founder Andrew Slack. "We look for where the energy is in the culture and try to redirect it to heal the body politic."

### **Reveal or magnify the political side of a pop-culture phenomenon.**

The 2011 Hollywood film [The Help](#) was about a group of African-American maids serving white families in 1960s Mississippi. Some considered the movie politically regressive; all the more remarkable, then, that the National Domestic Workers Alliance capitalized on public interest in the Oscar-nominated film with a campaign called [Be the Help](#). That campaign invited moviegoers and others to help improve legal protections for the 2.5 million domestic workers in the U.S. The campaign included

Oscar-watching parties nationwide, video stories of domestic workers, and social-media outreach; and it garnered coverage in pop-culture media such as *Entertainment Tonight*. Or take a look at how a parody video called “[Black to the Future](#)” imagined what might happen if a black character from the popular film series visited the future.

### Use pop-culture forms to create your own social-justice stories.

Piggybacking on pop culture doesn't always mean leveraging existing books or films or other stories. You can also use larger themes and forms in the culture to create your own stories. The [Opportunity Agenda](#) seized on Americans' enduring love of superheroes and created [Helvetika Bold](#)—a comic-book superhero who uses powerful words to break the grip of villains like Mindset and his weapon, “the dominant narrative.” Helvetika represents the power each of us has to change the world through language and story. (Read a hilarious [Q&A with Helvetika](#) about social-justice communications.)

Superheroes are just one current in pop culture among many: [Bamyam Media](#) creates reality-TV series about social entrepreneurs—first in Afghanistan and now in Egypt—to popularize social causes, connect entrepreneurs to resources, and help create social-sector jobs for marginalized young people. A pair of Senegalese rappers “set the news to a beat and viewership soars,” [reports the Open Society Foundations](#); follow Journal Rappé on [YouTube](#) or [Twitter](#). Superheroes, reality TV, and rap are just a few currents in pop culture; what could your group do by harnessing [video games](#) or adorable cats?

### Team up with artists or storytellers to boost your pop-culture quotient.

You may not have the expertise—or deep knowledge of the latest TV shows—to do substantial work in pop culture. Tap your network or your local art school or writing center to recruit some help creating a pop-culture-engagement strategy. You might create an artist- or storyteller-in-residence position to help you interpret your issue through the lens of pop culture. The Opportunity Agenda guide [Spoiler Alert: How Progressives Will Break Through With Pop Culture](#) offers tips on working with creatives, including: “Allow artists to lead the creative process...or the results may be just flat-out bad art, or, at best, a ‘pretty’ version of campaign talking points.” Be sure to talk with storytellers about roles and expectations up front.

### Learn from the desires and impulses that underlie pop culture.

Stephen Duncombe's brilliant book [Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy](#) encourages readers toward a dreampolitik to imagine justice and channel popular energies to achieve it. Progressives, he writes, have become too wedded to reason—and neglected the importance of culture and fantasy. “If culture stays, and sells, it means that it somehow resonates with the popular will,” Duncombe writes. “And anyone interested in democratic politics ignores such enthusiasm at his or her peril.”

Duncombe explores the impulses and desires behind such pop-culture phenomena as Las Vegas (spectacle), video games like *Grand Theft Auto* (rebellion), advertising (transformation), and the allure of celebrity (to be recognized and appreciated). The desires for spectacle, rebellion, and transformation are not destructive on their own; progressives can channel them toward a more just future. For example, the group [Billionaires for Bush](#), which satirizes the influence of big money in politics, appreciates the need for spectacle. Duncombe is co-director of the [Center for Artistic Activism](#) and co-creator of that group's [Actipedia](#), a wiki of creative activism.

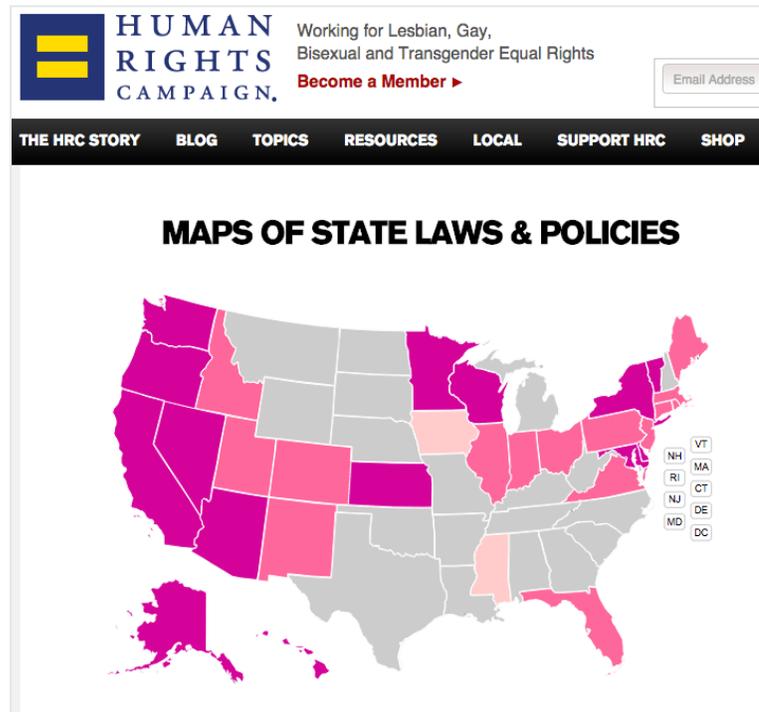
### Beware of pitfalls.

Piggyback too much and you may lose focus or get mission drift. Tying yourself too closely to a passing fad could result in a waste of resources. Or if you link up to a pop-culture phenomenon that ends up attracting lots of negative attention, you could get tarnished in the process.

### Further exploration:

- [Spoiler Alert: How Progressives Will Break Through With Pop Culture](#), 2014, by Tracy Van Slyke for the Opportunity Agenda.
- [Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy](#), by Stephen Duncombe.
- [Pop Culture Salvage Podcast](#), by the Center for Creative Activism, on how the most popular, highest-grossing mainstream culture can be used for good.

# HOW DO WE BALANCE SHORT- AND LONG-TERM STORYTELLING?



Credit: The Human Rights Campaign

President Franklin D. Roosevelt faced this very question when building support for his strategy in World War II. Speaking on one of his “fireside chat” radio broadcasts, he said, “I want to explain to the people...what our problem is and what the overall strategy of the war has to be...so that they will understand what is going on and how each battle fits into the picture.” The president was confident people could “take any bad news right on the chin” if they understood the big picture. (Cited in [Discovering the Activation Point](#), by Spitfire Strategies.)

Maybe your organization is fighting a war of its own. But if you’re always busy with details such as grant reports or social media, you may lose sight of the larger struggle. Following are some ways to avoid that.

## Identify the war you’re fighting.

Roosevelt had a clear objective—to win the war and defeat fascism. But is your long-term goal so clearly articulated? Communications expert Andy Goodman says that in order to move someone, you must supplant the story they have in their minds with a new story. Taking capital punishment as an example, he says most people believe in the principle of “an eye for an eye.” “As long as they have that story in their mind, you’re not going to change their opinion. But the Innocence Project came along in the 1990s and said, ‘We have executed innocent people, are you okay with that?’ And the vast majority of people would answer ‘no.’ So the Innocence Project said let’s slow things down before another innocent person is executed. That changed the story.”

# “Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.”

—Folk song, Mavis Staples [version](#). Adapted from “Keep Your Hand on the Plow,” sung [here](#) by Mahalia Jackson

## Determine your big narratives vs. your smaller messages.

What are the big values or “narratives” animating your work? People of all political stripes have overarching frames, or narratives. Alan Jenkins, director of the Opportunity Agenda, says that one anti-immigrant narrative is “scare resources”—we’ve got only so much to go around, and we can’t have every immigrant come in and take our jobs. The Opportunity Agenda has worked with advocates and policymakers to develop pro-immigrant narratives of upholding our nation’s values and moving forward together. Jenkins says these larger narratives may yield such messages as “We can’t deport 11 million people. We need to move toward solutions that are actually going to work.” Such a “practical solutions” narrative cuts across many issues, from immigration to criminal justice to the economy. What is the overarching story of your cause?

## Consider your time frame.

Are you working to help pass a ballot initiative in the next election, or are you looking to effect a big cultural change over the course of many years? Consider your time frame and plan accordingly. [Brett Davidson](#) of Open Society Foundations cites the example of the marriage-equality work of the Human Rights Campaign (pictured), which he says did “a great job of highlighting small or interim victories and featuring individual stories at the heart of these battles, while maintaining a clear long-term vision.” The HRC’s [website](#) featured stories of victories and setbacks in individual U.S. states, as well as maps and other tools to show the big picture. Now that the Supreme Court has affirmed marriage equality nationwide, the site addresses U.S. adoption laws and also marriage laws in other countries.

## Avoid conflicts between short- and long-term communications.

[Alan Jenkins](#) of the Opportunity Agenda says it may be tempting to use short-term messages that ultimately undercut your long-term “story” or goals: In California, one campaign argued that undocumented immigrants should have health-care access lest immigrant nannies get tuberculosis and infect the kids they take care of. “That message moved some people in the short-term; but it also ran counter to the overarching message that immigrants are part of us.” Advocates realized the damage this message might do and shifted to say that removing barriers to health care is important “so that everyone can participate and contribute to a thriving California.”

## Consider slowing down and just talking.

Sometimes you want to create a sea change on a charged social issue. If that’s the case, there’s [evidence](#) that urging people to take action may cause them to dig their heels in. Aspen Baker of [Exhale](#), a group that addresses people’s emotional health after abortion, says in a [TED talk](#) that she helped develop a “pro-voice” practice of talking about polarized issues; the practice aims to speak of people’s experiences rather than of right and wrong. In this approach, storytelling is used not to advocate for some narrow legislative change but to break a logjam and make way for the possibility of larger change.

## Further exploration:

- [“No Point Going Halfway,”](#) a short video that links the fight against global poverty to other great endeavors, such as the moon landing.
- [“The Girl Effect”](#) and [“The Girl Effect: The Clock Is Ticking.”](#)
- [Then-candidate Elizabeth Warren speaks to voters about taxation and wealth.](#)
- [The Story of Stuff](#) has numerous videos about big-picture consumption issues.
- [“The Life You Can Save”](#) video makes global poverty feel big but conquerable.
- [“Life Cycles of Inequity: A Colorlines Series on Black Men,”](#) the “daily news site where race matters” has a series of videos about black males at different stages of life, including high school, finding work, creating culture, fatherhood and more.

## HOW DO WE MAKE STORIES ACTIONABLE?



Credit: WITNESS

Plenty of stories will move people emotionally, but it's less common that a story will move people to action. Here's how to improve your success rate.

### **Determine what kind of action you want people to take.**

Identify what you want people to do: donate, volunteer, share an item on social media, visit your website. Set precise objectives for your storytelling, whether it's for one particular story (a web video) or a larger enterprise (a story-sharing campaign). The Rockefeller Foundation's outstanding Hatch storytelling tool has a [section on strategy](#) that lays out useful thinking about objectives. In order to move your audiences from awareness to action, Hatch says, your stories should offer some surprise to focus their attention and generate *awareness* of your cause; people, rather than abstractions, to move your audiences to *care*; specific problems and tangible solutions to help them *understand* how they can help; an indication of what will be gained if they act (or lost if they don't) to create a sense of *urgency*; and a show of how their participation will help, so as to drive *action*.

## Mix struggle with success.

Success stories are vital, because they show that your organization actually helps people. However, too many success stories leave out the struggle that the real-life characters go through in order to *achieve* that success. For, say, a mentoring organization, that struggle might be the difficulties that kids have at school, or the sense of unfulfilled purpose that motivates your mentors to sign up. Leave out the struggle and all you have are pleasant anecdotes that nobody can connect with or take action on. Indeed, they might just feel that your organization and the people you work with will be fine without them. But if you leave your stories open-ended—say, the story of a youth who still needs a mentor—then your audiences complete the story by volunteering or donating. What's more, when you tell stories about struggles—the big social problems you work on—that leaves room for audiences to become engaged in the intellectual work of your organization. People may love a winner, but they love a fighter even more.

## Create “pathways to action.”

Provide audiences with “pathways to action,” or ways to get involved—an information table outside a theater, a “sign our petition” button at the end of a web video. Part of creating pathways to action is to build partnerships with other organizations so that you have a structure in place to engage your audiences.

## Make your stories sharable.

People are more likely to read or watch—and take action on—stories that have been recommended by a friend than from other sources. For that reason, make your stories easily sharable: Give your members a chance to add their own stories on a theme, send your supporters sample tweets and Facebook posts so that they can easily post your stories on social media, and network with bloggers to share your YouTube videos.

## Give people a way to meaningfully participate.

Many people have a story they tell themselves about their own life or their purpose: to make her family proud, to sacrifice for his hometown, to be part of a historic movement. “People don’t buy what you do; people buy why you do it,” says author Simon Sinek in his [TED talk](#). In other words, effective leaders don’t sell the product or idea of their organization, they sell its reason for being. The better you can connect your “why” to your audience’s “why,” the more likely they are to join your cause.

## Offer hope and a sense of efficacy.

Hope is essential in a story—after all, why bother taking action on a lost cause? A group called [Images & Voices of Hope](#) is championing what it calls “restorative narratives,” which show how people rebuild during and after difficult times. Restorative narratives may prompt people to become more generous, courageous, and compassionate; there’s even [psychological research](#) to support that notion. The group’s managing director, Mallery Tenore, says the media tends to tell “what happened” stories in the aftermath of a tragedy and not nearly as many “what’s possible” stories.

Another group working to change the kinds of stories the media tell is the [Solutions Journalism Network](#). “Depending on what gets highlighted and what gets overlooked—and how stories are framed—the media can accelerate social progress or do just the opposite,” [says](#) the group. Raising awareness about problems can be counter-productive, [says](#) the group’s director, if you don’t *also* give audiences a sense of what they can do about those problems. To that end, the group aims to replace “Whodunnit?” stories with “Howdunnit?” stories. Do your stories focus exclusively on what happened and who did it? If so, use these organizations’ resources to rethink your stories.

### Further exploration:

- [Images & Voices of Hope](#) has a [research page](#).
- [Solutions Journalism Toolkit](#), by the Solutions Journalism Network.
- [Hatch storytelling tool](#) has a [section on strategy](#).

## HOW DO WE COMBINE THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL?



Credit: Cornerstone Theater Company

The Yale psychology scholar Paul Bloom, [writing](#) in *The New Yorker*, says that our attention may be drawn to the dramatic stories of individuals—say, a baby stuck in a well and the heroic efforts to rescue her—while ignoring the vast numbers of other babies in wells, proverbial or real, and the rational moves we can take to prevent them from falling into those wells in the first place.

Stories do a great job of humanizing social issues, but they may also *personalize* what are fundamentally political problems. Sure, it's glorious if one baby is rescued from a well, but what if the water industry is so poorly regulated that people are regularly falling victim to unsafe conditions at wells? Personal anecdote, therefore, might not only do little or no good for social change but might be *harmful* when it distracts from the larger issues at hand.

Bloom was arguing that empathy is “a measure of our humanity. But empathy will have to yield to reason if humanity is to have a future.”

This might *also* argue for stories that link the personal and the political; stories that engage emotion and reason. Here are some ways to do that.

“The stories we tell ourselves are how we live in the world. It’s incorrect to separate the stories we tell from how we act politically.”

—Michael John Garcés, artistic director, [Cornerstone Theater Company](#)

### Tell “systemic stories” that link personal experience to larger social issues.

Tell a story about a worker who loses her job and health-insurance coverage for her family, and you may get audiences to sympathize with that one person. But tell a story about a worker who organizes her fellow employees when they’re being stripped of their rights, and you get audiences to understand how her personal struggle is tied to big structural challenges like labor law. That’s what the Opportunity Agenda calls a “systemic story”—one that addresses the larger social problems behind a given individual’s experience.

As the organization’s *Vision, Values and Voice* communications tool kit says, several types of stories can help with such big-picture thinking: The “enlightened insider,” such as a health-care provider, has spent time inside of an unjust system and recognizes its faults; an “affected change agent” who took action to change the system, policy, or way of thinking that she is directly affected by (e.g. *Norma Rae* or Erin Brockovich); or an “expert” who can help show how a social problem affects an entire community and how it must be solved at the political rather than the personal level.

### Tell “collective success stories” about groups of people.

Let’s say you’re a homeless service provider and you tell a story about a man who gets laid off from his job, becomes addicted to drugs, and loses his home. Then the man crawls his way out of addiction and homelessness, with help along the way from your organization.

On the surface, it’s a perfectly nice success story. But what are your audiences likely to do with that story? Research by the FrameWorks Institute says that they might think *Good for him!* and leave it at that. Or they might think it was his own fault for getting into this situation in the first place, and further, that anyone who works hard enough can do the same, and it’s their own problem if they don’t succeed.

If you want to not only serve homeless people but also end homelessness, then you’re better off if your audiences understand its root causes.

To that end, you might tell [another kind of success story](#). It’s one that tells of a community of people—homeless people, their advocates, neighbors, and local legislators—who work together to create sensible public policy to reduce homelessness. Such a story might include shared values that people can unite around; put the social problem in context; and show the importance of teamwork, so your audiences feel capable of making a difference.

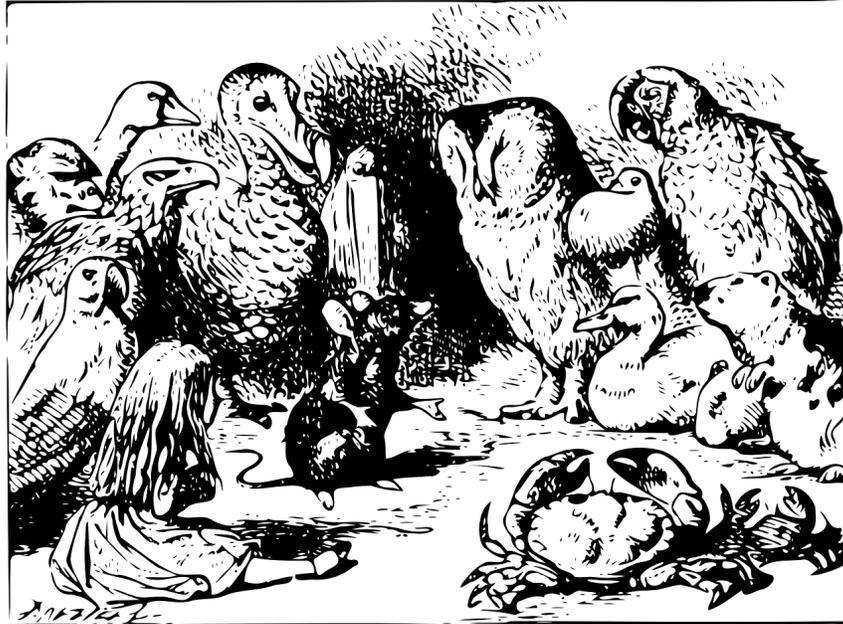
### Tell “Public Narratives” that connect self, us, and now.

The Public Narrative method, described in another chapter of this guide, has each member of a group share their “story of self,” about what brought them to a cause; their collective “story of us,” about who they are as a group and what they hope to accomplish; and their “story of now,” about the urgent social challenge they’ve taken up and the action they’ll take to address it. When used properly, this storytelling method reveals the personal and the political as two sides of the same coin.

#### Further exploration:

- [The Opportunity Agenda’s \*Vision, Values and Voice: A Social Justice Communications Toolkit\*](#).
- [FrameWorks’ page of storytelling resources](#).
- [“The Road That Changed Everything,” a superb example of a collective success story, by charity: water.](#)

# WHAT MAKES FOR A GOOD STORY?



Credit: Illustration from Alice in Wonderland

There is no single formula for a good story, but there are elements that many a good story has: There are people in it, the people want something, they face some difficulties, they decide what to do, they undergo a change, and there is an ending. That's it. A shorter way of putting this is that a person or people undergo a struggle that has an outcome.

## **Establish who your protagonist is.**

Tell your audiences a bit about your protagonist, the person who guides them through the action. Let's say your group works to fight hunger. Is the protagonist an 8-year-old who goes to school hungry every day? Is it the teacher whose students are distracted all morning because they haven't eaten breakfast? Is it the mother who has no car and lives miles from the nearest produce market?

Nonprofits may hesitate to name individual protagonists, because they are dealing with social problems, not personal ones; or because they want to give credit to more than one person for addressing those problems. And indeed, personal stories should be used with caution. For example, a dramatic account of how one man worked his way out of homelessness may lead readers to sympathize with him, but it may also lead them to think that the path out of homelessness is all about individual pluck.

You can tell stories about communities—or specific people in a community—working together to solve social problems. Other chapters in this guide will help you decide which stories to tell and how, as well as how to put personal anecdotes in the context of larger social problems.

Narrative’s power stems from its complexity, indeed, its ambiguity... Following a story means more than listening: it means filling in the blanks, both between unfolding events and between events and the larger point they add up to.

—Francesca Polletta, [It Was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics](#)

### Identify what your protagonist wants or needs and the obstacles in her way.

Desire and conflict are part of what makes a story more than just a sequence of events. Social-sector groups are generally practiced at identifying needs; just about every grant proposal they write has a statement about the need or problem or opportunity they’re addressing. Without desire or need, there are no stakes. What will happen if your protagonist doesn’t get what she needs?

Obstacles are no less important. There’s a *Twilight Zone* [episode](#) in which a career criminal named Rocky Valentine is killed while robbing a pawnshop. He finds himself in a place where his every wish is granted by a smiling man in a white suit. Eventually, Rocky bores of getting whatever he wants and says he doesn’t want to stay in heaven anymore but instead go to “the other place.” The man in the suit [replies](#), “Whatever gave you the idea that you were in heaven, Mr. Valentine? This is the other place!”

Hell is knowing exactly what’s going to happen. And yet, far too many nonprofits leave us in precisely this storytelling hell of no obstacles, no struggle. In the case of a homeless organization, maybe the protagonist is a disabled veteran. He needs a home, but why can’t he get one on his own? What is a rough patch he encountered even after he reached out to your organization for help? Such obstacles give texture to the story and justify the value of the organization. However, these obstacles must not be the only thing we learn about the character’s life. If we know little about his background or what he wants, then we as the audience have nothing to identify with. He himself becomes a “problem.”

### Give your story an ending.

I once binge-watched two seasons of *V* (short for “visitors”), a reboot of the 1983 TV miniseries in which space aliens come to Earth. The prospects for humanity were grim as the end of season 2 approached; optimistically, I figured either the series would wrap up with a big win by the rebels, or there was a third season in the offing. But the show was canceled after season 2, and it didn’t so much end as stop, with the story left unresolved. Don’t do the same to your audiences, or they will eat you alive on message boards—if the response to *V* is any indication! An ending gives shape to your story, and it points your audiences in the direction you want them to go; or at least it makes them ponder questions you want them to think about and justifies the time and attention they gave.

### Clarify the essence of your story.

If you get confused about the story you’re trying to tell, try distilling each of the following points into one sentence. **(1) Before and after:** Who your protagonist is at the beginning of the story, and then at the end of the story. **(2) Turning point:** What caused the change from beginning to end, or what the moment of change was. **(3) Stakes:** What stands to be won or lost in the work you’re doing. The idea of this exercise is not to reduce your story to a series of bullet points but to help you clarify it. Keep whatever serves the essence of your story and discard the rest.

### Further exploration:

- Radio host [Ira Glass’s manifesto](#) and notes on what makes a good story.
- [This American Life](#) has resources on how to make radio, including four short videos from host Ira Glass, and another one from producer Brian Reed on “action, reflection, and stakes” as the key elements of story.
- [“The 22 Rules of Storytelling, According to Pixar.”](#) A former Pixar storyboard artist reveals what she learned about storytelling in her years with the company.



# Think of story as a mnemonic device for complex ideas.

—Annette Simmons



## Look for the people behind your issue.

People are at the heart of every social issue; issues become abstract only when we cover them up with policy or technology or the law. Return to the human heart of the cause you're dealing with. "Ask yourself: Who's involved and who has something at stake?" says communications expert [Andy Goodman](#). "Many nonprofit stories are boring precisely because they're about an organization, issue, place, or thing—everything but real people!" When *This American Life* teamed up with NPR News to explore the housing crisis, they didn't just talk about numbers. Instead, they went and got stories from a long chain of people that led from Wall Street to Main Street; the resulting episode, "[The Giant Pool of Money](#)," uncovered how the crisis happened.

## Focus on what you need people to understand.

No doubt, campaign-finance law is a complex business. Fortunately, however, legislators and policy analysts and legal advocates are pretty much the only people who really need to understand the details. The rest of us just need to know how powerful interests are all but buying elections, and the voice of the individual voter is harder and harder to hear. *Those* are the stories you can focus on. If there are intricacies of the law that your constituents must grasp before taking action, those details too can be embedded in stories. For example, consider how the Opportunity Agenda used archetypal characters to get to the heart of the home-foreclosure crisis in a three-minute video called "[American Banksters](#)."

## Eliminate jargon.

Jargon can be convenient shorthand within an organization, but use it with most any other outside audience and you might as well give them sleeping pills. Excise jargon from your writing by following these three tips. First, use the Communications Network's [Jargon Finder](#) to strip your stories of any technical language or cliché, and check out the [free guides](#) of the [Plain English Campaign](#). (That group's [Gobbledygook Generator](#) is also good for a laugh.) Second, have an outside reader or listener scrub your stories clean of any jargon or language they don't understand. (Have that person excise cliché while they're at it.) Third, read your story aloud and revise language that sounds awkward.

## Let people identify their own connections to the cause.

Maybe your audiences don't see how your stories relate to them. *If a few suspected terrorists get tortured in the name of national security—what does that have to do with me?* Your job is to reveal that connection to your audiences or enable them to make those connections on their own. President Obama [solicited people's stories](#) about the importance of health-care reform in their lives, and many thousands responded. This story-gathering process had several benefits. It helped policymakers understand better how people related to health care and how to craft the reform bill to meet people's needs; it yielded a collection of stories that could be used to persuade skeptics; and it built a huge email list the administration could draw on to enlist volunteers to rally even more support. Nonprofits and funders can take a page from this playbook.

## Further exploration:

- George Orwell's 1946 essay "[Politics and the English Language](#)" translates a Bible passage into horrendous contemporary language and offers six rules for clear writing.

# HOW DO WE KEEP AUDIENCES INVOLVED IN THE STORY?

Attention is a finite resource. Social-change groups have to excel at storytelling if they want to be heard in a noisy field. Here's how.

## Hook your audience early.

In online video, you've got about [15 seconds](#) (if that) to grab your viewer before their attention starts to wander—to another video or website. That number is different for audiences of street theater or a film at a cinema, but the principle still applies: Your audiences must have a compelling reason to start—and continue—engaging with your story. The organization behind the popular live storytelling series The Moth [suggests](#) that storytellers “start in the action.” Don't say, “So I was thinking about climbing this mountain,” but rather, “The mountain loomed before me.” (For inspiration, read Gawker's “The [50 Best First Sentences in Fiction.](#)”)

## Leave part of the story untold.

Questions and mysteries can draw an audience to your stories and keep them interested. As playwright [Bryan Delaney](#) has said, “Starve the audience of information to make them work their brains.” A story is given shape not only by what's in it but by what's left out. The website [Upworthy](#) has become famous (and reviled) for producing a stream of “irresistibly sharable” stories about “stuff that matters.” The site's success is thanks largely to its headlines, which are [designed to inspire curiosity](#) that can only be satisfied by watching the video stories. Radio host Ira Glass [says](#), “The whole shape of a story is that you are throwing out questions to keep people watching or listening and then answering them along the way.”

## Build suspense through intercutting and serialization.

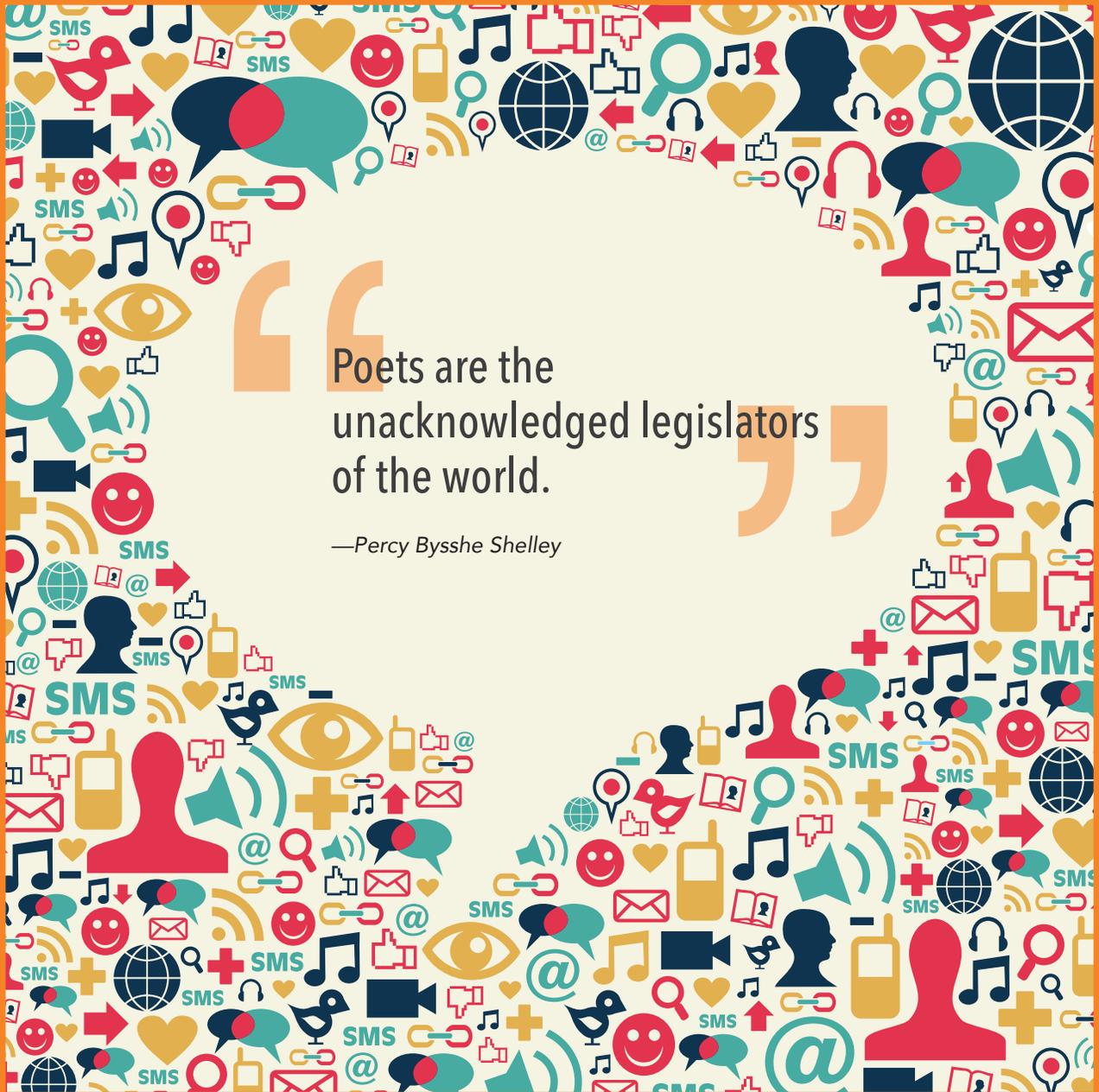
Another way to inspire progressively deeper interest is to create serialized stories—just look at the success of Charles Dickens (whose novels were originally published in serial form), soap operas, or the [Serial](#) podcast, which the *New York Times* [says](#) is part of an upsurge in serials. Another way to build suspense and interest is to intercut different scenes or chapters of your story—switch back and forth from one subplot to another, or between different characters' perspectives, as [two speakers](#) from Resurrection After Exoneration did to excellent effect. In each scene, you leave your audience curious to know what happens next.

## Further exploration:

- “[Serial Storytelling](#)”, a webinar by See3 featuring former TV correspondent Mike Lee.
- “[1 in 3 Women](#),” a short video with a twist about how a third of the world's women don't have a safe place to go to the toilet.

## Use pictures.

[Seeing Is Believing](#), Resource Media's guide to visual storytelling, reminds us that visual imagery has a profound effect on emotions, and recommends testing your visuals with your target audience before going full throttle with them. Also, pair words with pictures, have subjects make eye contact with the viewer, and make sure your images match your message. The Network for Good guide [Storytelling for Nonprofits](#) offers some similarly useful advice: Write photo captions, because people are more likely to read captions than other blocks of text. Think about the best opportunities to get photos for your organization: Solicit photos from your members on Pinterest, hire a photographer, or shoot photos at your organization's special events or actions to illustrate your work.



Poets are the  
unacknowledged legislators  
of the world.

—Percy Bysshe Shelley

## HOW DO WE COMBINE STORIES AND STATISTICS?



Credit: Californians for Safety and Justice

Mother Theresa said, “If I look at the mass, I will never act. If I look at the one, I will.” However, if you tell stories about only individuals, you run the risk of removing the “social” part of a “social problem”—and structural injustices then seem like the fault of the people who face them. Numbers can bridge the gap here, making individual stories into a collective concern—so long as you don’t overuse them, and turn a story into a scorecard.

### **Tell a story to give meaning to your data.**

In the United States, African-American men have a 32 percent chance of spending time behind bars at some point in their lives, as compared with a 6 percent chance for white men. But does this mean that black men are more than five times more criminal than white men, or that there’s a racial bias in our criminal-justice system? Without the context of a story, your audiences might just slide this fact into their preexisting interpretation of the world.

Stories help us filter and judge the data we’re constantly receiving, says Andy Goodman, head of the communications consulting firm the Goodman Center. “A good analogy is a courtroom,” he says. “Research shows that jurors reach decisions by weaving stories, and by what makes sense or doesn’t make sense in the context of that story. Story is what gives data meaning.” The FrameWorks Institute’s 2003 paper “[The Storytelling Power of Numbers](#)” recommends that groups “provide the meaning *first* and *then* use the numbers to support that meaning.”

## Don't let the issue get beyond your audience's reach.

If you're like a lot of nonprofits, you use statistics that show how big a social problem you're dealing with is. Hundreds of gun deaths every day. Thousands of people dying in natural disasters every year. Millions of acres deforested. Billions of dollars spent on war. These numbers seem perfect for waking people up to your cause. But such data can make your audiences feel that the problem is too big or beyond human control and lead them to disengage or, worse yet, to reject collective solutions to social problems and focus on self-preservation. [Action Media](#) says that "David and Goliath" or "Little Engine That Could" stories can use statistics to communicate the possibility of outsized impact.

## Use data and stories to demonstrate impact.

Grantmaker Gara LaMarche says, "All the data in the world is useless if those collecting it do not use it to tell a story: How are immigrants enriching the communities they join? What impact has school reform had on the daily lives of students and their parents? What changes are we seeing as a result of a job-training program? Demonstrated impact is not a substitute for storytelling—it is the story." Infographics and data visualization tools can be useful here; check out the free and paid resources at [Easel.ly](#), [Infogr.am](#), or [Piktochart](#).

## Use numbers that people can grasp.

Have you ever heard statistics that you just couldn't wrap your head around? Let's take the notion that "10 percent of people suffer from such-and-such a health problem." "Ten percent" is less grounded than "1 out of 10 people." The FrameWorks Institute also embraces analogies and "social math" (a concept developed by the Advocacy Institute and the Berkeley Media Studies Group).

The authors of [News for a Change](#) give this example of social math: "Community residents near a gasoline refinery noted that the plant emits 6 tons of pollutants per day—or 25 balloons full of toxic pollution for each school child in the town." Six tons sounds like a lot, but it's hard to grasp. The balloons and the children, though, are very real. Another example is a print ad (pictured) by [Californians for Safety and Justice](#) with the image of a young man and a dollar figure on either side of him: "Prison \$62,300. School \$9,100."

### In Praise of Messy, Unstrategic Storytelling

There's a mountain of advice available on nonprofit storytelling, this guide included. *Think about your goals first. Speak to your audience. Tell a story this way. Distribute it that way. Be personal. Be interactive.*

Storytelling for a cause can be so calculating, the storyteller may end up feeling like a salesperson, the audience feels manipulated, and the story sounds contrived.

Where's the fun in that? Can't a person just tell a story?

Some of the best social-change stories are passionate and unrestrained, not focus-group tested from the first word to the last period. In those instances, the storyteller doesn't craft her story to fit the audience but expresses her truth and lets the audience find it.

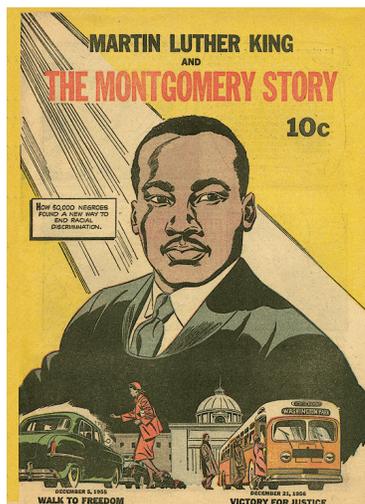
In the course of this practice, she discovers herself, discovers her own purpose, enjoys the art of it all, and grows closer to the people she is talking with—her audience.

In the end, then, she may arrive at the same spot that a strategist does. Just by a different route.

### Further exploration:

- "[Framing and Facts](#)" and "[The Storytelling Power of Numbers](#)," by the FrameWorks Institute, offer practical guidance on numbers and stories.
- "[Would You Let This Girl Down?](#)" a 2009 *New York Times* column by Nicholas Kristof, talks about statistics and "psychic numbing."

## WHAT ARE SOME OF THE FORMS OF STORYTELLING WE CAN USE?



Credit: Fellowship of Reconciliation / Still from The Revolutionary Optimists

Many nonprofit stories take the form of online videos, but there are plenty of other forms. Consider the following examples for inspiration.

**Oral history:** The [ACT UP Oral History Project](#) documents the history of the AIDS activist group. The [Vanguard Revisited](#) project enlisted homeless LGBTQ youth in San Francisco to document the history of their predecessors and take their own place in history. [Voice of Witness](#) (pictured) produces books of oral histories on contemporary human-rights crises. Slave narratives recorded by the [Federal Writers' Project](#) provided a training ground for socially conscious writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Studs Terkel, and Richard Wright. [Groundswell](#) is a network of people using oral history and narrative for movement-building and social change.

**Posters, plaques, stickers:** The [Neighborhood Story Project](#) in New Orleans did a series of [open letters](#) from workers at the local racetrack, and a poster series about them as well. Some groups place historical markers, such as the series of [LGBT history plaques](#) in Chicago or artist Norm Magnusson's political messages on official-looking [signs along Interstate 75](#). College activists have also used [stickers that tell personal stories](#) to reduce abortion stigma.

**Mobile story-mapping:** [I-Witness Central City](#), a project of Mondo Bizarro in New Orleans, and the [Berkeley Historical Plaque Project](#) place markers at historic sites from which passersby can dial a phone number to listen to a story about that site.

**Story booths:** In an initiative called [Generations HIV](#), the [HIV Story Project](#) set up a story-gathering booth at sites around the Bay Area. (Watch a short [video](#) about the project.)

**Walking tours and historical-site tours:** During its 15 years of operation, [MYTOWN](#) (pictured) trained nearly 400 Boston youth to create and lead historical walking tours. Though plantation tours are [notoriously light on information about slaves](#), some do focus on slavery, such as the [Whitney Plantation](#) in Louisiana.



Credit: MYTOWN / GLBT History Museum

**Comic books:** A Kenyan group called [Well Told Story](#) produces comic books, radio dramas, and other media on issues such as HIV and agricultural practices. The United Nations is using [comic books](#) to build support for international development. In 1958, the [Fellowship of Reconciliation](#) published a 16-page comic book called [Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story](#) (pictured); an Arabic translation was used by [Egyptian activists](#) before the Arab Spring as a point of departure for discussion about nonviolent social change.

**Online museums:** [America's Black Holocaust Museum](#) (pictured) is a series of online exhibits about the history of lynching in the U.S. [Girl Museum](#) presents online exhibitions, publications, and videos to advocate for girls as forces for change, "not as victims and consumers."

**Brick-and-mortar museums:** The [GLBT History Museum](#) in San Francisco tells stories on themes such as the struggle for self-determination. In the basement of the First Congregational Church of Detroit, the [Underground Railroad Living Museum](#) has "conductors" lead visitors through elaborate sets from plantation to swamp to safe house to the Ohio River and freedom. The [International Coalition of Sites of Conscience](#) is a global network of historic sites, museums, and initiatives that help the public "envision and shape a more just and humane future."

**Traveling museums:** The [Florida Modern-Day Slavery Museum](#) is a cargo truck that contains displays on the history of slavery in Florida, up to as recent a case as 2008, with the abuse of farmworkers in the state; it has toured the Southeast and beyond.

**Puppetry:** One of the best-known groups to use puppetry for social change is [Bread and Puppet Theater](#). Other groups include [Spiral Q](#) in Philadelphia, [Wise Fool New Mexico](#), and [Puppet Underground](#) in Washington, D.C. "[A Brief History of Puppets and Social Justice](#)" is a good primer. [Sanitation and Health Rights in India](#) works to end open defecation in that country; the first in a series of five videos about the group details [a collaboration with a puppet theater company](#).

**Theater and shared scripts:** [El Teatro Campesino](#) was founded in 1965 amid the grape strike of the United Farm Workers and performed [short skits in union halls and on flatbed trucks](#) to rally support for the cause. Some organizations make scripts available for community groups to put on their own performances, such as [8](#), a play about the debate over marriage equality based on the federal trial of California's Prop. 8. [Cornerstone Theater Company](#) in Los Angeles produces site-specific plays on themes such as hunger and the plight of day laborers.

**Games:** [Cops & Rubbers](#) (pictured) is a table-top game by designer [Lien B. Tran](#) and funded by the Open Society Foundations that puts players in the shoes of sex workers in cities and countries worldwide where a condom is enough evidence of sex work to get you arrested or extorted. [Games for Change](#) promotes games based on real-life social problems. The social-network game [EVOKE](#) was a "10-week crash course in changing the world," in which players in classrooms around the world generated ideas to real-world problems.

**Transmedia:** Projects such as the [Sandy Storyline](#) tell personal stories through a combination of text, audio, photo, and video, humanizing overwhelming or seemingly abstract events. A sister project is [Housing Is a Human Right](#), a creative storytelling project on housing and home.

**Speaking tours, open mikes, and other live forms:** [The Moth's](#) open-mike "story slams" take place in more than a dozen U.S. cities and internationally, and they also provide [community and education programs](#) for high school students and marginalized adults in New York City. Exhale sponsored a "Pro-Voice" speaking tour of college campuses for women to share their personal abortion experiences.

**Music:** What stories are more memorable than those told in song? Contemporary musicians with story-songs include [Jasiri X](#) and [Toshi Reagon](#). Classic songs that tell stories include Bob Dylan's "The Death of Emmett Till" and "Hurricane" and [Sweet Honey in the Rock's](#) "Ballad of the Broken Word."

**Twitter and Facebook:** It's hard but not impossible to tell a story in a single Facebook post or 140-character tweet. Novelist [Teju Cole](#) wrote "seven very short stories about drones" on Twitter. Another Twitter story unfolded over the course of 33 re-tweets and was called "Hafiz" (explained more on [Wired](#)).

**Online publishing:** [Wattpad](#) and [Storify](#) are web platforms for creating, reading, and sharing stories, from social-media collages to fan fiction to novels to serial stories. (Read this [Hatch blog post](#) on how to make the best use of Storify.)

**Reenactments:** In his [Slave Rebellion Reenactment](#), artist [Dread Scott](#) will reinterpret an 1811 uprising in the place where it happened. For her "Soldiers Stories" project, photographer Jennifer Karady had American veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan re-create combat situations they experienced in war.

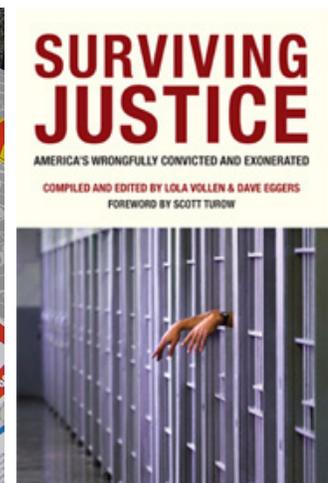
**Journalism:** [Renaissance Journalism](#) reimagines the media as a "vital source of education, engagement, and empowerment for underserved communities." [Images and Voices of Hope](#) promotes "media as agents of world benefit," and the [Solutions Journalism Network](#) encourages journalists to cover responses to social problems.

**Documentary and fiction film:** Years' worth of documentary film exists on virtually every social cause. Groups like [Active Voice Lab](#), [Working Films](#) and the [Stories of Change](#) partnership (funded film, *The Revolutionary Optimists*, pictured) work with media makers, funders, community groups, and others to link those films to social-change movements.

**Radio:** [Youth Radio](#) trains young people from diverse backgrounds in digital media and technology and distributes their stories through major media outlets. And [outLoud Radio](#) gives "LGBTQ and ally youth the skills and confidence to represent themselves."

### Further exploration:

- [The Future of Storytelling](#), a group exploring how stories are changing in the digital age, has a blog, online speaker series and annual summit that explore innovative storytelling forms.



Credit: Lien Tran / Voice of Witness

## WHOSE AND WHAT KINDS OF STORIES CAN WE TELL?

“The powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.”

—Walt Whitman, “*O Me! O Life!*”

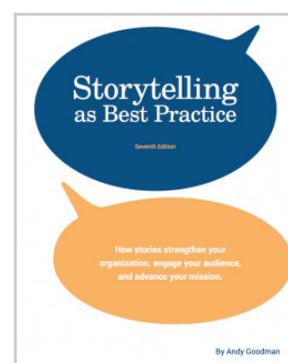


Credit: Andy Goodman

No organization can be summarized in a single story. In an [interview with the Bridgespan Group](#), nonprofit-storytelling guru Andy Goodman talks about an organization’s “sacred bundle” of stories:

- **The nature-of-our-challenge story** illuminates the people behind the problem that you are trying to address.
- **The creation story**, generally for audiences who already care about your issue, shares who started your organization and why and when.
- **The emblematic-success story** affirms that your organization is doing unique good in the world.
- **The values story** illustrates your organization’s core values and how it lives them.
- **The striving-to-improve story** helps create a culture of empathy and growth within an organization by reflecting on mistakes and what was learned from them.
- **The where-we-are-going story** answers the question *If your organization does its job, what will we see in 5 to 10 years?*

Any number of people can tell these stories. Oftentimes, it’s a staff member or someone directly affected by the issue. But your protagonist might be an activist, a neighborhood person, the mother of a client, a board member. By opening up the range of possible protagonists, you expand your notion of who is or can be involved in your cause.



### Further exploration:

- [Storytelling as Best Practice](#), by Andy Goodman. The seventh edition of Goodman’s book culls the best articles from 15 years of his newsletter.

# HOW CAN WE ELICIT GOOD STORIES FROM AN INTERVIEW?

You've got a chance to interview a stakeholder, and you may have just this one chance. How do you make the most of your time together?

## BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

**Determine your goal.** Identify your goals for the story, such as "to show the human impact of this policy issue" or "to celebrate our organization at the annual fundraising gala." Your purpose will drive the questions you ask and the interviewees you choose.

**Find the best interviewee(s).** Do brief "pre-interviews" on the phone or through video conferencing to identify the best candidate(s). The pre-interview should yield only an outline of the person's story, a sense of how they articulate their experience and a few areas for future exploration. Don't let the pre-interview go on too long, otherwise the full interview will sound stale. Set expectations by telling pre-interviewees that you're interested in learning more about their experience for a possible story but haven't yet decided on subjects.

**Prepare questions.** Based on what you know about the interviewee, write down the arc of her story and prepare questions you have about each part. Have a plan B if certain areas prove to be fruitless or too sensitive. Preparing questions to guide the interview shows respect for the interviewee's time and story.

**Give full information to your interviewee.** Once you've decided on your interviewee(s), tell him about the purpose of the interview, how it will be used, and if he'll have a chance to review a draft. Your interviewee will want a good story just as much as you do, and stating the context up front gives him the opportunity to focus on the most interesting areas.

## DURING THE INTERVIEW

**Solicit stories and feelings.** Ask short questions like "How did you feel about...?" or "Tell me about a time when...", and give the interviewee some breathing room. If your interviewee expresses an opinion, ask for the story behind it with a question such as "What experience made you come to that opinion?" That's not to say that opinions, or at least analysis, should be excised entirely from your stories. Radio host Ira Glass of *This American Life* says that the best stories on his show alternate between action (what happened) and reflection (what the person learned from the experience or how she feels about it).

**Listen.** Listening carefully will allow you to follow whatever interesting stories or ideas present themselves. In order to free your mind up for listening, prepare well for the interview. It can be hard to listen if you're worried about what question to ask next or how you appear to your interviewee. Indicate that you're listening by nodding your head, responding with facial expressions, or summarizing what she just said and asking questions to make sure you understood correctly. Listening closely leaves you open to surprises. If there's something you're curious about, ask. If some emotion comes up, follow it. Don't rely strictly on whatever questions you may have prepared in advance.

**Guide your interviewee.** For obvious ethical reasons, you should not “coach” your interviewee to lie or express a particular point of view. But you can help your interviewee tell her story by providing guidance. If you are confused by some terminology or what’s happening in the story, ask her to explain or rephrase. Or if she tells her story out of order or goes on long digressions, ask her to clarify or go in chronological order. You are a proxy for the audience; they rarely know as much as you do, so ask questions that they would ask—even if the answers seem self-evident to you.

**Display the kind of openness you’re looking for.** Imagine how it might feel to submit to an interview. Someone you know little or nothing about comes in, asks you personal questions, maybe hopes that you’ll cry or otherwise give him “good material,” and runs off to write your story for who knows what audience, perhaps making errors and misinterpretations that would make you squirm. As an interviewer you might tell a story about yourself or show some genuine emotion; this can give the interviewee a basis for trusting you.

## AFTER THE INTERVIEW

**Follow up with information.** Write or call the interviewee to thank her again for sharing the story and to check in about how she’s feeling. Let her know what to expect, such as when the story will run or if you’ll be back in touch with other questions.

**Give the interviewee a chance to edit, within reason.** Unless there’s a good reason not to, give your interviewee the opportunity to review the story for factual accuracy and the impression they created. Expectations are important here—you might not want to give the interviewee license to rewrite the piece or change its direction—but giving her a chance to provide input shows respect for her time and her story.

## Further exploration:

- [“Don’t Be Afraid to Ask Dumb Questions,”](#) interview tips from radio and podcast producer Alex Blumberg, and his Creative Live class [“Power Your Podcast With Storytelling.”](#)
- [“On how I approach strangers on the street,”](#) Humans of New York creator Brandon Stanton talks about his interview method.

## Working with StoryCorps



Credit: StoryCorps

[StoryCorps](#) has recorded the stories of tens of thousands of Americans from all walks of life and shared selected stories through books, animated videos, and public radio.

They’ve had some help. Every year, StoryCorps partners with hundreds of nonprofits to record stories that those groups can use in their programming and that help StoryCorps fulfill its mission to “provide people of all backgrounds and beliefs with the opportunity to record, preserve and share the stories of our lives.”

The group is serious about inclusion, reflected in its initiatives working with veterans, LGBTQ people,

Latinos, African-Americans, or people with serious illness and their families.

Partner groups put their stories to many uses. In Chicago, Affinity Community Services hosted an evening of story sharing called “Queering Black History,” which was documented in a [comic strip](#) by a local artist. The [Disability Visibility Project](#) shares stories of people in the disability community on its website, including some to mark the 25th anniversary of the 1990 Americans With Disabilities Act. Native American community elders went to the Maidu Museum in California to record their stories, which were then published in [News From Native California](#).

Some nonprofit partners record their stories at StoryCorps’ mobile booths; at stationary booths in Atlanta, Chicago, and San Francisco; or on portable equipment at hospices, hospitals, and libraries. Still other stories are now being recorded on the [StoryCorps.me](#) mobile app or using the organization’s DIY guides and other downloads.

Much of StoryCorps’ programming is free of cost to partners that fit the organization’s mission and are dedicated to collaboration; for a fee, StoryCorps also offers [custom services](#) to other projects.

## WHAT IS THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED AND HOW DO WE USE IT?



Credit: Will O'Hare for TONYC

*Scene: A woman in her apartment is beaten up by her boyfriend, then he leaves. Shortly thereafter, she hears a loud knock at the door and staggers over to open it. It's the police, responding to a noise complaint from a neighbor. The woman lets the police in, only to have them see a syringe on the table, which is reason enough for them to check her ID. The police call the station and are told that the woman is a "man"—she's actually a transgender woman, and she uses the syringe to inject hormones. The police ignore her bruises, ignore the real purpose of the syringe, and arrest her.*

That was the premise of one of several short plays performed at a 2014 festival organized by [Theatre of the Oppressed NYC](#) (TONYC).

Each scene or short play performed at the festival is drawn from the real-life experiences of the actors themselves, among them homeless adults and LGBTQ youth from the group's partner organizations.

After each scene ends, a TONYC facilitator invites audience members to the stage to take the protagonist's place for a replay of the scene.

In the scene above, one audience member talks with the police at the door and does not let them in the apartment. Another audience member tries calling a trans advocate from a local organization to come videotape the interaction. In a given replay of the scene, the woman may still get arrested, but together the actors and audience have explored alternatives.

# “The theater itself is not revolutionary: it is a rehearsal for the revolution.”

—Augusto Boal

Having audience members jump onstage and enter the action is just one of various techniques in Theatre of the Oppressed, a set of methods developed by the Brazilian director Augusto Boal starting in the 1960s that's now practiced by groups around the world (such as in [Egypt](#), [Tanzania](#), and [Spain](#)). TONYC is one of the most active practitioners of the method in the United States.

“We are all actors: being a citizen is not living in society, it is changing it,” said Boal, who died in 2009.

## How a play is developed.

First, members of a group—say, a group of homeless LGBTQ youth—talk about the nature of human rights and what they as a group feel they need. Participants will then exchange stories about a time they were denied something they needed. In a group of homeless LGBTQ youth, the stories might be about when they were kicked out of their home by parents, harassed by police, or abused by a shelter worker.

In the course of telling and retelling, the group selects and may combine stories that most resonate with them to develop into a short play. For each play they create, the group outlines the story and figures out who the characters are—a son, his parents, maybe a sibling or a boyfriend.

Participants take on roles, and then, through a series of games, develop the play. In one game, the players improvise “interior monologues” about their point of view. In another game, called Opera, the actors play the scene with exaggerated emotions—happy, sad, angry, jealous—as they are called out by the “joker,” or facilitator. A similar game has people replay the parts of the scene in different genres—soap opera, detective movie, fairy tale. The “joker” facilitates discussion on what the games reveal about the characters, and then actors incorporate those revelations into the play.

Through this process, the group creates a short play of perhaps 10 minutes and is ready to perform it onstage and invite audience members—or “spect-actors,” in Theatre of the Oppressed parlance—to get involved.

## How groups can use the Theatre of the Oppressed method.

The games used to develop a TONYC play help clarify the real drama of social-justice work. The group's artistic director, Katy Rubin, says, “There's a reason this is ‘theater of the oppressed’ and not ‘talking of the oppressed.’ A play gives you an emotional response, and that activates the audience to do something.”

Games and techniques can be used to warm up a group before a discussion, build group solidarity, prepare for an action, or attract new participants. It can also promote dialogue in communities in conflict. For example, the method has been used by [Combatants for Peace](#), bringing together former Israeli soldiers and Palestinian combatants to resolve disagreements and advance a shared political platform.

The ultimate purpose of a TONYC play is not just to draw audiences in, Rubin says, but also “to make it impossible for them to leave” without feeling connected to the people and the problem dramatized onstage. “They will now always carry the problem with them as their own. They see how it relates to their lives.”

## Further exploration:

- [Theatre of the Oppressed NYC](#) collaborates with community organizations to produce performances and workshops in New York City and beyond. A short [video](#) of a performance and audience interventions demonstrates what they do.
- [Theatre of the Oppressed](#) by Augusto Boal gives the theoretical underpinning to the method. His book [Games for Actors and Non-Actors](#) gives instructions on the particulars. Watch an [interview](#) with Boal on [Democracy Now](#).
- The [International Theatre of the Oppressed Organisation](#) has a directory of groups worldwide, a resource library, and more.
- The website [Beautiful Trouble](#) has pages on [Theatre of the Oppressed](#) and some of its various forms (see right-hand column of that page).

# WHAT IS PUBLIC NARRATIVE AND HOW DO WE USE IT?



Credit: Paul VanDeCarr

“I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story.” That’s Barack Obama in his 2004 Democratic National Convention [speech](#). No wonder that the speaker of these words, and the author of a thoughtful [memoir](#), would have storytelling be a central part of his presidential campaign four years later.

Obama’s 2008 campaign volunteers would attend a gathering called Camp Obama. One of the things they learned there was a leadership-development practice called Public Narrative. The practice was developed by Marshall Ganz—a former longtime United Farm Workers organizer and now Harvard professor—and used as a template by the Obama campaign.

Public Narrative brings three stories together into one.

## **A story of self.**

A story of self is a personal story that Ganz says shows “why you were called to what you have been called to.” Everyone has a story about an experience that got him or her involved in a given cause. If the cause is improving local schools, maybe one person got involved because her kids are getting a poor education and have outdated textbooks. Someone else is a local store owner who sees schoolchildren every day when they come to buy snacks. The story of self communicates the teller’s values, whether it’s “opportunity for children” or “it takes a village.” The story of self presents a specific challenge the teller faced, the choice they made about how to deal with the challenge, and the outcome they experienced. Ganz says this story invites listeners to connect with the teller

## **A story of us.**

A story of us is a collective story that Ganz says illustrates the “shared purposes, goals, vision” of a community or organization. As with the story of self, the story of us focuses on a challenge, a choice, and an outcome. The story of us of a school-reform group might be, “Together, we are a community of local parents and residents who got into this work because we were fighting for our own kids’ educations in a failing school system—each of us wanted the best for our sons and daughters and neighbors. Then

# “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am for myself alone, what am I? If not now, when?”

—Rabbi Hillel, [quoted](#) by Marshall Ganz

we found each other and realized the fight was bigger than just ‘my kid’—we realized that we needed each other to win this fight. And so we started this campaign.” The story of us, says Ganz, invites other people to be part of your community.

## A story of now.

A story of now is about “the challenge this community now faces, the choices it must make, and the hope to which ‘we’ can aspire,” as Ganz puts it. “A ‘story of now’ is urgent, it is rooted in the values you celebrated in your story of self and us, and a contradiction to those values that requires action.” There is always some discrete and urgent challenge you can present to listeners. In the case of a school-reform group, the story of now might involve getting rid of a corrupt superintendent or pressing for more public funding for education. The story of now invites people to join you in taking hopeful action on the pressing challenge, Ganz says.

## Linking the stories of self, us, and now.

Public Narrative links these three stories together into one. Each person has her own Public Narrative; your story of self is unique, and your stories of us and now are similar to others in your group, though you may express them in your own way. Your Public Narrative may change over time. You may learn how to express your story of self more clearly as you tell it repeatedly; the shifting makeup of your community may suggest a change in the story of us; or maybe the group takes on a new, urgent challenge that requires a different story of now. Ganz writes that you don’t produce a final “script” of your Public Narrative but rather learn a process “by which you can generate that narrative over and over and over again when, where, and how you need to.”

## How to develop Public Narratives.

In gatherings led by Ganz and groups such as the [Leading Change Network](#), people first learn about the theory behind Public Narrative. Participants spend time composing their own story of self then share it with others to get questions and feedback meant to zero in on the challenge, the choice, and the outcome in their stories. Storytellers may be asked questions such as what made their challenge a challenge or where they got the strength to make the choice they did. Other participants may give feedback, such as what images they found most vivid, what moments moved them, and how they understood the storyteller’s values. Once group members have heard one another’s stories of self, they are in a position to start creating a story of us and a story of now—using a similar process of individual writing, followed by group sharing and feedback.

## Sharing your Public Narrative.

A person can share her Public Narrative in any venue, from press releases to public events to social media. “By telling our personal stories of challenges we have faced, choices we have made, and what we learned from the outcomes, we can inspire others and share our own wisdom,” Ganz has [written](#). “Because stories allow us to express our values not as abstract principles, but as lived experience, they have the power to move others.”

## Further exploration:

- Marshall Ganz’s Public Narrative [worksheet](#), which is the source of most of the quotes in this chapter.
- Marshall Ganz [Q&A](#) on the Working Narratives blog.
- Global Health Leadership Program, Public Narrative coach training [manual](#), adapted from the work of Marshall Ganz.
- Camp Obama in Burbank, California, has videos of campaign volunteers’ [stories](#) of self, us, and now.
- James Croft gave a [five-minute speech](#) on bullying and LGBTQ suicide that has a “self, us, now” framework.
- Tom Hanks wrote an [op-ed](#) supporting a bill to fund community colleges that tells stories of self, us, and now.

## HOW CAN WE USE FICTION IN OUR WORK?



Credit: The Opportunity Agenda

In fiction, one can change the world with the stroke of a pen. You want a world where no one goes to sleep hungry every night? Write it. Or you want a time-travel machine and teleporters to go visit friends across the eras and around the globe? They're as close as your keyboard. You don't even need a writing instrument, for it's all in the reach of your imagination.

Consider protest novels such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Jungle*, or *Native Son*, which were no less influential—or perhaps were more influential—for being fictional. And what of more fantastical stories? The slow machinations of the courts are captured in *Jarndyce and Jarndyce*, the case at the center of Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, and an arbitrary justice system does its terrible work on Joseph K. in Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. One of the defining texts of the early years of AIDS in the United States—Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*—was a “gay fantasia” that involved a visit from the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg.

The attraction of fiction lies partly in its resonance with the fantasies we are all creating by the minute. Every time we imagine how life will unfold, or what would have happened had we made another choice that one day years ago, or anytime we paste together memories to create a bigger picture—these are fictions. And yet they are real. The invisible workings of our memories and imaginations are just as real a part of life as are an alarm clock or a broken bone.

“When we write, we try to get at the truth through the lie of the story.”  
—[Laila Lalami](#)

We spend all of our time in our imaginations, and imagination is not, as John Guare has his character Paul say in *Six Degrees of Separation*, something outside ourselves, but “the passport we create to take us into the real world.”

Following are some ways to use that passport.

### **Tell stories that convey the essence of your cause.**

If you don't have a nonfiction story that encapsulates your social struggle—or even if you do, but you want to go at it from another angle—create a fiction that does. Consider the Opportunity Agenda's short video “[American Banksters](#)” (pictured), which used archetypal figures such as the huckster and the cardsharp to tell the story of the home-mortgage crisis and what viewers could do in response. A progressive Australian group called GetUp! advocated for marriage equality through a short video [love story](#) with fictional but plausible characters. (They also have a [nonfiction video](#) starring twin brothers, one gay and one straight.) Likewise, an [animated video](#) from a French campaign for AIDS prevention told the story of one young man's search for sex and love. You might use in-house talent or outside writers and producers to create such stories.

### **Leverage pop culture stories to spark action on your cause.**

As discussed in the chapter on piggybacking on pop culture, social change groups can use TV shows, films, and novels to their benefit.

### **Create or join a book club or movie club.**

A book or movie club can deepen your inquiry into social issues. Goodreads offers [popular titles](#) for such clubs. Your local film society or Netflix queue might yield ideas for movies to watch. [Meetup.com](#) offers a means of recruiting members for a group (and offers [organizing tips for a meeting](#)). And local bookstores and libraries can be a source of book suggestions, meeting spaces, and publicity. If a novelist or film director lives in your area or is visiting while on tour, ask her to speak to your group. The organization [Sea Change](#), with a mission to transform the “culture of stigma around abortion,” helps people form reading groups to discuss its nonfiction book *Untold Stories: Life, Love and Reproduction*. Other groups can form reading clubs around fictional books.

### **Start a writing group or workshop.**

Regular practice helps writers explore their own lives and make connections with one another. Some groups give readings of their work or produce chapbooks. The effect can be therapeutic and galvanizing. The [NY Writers Coalition](#) places writing instructors with programs and organizations in New York City that serve those who have been “historically deprived of voice in our society,” including veterans, immigrants, people with disabilities, and former prisoners. (Listen to a [podcast](#) about the writing group composed of [formerly incarcerated women](#).) For organizations outside of New York City, try finding a volunteer facilitator from a local college or creative-writing program.

I wish, instead of looking for a message when we read a story, we could think, 'Here's a door opening on a new world: what will I find there?'

— *Ursula Le Guin*

### Further exploration:

- [Mobius: The Journal of Social Change](#). (Has fiction and nonfiction.)
- ["Inventing the Past: A Conversation,"](#) from the 2007 PEN World Voices Festival.
- [Writing Alone, Writing Together: A Guide for Writers and Writing Groups](#), by Judy Reeves.
- [Writing Fiction](#), a guide from Gotham Writers' Workshop that includes tips on story structure and elements, and writing prompts.
- [PEN International](#) and [PEN American Center](#) celebrate literature and defend freedom of expression.
- ["Will Fiction Influence How We React to Climate Change?"](#) A *New York Times* "Room for Debate" forum, with a variety of thoughtful perspectives.
- [Priya's Shakti](#), a multimedia comic book about gender-based sexual violence in India and beyond, told through the story of a mortal and a goddess.

### Use writing prompts relevant to your group.

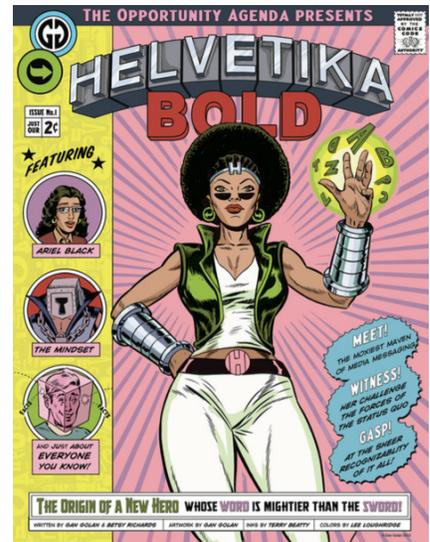
To explore your cause and have fun, use writing prompts such as the following:

- "Alternate Histories," on the moments in history at which your members would like to intervene and change the course of things.
- "Superpowers" that members of your group have to fight injustice.
- "Ghost Stories" that imagine encounters with whomever or whatever haunts your group.
- "Monsters" that give terrible form to the forces you are fighting.
- "Animal Kingdom," in which your characters are talking foxes, owls, elephants, and other animals whose qualities embody the forces at work in your movement.
- "Gumshoe" stories that cast people in your group as detectives investigating the roots of the social problem you're fighting.
- "New Rules" has writers change one law or social code—marijuana is legalized, black men can easily get a taxi—and explore what happens.
- "Mythology" and "Fairy Tales" use the tropes of those genres to explore a social problem and uncover the deeper issues at play.

In each of these prompts, encourage writers to get specific: What does your monster look like? How would you exorcise your ghost?

### Partner with groups that produce stories.

Chances are, there are professional storytellers in your community that deal with social issues. Look to your local theater company or other storytelling group for opportunities to work together. For example, [Cornerstone Theater Company](#) in Los Angeles creates site-specific plays on social issues such as hunger or the plight of day laborers. From start to finish, the company collaborates with the people it portrays onstage and the community at large, such as through diverse "story circles" that generate material for plays; public readings; acting casts made up largely of community members; and post-show discussions. Not all partnerships will be so involved, but social-change groups might do lower-key collaborations, such as asking local theater companies to partner on hosting a post-show discussion.



Credit: The Opportunity Agenda

# WHAT IS A STORY CIRCLE AND HOW DO WE FACILITATE ONE?

A story circle is a group of people sitting in a circle and sharing stories about their experience on a given topic or theme. The story circle may be used to build community, examine difference, explore social challenges, or for some other purpose. The method has been used extensively by [Roadside Theater](#), and they call it “Our tested storytelling method for empowering community members.” The following information is paraphrased and condensed from Roadside Theater’s [guidelines](#) and [FAQs](#) on story circles.

## **Allow informal time beforehand.**

Assemble a group of 5 to 15 people for the story circle. Meet in a quiet place free from distractions. If possible, have some informal socializing time before the story circle begins, such as a potluck meal.

## **Introduce the story circle.**

Have a facilitator introduce the story circle and state the theme of the story circle or lead the group in deciding what that theme will be. The facilitator asks participants to briefly review the typical elements of a story, such as plot, characters, atmosphere, and so on; this process reminds participants to tell a story, rather than give a lecture or present an argument. The facilitator states what time the story circle is to end and asks people to keep this in mind when telling their stories.

## **Keep things moving.**

Roadside’s story circle guidelines say that everybody in a story circle must participate and listen to one another’s stories without comment (except to say, when their turn comes, “That reminds me of something that happened to me”). During the story circle, the facilitator may give a signal agreed on beforehand if someone is taking up an undue share of time, and she may use her judgment to stop the story circle if someone becomes distressed. Allow silence after each story.

## **Allow time for comment.**

After everyone has told a story, allow some time for people to comment on what they’ve heard. When possible, end the story circle with a group song or poem that helps “bring closure to the spirit of the particular Story Circle.” Make space available for people to talk after the story circle ends; they often will, as something during the story circle will have piqued their interest or compassion.

## **Consider some possible topics.**

The topic or theme of your story circle depends on your goal. A few possible topics of story circles that I have led or participated in include:

- A time when I made a change in someone’s life
- A person who cared for me when I needed it
- A time when I was discriminated against or felt I was judged unfairly
- The experience that got me involved in my cause or organization

## **Further exploration:**

- Roadside Theater offers a [page of resources](#) on what story circles are and how to do them, and even video of sample circles.
- The Orton [Family Foundation](#) created the “Heart & Soul” method for community development, and has tips for how to use [story circles](#) to articulate community values.

# HOW AND WHY CAN WE USE HUMOR?



Credit: Landon Nordeman

Our work is serious. That doesn't mean we have to be serious all the time. Sometimes humor is just the thing to get people to pay attention to a pressing issue or see the absurdity of the status quo. Following are some notes about what humor does and what you can do with humor.

## WHAT HUMOR DOES

### Challenges people's cognitive biases and prejudices.

We make sense of our lives through stories. And, in a process that cognitive scientists call "confirmation bias," we tend to dismiss new information that doesn't fit with the story we already have of how the world works. But humor interferes with that bias by creating surprise. It also opens people up to drop their prejudices. That's what happened when comedian Negin Farsad organized a tour of Muslim comics throughout the American South and Midwest, as documented in her film *The Muslims Are Coming!* A similar principle was at work when a group in Bucharest called ActiveWatch had Roma medical students go on public transit to play accordion and offer free medical visits; the students couldn't play accordion to save their lives, so the outing challenged riders' stereotypes of Roma people as beggars and buskers—and opened up the possibility that they could be health providers.

“Against the assault of laughter, nothing stands.”  
—Mark Twain

### **Creates a joyful experience and makes for good “optics.”**

Activists lose a lot of battles. So it helps to add some joy to the proceedings. Andrew Boyd, an initiator of the satirical group [Billionaires for Bush](#) (pictured), says, “If you can make people laugh, then you’re giving them a gift. You’re not just saying ‘You should pay attention to this.’ It’s more like, ‘Let’s play together.’” Creative activism draws the attention of reporters and social-media users who have become tired of covering the same old rallies—to say nothing of a public that may be tired of hearing about them. “[Funny activists] are harder to shrug off as knee-jerk do-gooders,” says Medea Benjamin, a founder of the peace group [CODEPINK](#). “And with humor, you don’t need a lot of people to make an impact. You can make a 10-person demo a successful event.” (Or fewer, as [the Yes Men](#) prove.)

### **Exposes the absurdity of the status quo.**

In his classic satire *A Modest Proposal*, Jonathan Swift proposed that poor Irish families sell their children as food. This outrageous idea, delivered by an utterly serious narrator, led readers to grapple with the very real choices faced by these families. The Yes Men are among the greatest contemporary bearers of the Swiftian tradition, with pranks like [mock-serious websites](#) and unauthorized apologies issued on behalf of corporate polluters. Members of Billionaires for Bush dressed up as faux billionaires—wearing thrift-store fancy clothes and jewelry and assuming names like “Phil T. Rich” and “Anita Subsidy”—and went to rallies, speeches, and other public venues to proclaim their support for President George W. Bush during the 2004 election season. They’ve continued their antics since then. With signs reading “Corporations Are People Too” and “Leave No Billionaire Behind,” the group highlights the relationship of mutual back-scratching between billionaires and politicians in a way that more shrill polemics do not.

## **WHAT YOU CAN DO WITH HUMOR**

### **Explore the comical aspects of your work.**

Using the functions of humor described above, explore the comical aspects of your work. Deadly serious as your cause may be—human rights, extreme poverty, prisons—there is always a humorous aspect to it. The humor might not be in the injustice itself, such as rape, but it could be found in targeting [rapists](#), satirizing the public dialogue about rape, or taking the logic of the injustice to its absurd extreme. Tina Fey and Amy Poehler, for example, [told jokes at the 2015 Golden Globes](#) that touched on several aspects of “rape culture.” And humor may subtly implicate the audience, make them acknowledge their complicity in the injustice at hand.

“If you’re going to tell people the truth, be funny or they’ll kill you.”  
—Billy Wilder

### **Make room for play and spontaneity.**

There are no rules for how to be funny, but you can make room for people’s humor to emerge. As described in other chapters of this guide, try using improv theater games, creative-writing prompts, or art exercises to imagine a better future. You can do a one-off experiment with these or other methods, or build creativity into the practice and culture of your organization—allow staff to use a small percentage of their work time to learn fun new ways of communicating, or set aside time in staff meetings to talk about the latest political comedy.

### **Draw on your network for humor.**

In the run-up to the 2004 presidential election, the MoveOn.org voter fund sponsored a video contest called “[Bush in 30 Seconds](#),” which invited people to submit short video ads about President Bush—there were some hilarious videos among the more than one thousand entries. Other groups have sponsored meme contests and open-mike comedy shows to tap the talent of their network.

### **Partner with professionals.**

Draw on the skills of professional comedians and clowns to help you figure out how to integrate humor into your cause. Hire a comedian-in-residence, get a humorist to write a series of funny blog posts, or ask a comedy-for-change group to consult on your work. Consider [Stand Up Planet](#), a TV documentary and transmedia series hosted by [Hasan Minhaj](#) that showcases comics from the developing world who do socially relevant comedy. Comedian [Lizz Winstead](#), a founder of *The Daily Show* and Air America Radio, also helped launch [Lady Parts Justice](#), a “cabal of comics and writers” dedicated to protecting access to birth control and abortion. Many pros were involved in [JJJ: Comedy for a Change](#), an international conference on the ability of comedy to drive social change.

### **Watch out for pitfalls.**

Staying tuned to popular cultural forms is politically advantageous, but it threatens to devolve into folly, or worse. Humor may just act as a safety valve to let off social pressure, as [Claudia Orenstein](#) has written of clowning: “Small theatrical transgressions thus express, but at once defuse, brewing political unrest, perhaps even undermining the prospect of real and effective political action.” [Medea Benjamin](#) ticks off a list of other potential drawbacks to the use of humor in political organizing. “You can really offend people, you may be taken the wrong way, or people may not realize you’re trying to be funny. You can belittle the work you’re doing or the issue you’re working on.” Andrew Boyd, while he admits these and other possible downsides, maintains that there is nothing inherently limiting about the use of humor. The question is when and how to effectively deploy humor.

### **Further exploration:**

- “[Follow the Frog](#),” a video by the Rainforest Alliance, offers a humorous look at all the over-the-top things the average person won’t do to protect the rainforests.
- “[Comedy and Democracy: The Role of Humor in Social Justice](#),” a 2013 paper by Nancy Goldman for *Animating Democracy*.
- “[What’s So Funny? The Role of Comedy in Social Change](#),” a panel at the 2015 Skoll World Forum.

## HOW CAN WE USE HISTORY?

“Of all our studies, history is best qualified to reward our research.”

—Malcolm X



Credit: Equal Justice Initiative

### Further exploration:

- [Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers](#), by Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May.
- [Dangerous Games: The Uses and Abuses of History](#), by Margaret MacMillan, and reviews in the [New York Times](#) and the [Washington Post](#).
- “[The History of American Slavery](#),” as told through the lives of nine enslaved people, a “Slate Academy” course led by Jamelle Bouie and Rebecca Onion.
- The Equal Justice Initiative has a [timeline of racial injustice](#) (pictured) and published a landmark report on the history of [lynching in America](#), which the [New York Times](#) covered.
- [Colorlines](#), the “daily news site where race matters,” has [many stories](#) that concern history.

Most every social-change movement has an interpretation—or many interpretations, diverse and contested—of the history that brought us to where we are now.

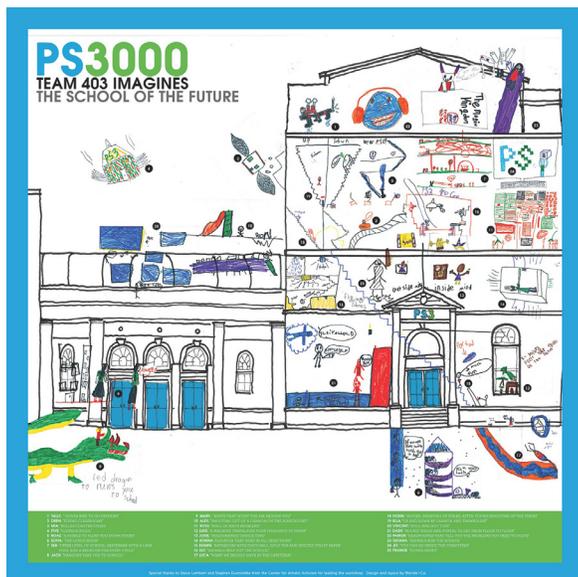
In the movement to end mass incarceration, for example, Eugene Jarecki’s film [The House I Live In](#) sketches the history of the drug war; Michelle Alexander’s book [The New Jim Crow](#) draws a line to earlier eras in racial persecution; and the Equal Justice Initiative goes back further still in its short animated video “[Slavery to Mass Incarceration](#).” Members of the Facebook group [Historians Confront the Carceral State](#) share resources exploring the root causes of the problem—and how one conceives of “the problem” depends on one’s interpretation of history.

Much like nations, social movements are defined in part by the stories they coalesce around—the histories, the legends, the lore. Members of a movement may see themselves not as a discrete segment of society but as a permeating force that cannot be separated from society at large any more than a wave can be separated from the water.

History can be told in everything from comic books to documentary films to museum exhibitions. Just as the forms of history-telling are many, so are its uses. History helps us draw courage from [those who came before us](#), and connect our struggles to theirs. It affirms the importance of social movements in making change, such as the [ACT UP Oral History Project](#) aims to do. History can help societies confront and redress past crimes, such as the [cold cases from the Jim Crow era](#).

History can inform our vision of a just society and inspire us to realize that vision.

## HOW DO WE TELL STORIES ABOUT THE FUTURE WE WANT TO SEE?



Credit: Center for Artistic Activism

A very unscientific survey of nonprofit stories reveals that, oh, 95 percent of them take place in the past. Stories of [voter suppression](#) can stir people to action. Stories of how LGBTQ adults are thriving can inspire young people to stick around until [things get better](#). And yet much of what nonprofits do is focused on the future. But what does the future that we're trying to create actually look like?

"Most movements from the early days of my activism could be summed up by 'No, we're against it.' There was very little of 'Yes, this is what we're for,'" says Steve Duncombe, co-founder and co-director with Steve Lambert of the [Center for Artistic Activism](#) (CAA).

Stories of a better future have been among the most powerful documents in history, Duncombe says, from the Bible's depiction of heaven, to Plato's imagining of the Republic, to Thomas More's renderings in *Utopia*. (And let's not forget Martin Luther King Jr.'s riveting dream.) In the insightful introduction to [his open online edition](#) of More's 1516 book, Duncombe says: "The dominant system

dominates not because people agree with it; it rules because we are convinced there is no alternative. Utopia offers us a glimpse of an alternative."

So how can we tell stories to bring about the future we envision?

### Imagine it.

We've had our imaginations constricted by endless meetings, jargon, grant proposals, and all the rest. According to Duncombe, "We're under the tyranny of the possible."

To overthrow that tyranny, the CAA leads workshops called "[Imagining Utopia](#)." The workshops start off with a slideshow of 19th-century images of what the 21st century would look like. "Flying cars and all that stuff. It helps participants break out and imagine fully," says Duncombe. Workshop leaders then ask what victory looks like. At a workshop for a health organization, the answer might be "a cure for hepatitis C"—at which point the workshop leaders will prompt participants to think bigger. Once they get to the really big picture—"We want people to be healthy so they can enjoy a good life"—the CAA duo might ask, "What does a good life look like? Take us on a tour of your neighborhood," and then trace things backward from there. (Pictured, CAA worked with a group of students to imagine the school of the future.)

This process helps people put discrete advances, such as curing hep C, in the context of a larger vision. "The Utopian answer to power is to redefine power and what a good society is," Duncombe says. "And those visions, when shared by enough people, actually do undermine power."

I think hard times are coming when we will be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now and...even imagine some real grounds for hope... Poets, visionaries—the realists of a larger reality.

—Ursula Le Guin, in her 2014 National Book Award [acceptance speech](#)

### Draft it.

Tell your story of the future using collage, photography, drawing, or writing. The U.S. Department of Arts and Culture—a nonprofit organization, not an actual government agency—sponsors “[Imaginations](#)” to bring together artists, organizers, and community members to [imagine what their communities might look like](#) in 20 years.

Steve Lambert once collaborated with other artists and writers to produce a free [New York Times Special Edition](#), published in 2008 but dated 2009. The paper was full of “All the News We Hope to Print,” such as the end of the Iraq war and the passage of a “Maximum Wage Law,” and each story contained ideas on how grassroots activism could drive the change.

Members of the [Hypothetical Development Organization](#) selected a dozen buildings in New Orleans that had fallen into disuse and invented a “hypothetical future” for each one, unbounded by “commercial potential, practical materials, or physics.” Renderings of each building were posted out front of the building, displayed in a gallery show, and offered for sale as prints.

### Enact it.

Telling stories about a better future puts that future forever out on the horizon. What if you could act out the future now? Writing in [Beautiful Trouble](#), a project on creative activism, Andrew Boyd says you *can*, by doing what he calls “[prefigurative intervention](#)”—actions that “create a little slice of the future we want to live in.”

He sees the lunch counter sit-ins of the 1960s as an example: “[They were] defiant, courageous and ultimately successful acts of resistance against America’s Jim Crow-era apartheid...but they also...prefigured the world they wanted to live in: they were enacting the integration they wanted.” More recent examples Boyd cites include Occupy encampments around the world, which he sees as a “microcosm [of] the communitarian and democratic world they want to bring into being.” According to Boyd, “We can’t create a world we haven’t yet imagined. Better if we’ve already tasted it.”

### Further exploration:

- “[Visioning](#)” exercises from the Advantage Initiative—a group working to improve communities for an aging society—including guided imagery and collage.
- [Cover Story](#) (PDF), a shared-vision exercise created by COOL and Idealist in which people create a magazine cover or front page of a newspaper from a possible future. A group in North Carolina [did the exercise](#).
- [Could Be](#), a program produced by United Nations Radio and broadcast on NBC in 1949, imagined what could be if countries focused on peace.
- “[The Future Is Now](#),” the opening-night event of the 2015 PEN World Voices Festival, had writers from around the globe imagine the best- and worst-case scenarios for the world in 2050. Full audio and video [here](#).
- [Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories From Social Justice Activists](#), edited by Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown. The editors offer presentations and workshops on writing science fiction and visionary fiction.

## HOW DO WE MAKE STORYTELLING A REGULAR PART OF OUR WORK?



Credit: GlobalGiving

### **Take small steps and have fun.**

Gathering stories may feel daunting, especially if you feel like you need to create a full-fledged storytelling program. Instead, start out with a small experiment in storytelling. Or try making each individual story shorter—a one-minute video instead of three minutes, a photo with a paragraph of narrative instead of a pages-long testimonial. Focus on the craft of telling, editing, or performing stories and the great feeling that comes with *creating* something. Once you get in the swing of things, you'll find storytelling easier—and not only that, you may find that it makes your work more efficient and even fun.

Stories rarely emerge fully formed in the first telling, but “good enough” stories can usually meet your goals. Is the story going in an expensive annual report with a long shelf life, or do you need just an anecdote to humanize a speech you're giving? Or perhaps you need just short narratives to get a sense of where your community or colleagues are on an issue? The goals of your story work should align with the resources you can dedicate to it.

### **Hire someone from the community to work with you.**

You may be at some distance from the community you want to gather stories from or otherwise feel unqualified to tell their stories. Consider bringing on a volunteer, intern, or staff member to do it. You might follow the lead of GlobalGiving, which in 2010 launched its [Storytelling Project](#) (pictured), hiring and training “scribes” to gather stories in selected countries where it operates. Or consider the Walter and Elise Haas, Jr. Fund, which hired an oral-history organization to collect “[First Person Stories](#)” to illustrate the human drama behind the issues it works on.

[Progressives should] build a politics that embraces the dreams of people and fashion spectacles which give these fantasies form—a politics that understands desire and speaks to the irrational; a politics that employs symbols and associations; a politics that tells good stories.

—[Stephen Duncombe](#), *Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*

### **Set guidelines for your story collection.**

Whether you're collecting stories from your staff, board, clients, donors, or visitors to your website, tell them precisely what you want and other pertinent information. Creating a short set of guidelines or offering a couple samples of what you're looking for will yield better content and prevent bruised egos. (That's what the group Northern California Grantmakers did in its [Philanthropic Storytelling Toolkit](#).) Questions to address include:

- What story do you want them to tell? Is it about a specific event, theme, or experience?
- What is the suggested length?
- Are there any prohibitions, such as on hate speech or other language?
- Are photos and videos needed, and what are the technical specifications?
- What additional information (name, email address, phone) is needed?
- Where and how will the story be used? Will the storyteller have input?
- Will the person be named or remain anonymous?
- Will the story be used as is, or might it be edited for length or clarity?
- Will the story definitely be used, or is there a chance it will not be used?
- Does the storyteller need to give permission, such as on a release form?

### **Be systematic in your story gathering.**

Use a story-gathering method that requires the least finagling. You can have people submit text stories via Google Docs, or videos on YouTube, or photo stories on Facebook, but make sure users have clear instructions about how to share stories and, as above, what kinds of stories to share. Email or phone are fine collection tools as well, but the more systematic you are the easier the project will be to complete.

### **Be clear about the chain of command.**

Determine who is going to review stories before they are published. Does each story have to be approved by a communications staffer, the director, or someone else before being published? The more clear you are about the process, the smoother it will be.

### **Further exploration:**

- [“Three Ways to Collect Stories More Effectively at Your Nonprofit,”](#) by Julie Dixon, has good examples of how to “create simple mechanisms to capture stories.”

# HOW CAN WE GATHER STORIES FROM CONSTITUENTS?



Credit: Nation Inside

You can gather stories for any number of purposes: to recruit supporters, to get people to sign on to a petition, to take the pulse of the community where you work. But even if you believe in the value of storytelling, your constituents may not. Following are some solutions to challenges you may face.

### **Get support from your group's leaders.**

If people in your organization aren't sold on the idea, then gathering stories will be more like wrangling cattle and less like a night around the campfire. To overcome this barrier, try to get the endorsement of leaders in your organization. Demonstrate the value of stories by the power of example—point to any of the groups in this guide. To give skeptics an example that's closer to home, try doing a test-run yourself with a story or two.

“Anyone who has lived to the age of eighteen has enough stories to last a lifetime.”

—Flannery O'Connor

### **Get buy-in.**

When asked for their story, many people will start out by protesting, “I have nothing to say!” One way around this is to look for low-hanging fruit. Is there someone who has a readymade story that can serve as an example? Alternatively, try coaxing a story out of one of the more reticent people. It can help to make it a fun process—take him out to lunch to get background, or ask her for photos that will prompt her to recollect. This will encourage others to take part.

### **Try out different venues, media, or story gatherers.**

Some people are intimidated by video; others may not like the sound of their voice. Offer different media options for people to tell their stories, whether it's on video, in writing, or via a toll-free call-in line. Allow stories to be posted anonymously or under a pseudonym. You might also want to be ready with a diverse group of story gatherers; some people might prefer to tell their story to someone who shares their gender or background, or just someone they feel more comfortable with.

Some people may not want to go public with their story for fear of retribution or because it's very personal but may be willing to tell it through some other means. You could have actors portray your storytellers; for example, the Chicago theater group [Erasing the Distance](#) stages theater pieces based on conversations with people with mental illness. Other ways to protect the identity of the subject of a story are to change the name, age, gender, or other details; or to create a composite character. In that case, honesty compels you to state that's what you're doing.

### **Use the techniques of theater and fiction to overcome people's reluctance.**

A growing number of documentarians are incorporating fictional elements into their films says filmmaker [Adele Horne](#). They may invite their subjects to perform or make up stories. “This allows for deeper truths to emerge—not just actions of daily life, but the workings of the imagination, dreamlife, psychology, or subconscious,” she says. “I worked in this way on my film *And Again*, organizing and filming a theater workshop that invited local people who live in the economically depressed region around Playas, New Mexico, to tell the story of their town. I was struck by how much more sadness and anger came out in the theater workshop than I had heard in the dozens of hours of interviews I had previously recorded.”

### **Respect people's wishes if they just refuse.**

It's one thing to try to encourage people who are reticent or make it easy for people who have a tough time expressing themselves. But it's another to try to pressure people to tell their stories. Much as you may believe in the power of storytelling, not everyone will agree. Respect their wishes to not share their story.

## WHAT IS A STORY BANK AND HOW CAN WE BUILD ONE?



Credit: The National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health

A story bank is a collection of narratives that you can easily draw on for an interview with a news reporter, a speech you're giving about your work, a fundraising letter, a meeting with a legislator, or another purpose. By "banking" and indexing stories, you can have them on hand—rather than having to sort through your memory when you need a story. Following are tips on how to create and use a story bank.

### **Identify your goals for the story bank.**

If you're going to spend time gathering stories, be clear on what you hope to achieve and whom you hope to move. Do you aim to sway voters in a particular district or raise funds from your members? [Bolder Giving](#) has an online [story library](#) of people from across the income spectrum who give away large percentages of their money; the goal is to inspire others to do the same. Sometimes your goal might be to

“Many organizations already have a wealth of stories through the work they do every day—they just don’t save them anywhere. That’s like having all of your money scattered around your house.”

—Elizabeth Prescott, formerly of Families USA, in the journal [free-range thinking](#)

move your storytellers as much as your audiences. The [National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health](#) campaign ¡Soy Poderosa! (I Am Powerful!) asks supporters to be photographed holding signs on which they’ve written “Soy poderosa because…” Gathering these micro-stories helps the organization learn about and develop its base. “In our constituency, not everyone votes,” says one staffer. “Stories are a way for them to make their voices heard in other ways.” Clearly stating your goals does not rule out serendipity or surprise; it only helps you be strategic.

### **Set guidelines about how to capture and share stories.**

People gathering or telling stories need to know what the story should be about, how long it should be, what medium it should be in, how it will be used, and any other parameters. (See the chapter on gathering stories.) Such guidelines might be as simple as, “Using your webcam or phone, tell a story of two minutes or less about a time when you fought for human rights and what difference it made; your video may be shared publicly online or in any of our organization’s materials.” You might produce stories for your bank, or invite your constituents to “deposit” theirs. Not all story banks are public; some groups keep stories private until they need one.

### **Index or tag your stories so that you or other users can easily retrieve them.**

Use tags, keywords, database fields, or other indexing tools to call up the right story for the right occasion, such as for a reporter on deadline. The [Earned Assets Resource Network](#) (EARN) provides matched savings accounts for low-income people saving for education, business, or housing. A grant from the Levi Strauss Foundation enabled the organization to build a “story engine” into its database, so the entry for each person—a saver, a donor, or other constituent—contained new fields about their story, public-speaking skills, and so on. EARN could now easily retrieve stories to respond to press inquiries, motivate savers, or cite in fundraising letters and on its website.

### **Learn from experience.**

Today’s web-tracking tools enable nonprofits to have a good sense of how many people see a given story online, how much time they spend on it, and whether they finish it. The comments section gives qualitative feedback from your audiences. No matter what your goal with story-banking, it helps to know at least who and how many people are reading, listening, or watching and what they think. The data can help you answer whether and how your story bank is helping you achieve your goals; and if it’s not, then it may be time to adjust your goals or improve your story-banking procedures.

### **Further exploration:**

- “[How to Build a Storybank](#),” by Elizabeth Prescott, the former story-bank supervisor for Families USA.

## WHAT ARE THE ETHICS OF STORYTELLING?



Credit: The Neighborhood Story Project

Organizations that tell stories are exercising power and influence. It is precisely because of this power that groups face ethical questions concerning their storytellers and audiences. Wrestling with these questions is not just an exercise in political correctness. It can prompt an organization to better understand the causes of social injustice and get better at responding to them.

### **Who tells the story, and how is she represented?**

If you work on criminal-justice reform and you tell only the stories of prison guards, or only of white prisoners, you may be replicating power imbalances that contributed to mass incarceration in the first place. Your communications strategy may call for some guards' stories to be told. But if that strategy excludes the voices of people most directly affected by a social problem—you may want to rethink your strategy.

Then there's the matter of how your storyteller is represented. If she is sharing her own story unmediated—such as by uploading it directly to your website—she is telling her story the way she wants to. If, however, you'll be editing the story before sharing it, then the principle of informed consent (see below) suggests that your storyteller deserves to know this.

# “Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.”

—Proverb *cited* by writer Chinua Achebe

Some organizations give their interview subjects an opportunity to revise or reject a story before it gets distributed, to make sure they're satisfied with it. That's relatively easy if you're dealing with a blog post or short audio piece. It's much harder if you're talking about a film, in which case it could cost time and money to make even a small change at the last minute.

One question, then, is whether you are accurately and fairly representing someone; another is if you purport to represent other people with a story you tell. In her 2009 TED talk, "[The Danger of a Single Story](#)," author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says that telling only one story about a people or place "creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete... When we reject the single story, when we realize there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise." The question for social-change groups is whose and how many stories they want to tell about their cause.

## Does the storyteller know what he's getting into?

When someone tells their story, they become open to criticism, attack, misinterpretation, or even physical harm. They're also open to good things such as empathy or support or change. Either way, the storyteller is vulnerable.

That's why it's important for all involved to give and get "informed consent"—that is, when a person agrees to tell his story with full knowledge of how it will be used and what the known risks are. [WITNESS](#), the international video-for-human-rights organization, has a [tip sheet](#) on the elements of informed consent, adapted here to use the language of storytelling:

- **Disclosure:** The organization must explain the use and purpose of the story, such as where and to whom it will be shown, and what effect the organization hopes it will have.
- **Voluntariness:** Consent must be given voluntarily and with an understanding of whether or not the storyteller will be anonymous.
- **Comprehension:** The teller must understand the implications of sharing her story; for example, the possibility that the story will be put online or that certain audiences may see it and use it for their own purposes.
- **Competence:** The storyteller must be able to comprehend the implications of his participation; this is an issue especially with storytellers who are children or who have intellectual disabilities.

Ultimately, the decision to tell a story is up to the storyteller; the decision whether to use it rests with the organization. The ethical challenge is how to reconcile the interests and power of each.

## What does your audience expect of the story?

The 2009 report [Honest Truths: Documentary Filmmakers on Ethical Challenges in Their Work](#) reminds us that storytellers also have a responsibility to their audiences.

In nonfiction stories, audiences reasonably expect that the story will be factually true. Documentarians interviewed for *Honest Truths* “believed that they were obligated to provide a generally truthful narrative or story, even if some of the means of doing that involved misrepresentation, manipulation, or elision.”

In *Honest Truths*, filmmaker Ken Burns says he faced the tension between precise accuracy and larger truth in making his film about former Louisiana governor [Huey Long](#). He was trying to decide which of two photographs to use to make the point that Long was often surrounded by bodyguards. One photo showed Long’s typical bodyguards, in street clothes. Another pictured uniformed guards—a one-time moment. Burns used the atypical shot, because it communicated his point more rapidly. “I sacrificed a little bit of accuracy. But did I? It was a perfect ethical conundrum. It made the film better. It did not compromise an ultimate truth.”

## Who has power, who benefits and how?

Some groups pay their storytellers, whether it’s an honorarium for their participation or royalties on sales. The latter is the case with the [Neighborhood Story Project](#), which works with high school students and community groups to create books about life in New Orleans.

The organization’s co-director, Abram Himmelstein, says, “The people we work with have a fraught relationship with the media. Middle-class reporters go into poor neighborhoods and tell stories about them, and don’t pay, and in fact use those stories to sell advertising and subscriptions. The more incendiary the stories, the more profitable the enterprise. We do the opposite: People tell their own stories, and tell them correctly, and get paid for it.”

Other groups don’t pay. Many documentary filmmakers worry that paying subjects will induce them to craft their story in such a way as to be more satisfying—at the expense of truth. On the other hand, if only people who can afford to take time off work to tell their stories can participate, that creates another kind of bias.

Another question is not just whether your storytellers get paid, but whether they have decision-making power in your group. Are your storytellers just giving their stories over to you, or do they have a say in the priorities of the organization and whose stories will be told? This question concerns your responsibility to the storytellers, but also to your own mission.

## What can you do to address these ethical questions?

Consider whose stories you want to tell and how that matches your mission. Solicit input on whose stories to tell and how from the people most directly affected by the social issue you’re dealing with.

Inform your storytellers about how their story will be used. Offer a “terms of use” page on a media-sharing website, or explain your own motivations in sharing their story. Have storytellers sign consent forms.

Mitigate the harm your storytellers may come to. That might mean setting ground rules for comments on a blog or Facebook page and deleting comments that are out of bounds. Or it might mean blurring their faces on a video or changing their name and identifying information in a blog post.

Protect your storytellers if they do come to harm. Take a stand if your storytellers do come under verbal or physical attack. Use the resources of your organization to defend them.

### Further exploration:

- [Exhale, an organization that promotes dialogue about abortion, has a set of resources on ethical story-sharing.](#)
- [The Center for Media and Social Impact’s 2009 report, \*Honest Truths\*, has documentary filmmakers talk about ethical challenges in their work.](#)
- [“Ethical Storysharing, Part 1” and “Part 2,”](#) blog posts in *Philanthropy News Digest* by communications consultant [Thaler Pekar](#).

# HOW CAN NONPROFITS WORK WITH OUTSIDE STORYTELLERS TO CREATE CHANGE?

Sometimes you'll decide the best way to tell stories for change is to work with an outside professional. Maybe you commission a documentary film or hire a storyteller-in-residence. This chapter is about how storytellers and nonprofits, funders, or activist groups can manage their relationships and have the biggest impact. Here, we talk mostly about films and filmmakers, but the same principles apply to other kinds of stories and storytellers, such as plays and playwrights.

## Think about engagement and impact from the start.

Documentarians are skilled storytellers who care about the people and topics of their films, and they want to have an impact. And many nonprofits are on the lookout for high-quality media to get audiences involved. Good match, right? It can be an even better match—as far as social impact is concerned—if the two parties start talking early in the process. Filmmakers can learn about the issue from their nonprofit partners, find people to interview, and figure out how the organizations might use the completed film in order to move viewers to action. That all means bigger audiences and more impact.

## Communicate.

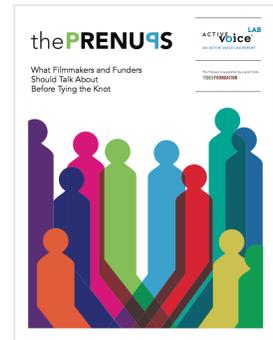
Filmmakers and their nonprofit or foundation partners might work closely together throughout production, or they may have only occasional contact. Whatever the case, they can all benefit by talking about everything from the nitty-gritty to the big picture. Doing so helps both parties not only avoid trouble later on but also get inspired about what they might accomplish together. For questions to discuss, read [\*The Prenups: What Filmmakers and Funders Should Talk About Before Tying the Knot\*](#), a project of [Active Voice Lab](#). Sample questions include: What vision does each of us have for this project? What are our respective goals for the project, and our roles in it? What risks are we each assuming, and how can we mitigate them? What do we each want in terms of editorial control and input during the film? Who owns the copyright? *The Prenups* focuses on filmmaker-funder relationships but contains wisdom that any storytellers and nonprofits can learn from.

## Prepare for things to change.

Creating a story is a process of discovery. That's especially true in a documentary project about people whose lives change over the course of production. That fact may be unnerving for organizations that have a particular story in mind. But as one documentarian says in *The Prenups*, filmmakers know how to “ride the wave of discovery” and “tell a compelling story, even if we don't have the script nailed down from day one.” And that's a good thing, the filmmaker continues: A film needn't follow a “party line” to have an impact. In fact, that may be the whole point: to follow the truth of the story wherever it leads. That will be more thought-provoking for some audiences than a story that hits them over the head with its message. Filmmakers and their partners can talk up front about what changes they can anticipate and how to deal with them.

## Create opportunities for engagement.

For a film to spur action, it helps to give audiences a chance to get involved. That might take the form of post-film Q&As with the director, benefit screenings for nonprofits, discussion guides for community groups, DVDs or streaming video made available for house parties, or abbreviated versions or “modules” of the film that can be shown in high school or college classes. Who your audiences are and what you want them to do are guided by strategy. But one-off events or small-scale campaigns can also help, even if they're last-minute.

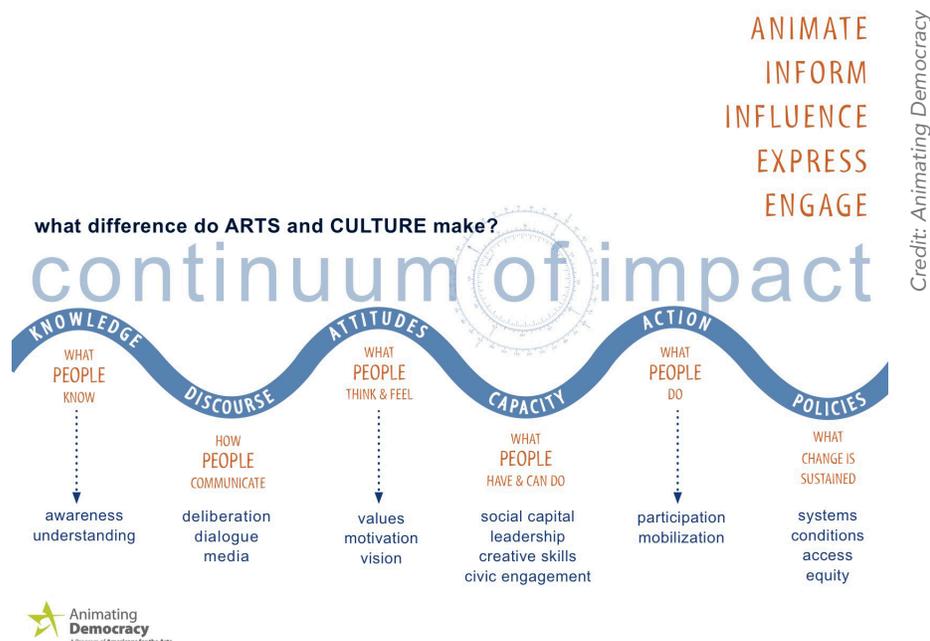


Credit: Active Voice Lab

## Further exploration:

- [Active Voice Lab](#) offers resources on “story strategy,” and case stories about films it has worked with. Also see the organization's resource [The Prenups: What Filmmakers and Funders Should Talk About Before Tying the Knot](#).
- [Participant Media](#) has produced dozens of films on pressing social issues, which it invites action on through its [TakePart](#) platform.
- [Working Films](#) has organized engagement campaigns around films on education, health, race, and other issues and has case studies available on its website.
- The Fledgling Fund has a [resource page](#) with case studies on social-issue films it has supported, papers on audience engagement, and more.

# HOW DO WE EVALUATE THE IMPACT OF OUR STORIES?



Not only can storytelling be evaluated, within limits, but it can also be a method of evaluation, providing a picture of the change you make. Here's how to make it useful.

## Identify your goals.

Before you can evaluate whether your storytelling met its goals, you have to be clear about what those goals are. Start by considering whether you're trying to change public knowledge, attitudes, behavior, or policy. Animating Democracy, a project of Americans for the Arts, has a page on [social-impact indicators](#) (pictured) to assess changes in such areas as people's knowledge, attitudes, and actions, and in policies. (It's part of a [broader set of resources](#) on the group's website.)

Go too narrow with what you're evaluating, and you risk showing only what's self-evident; go too broad, and you risk trying to prove something that it's impossible to document. The sweet spot is where social impact overlaps with your desire and ability to evaluate.

## Determine your metrics and your methods.

Once you've determined your goals, ask yourself exactly what it will look like if you succeed. More media coverage? More small donors contributing? New volunteers walking through the door? Peg your goals to a time period and specific numbers, and these become your metrics. If your storytelling is part of a web-based fundraising campaign, the metrics might be "10 new donors per fundraising email" and "\$500 raised per fundraising email." Depending on what you're looking to evaluate, the mechanisms of evaluation may include surveys, focus groups, comments on social media, voting patterns, web-traffic data, fundraising data, or reviews of policy changes.

“Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.”

— *William Bruce Cameron*

### **Measure for learning.**

Evaluation can be used to compare one storytelling method to another, and to generate lessons for your group, your funders, and the field. You might pose a strategy question up front that you'll address over the course of a project: What kinds of stories raise the most money in fundraising appeals? What media is most effective in communicating with target audiences?

To answer such questions, you'll have to check the indicators on your work against whatever you're comparing it to. For example, if you're checking how much traffic a web video drives to your site, you'll have to measure traffic before and after the time you post the video. Or you might use a control group to determine if some stories work better than others; for example, you might send out two fundraising emails to different but roughly equal email lists, one with a story from one of your clients, and one with a story from a board member. (This is similar to how the [2012 Obama campaign tested](#) the response rate of various email subject lines. One of the most successful was simply "Hey.") Once you have the first round of results, refine your strategy and try again.

### **Don't evaluate if you won't learn from it.**

Doing a project assessment can be useful in the same way that writing a grant proposal is: It forces you to articulate what you want to accomplish and why. If you have an idea of what you want to learn and why, evaluation can help. But it should be paired with a strategy for making a difference; otherwise, it's a little like telling only the end to a story: You say where you end up but not the path you took to get there. Or if you're not under pressure to evaluate, or won't learn anything from it, don't bother. That's the gist of a 2014 [article](#) in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.

### **Gather stories to assess needs and strengths and document impact.**

"Rebecca's life has come to an end with doctor's announcement that she was pregnant..." That's the first line of one of over 57,000 "micro-narratives" collected in Kenya and Uganda by GlobalGiving, a website that allows users to donate to vetted development projects around the world. The organization's [Storytelling Project](#) hires and trains "scribes" to gather stories in the areas where beneficiary groups are located. Those stories get fed through a host of tools GlobalGiving created to filter data about community needs, possible solutions, and innovative organizations that it might add to its web platform. The data also supports other groups in international development, especially the small ones that can't afford such a project, so one funder tells the [Stanford Social Innovation Review](#). And the project's principle applies to groups of any size: Gathering stories can help a group assess the needs and strengths of the community in which it works and document its impact.

## HOW DO WE KNOW?



For many storytellers, there is no more loathsome question than “How are you going to measure your impact?” It clashes with the creative impulse behind storytelling.

The folks at [Active Voice Lab](#)—a San Francisco-based group that helps people use stories and culture to advance social change—have artfully reframed this question to get at something more essential: “How do we know if we’re making a difference?”

That’s the topic—and the name—of a [new website](#) they’ve launched on media-impact measurement. It includes a blog, a resource page, a set of garden tools that serve as metaphors to explore media impact, and other features.

“I can’t think of a social-justice movement that doesn’t need stories, just as they need organizers, money, research, leadership,” says Active Voice Lab director Ellen Schneider. “But stories alone are just characters, settings, plot, and so on. They’re powerful as part of an ‘ecosystem of change’”—a big picture that includes all the other elements in a social-change movement.

The work of social change can feel abstract, especially if you sit at a desk much of the day, or if you’re not sure who sees your stories or if they care. You may wonder if your dedication to your cause is worth anything. You may despair of the possibilities for change, when the forces of apathy and injustice seem so entrenched. It’s in those moments especially when the question of “How Do We Know?” matters most—for it is a prompt to stay connected to the work itself and to the other people doing it.

### Further exploration:

- Chapter from [Hatch](#) on evaluation has tips about how to create good key progress indicators, or KPIs.
- [How Do We Know?](#) is a project of Active Voice Lab and has resources on evaluating how media contributes to social change.
- [Animating Democracy](#), a project of Americans for the Arts, has a page on [social-impact indicators](#), and a [broader set of resources](#).
- [Working Narratives](#) has a [blog post](#) on using the social-impact indicators of Animating Democracy to evaluate storytelling work.

## WHAT PRACTICES SUPPORT STORYTELLING ON AN ONGOING BASIS?

Good stories have a certain magic to them, don't they? But, as with any magic, there's plenty going on that you don't see. All the work it took to create a story and get it to you. Following are the four main practices that support social-change storytelling.

TYPE OF ENGAGEMENT	EXAMPLE
<b>Research:</b> Research on narrative strategies and activities.	The <a href="#">Opportunity Agenda</a> 's research on effective framing and messaging. <a href="#">Animating Democracy</a> 's Arts & Social Change Mapping Initiative.
<b>Training and convening:</b> Online and offline work that helps groups share ideas and tell effective stories.	The <a href="#">Leading Change Network</a> 's Public Narrative trainings and tools. <a href="#">Creative Change</a> retreat on culture-change strategies.
<b>Storytelling:</b> Creation and presentation of films, books, plays, and other stories, or the facilitation of popular storytelling.	Films and engagement campaigns in the <a href="#">Stories of Change</a> partnership between the Sundance Institute Documentary Film Program and the Skoll Foundation. Orton Family Foundation's <a href="#">Heart &amp; Soul</a> community-planning method.
<b>Infrastructure:</b> Systems, platforms, and policies that support safe and effective storytelling and the distribution of stories.	<a href="#">Nation Inside</a> 's story-sharing platform on mass incarceration. <a href="#">WITNESS</a> phone apps to support and protect video-for-change activists.

These practices all serve the short-term goals of a particular campaign while also building stronger social-justice movements for years to come. Organizations can do an audit of their own storytelling capacity in these four areas, then match the results against their needs.

# WHAT CAN GRANTMAKERS DO?



Credit: The Pittsburgh Foundation

Storytelling can be a part of any grantmaker's portfolio and strategy. Here we look at how grantmakers can explore narrative strategies; engage with applicants and grantees; and evaluate programs in such a way as to generate valuable learning.

## Explore

**Talk with current grantees.** Where to begin with funding storytelling? One grantmaker suggests starting right in your back yard. "Ask your grantees," says Taryn Higashi of [Unbound Philanthropy](#), "because some of them may already be using storytelling and can help grantmakers understand."

**Make experimental grants.** "You don't necessarily need a complete theory of change to get started," says a grantmaker who works on public-policy reform. "I've made some small experimental grants to media and storytelling projects. Even if some of the grants didn't turn out to be very high impact, they answered some questions I had about strategy."

**Integrate storytelling from the start.** "For some people, storytelling and other art forms are an afterthought," says Denise Brown of the [Leeway Foundation](#). "They might need a poster for their rally or a performer for their show." Those are legitimate needs, but Brown adds: "My question is, 'What would it be like to have a storyteller in the room when setting the agenda?'"

## Engage

**Solicit stories in guidelines.** Application guidelines might call for stories as another way to inform grantmaking decisions. The Leeway Foundation, which funds women and trans\* artists committed to social change, does just that. "We don't ask grant applicants for a résumé," says executive director Denise Brown. "Instead, we ask them to tell stories about up to 10 experiences that were transformational for them. Applicants rarely write about jobs, but instead they might tell stories about a trip, or their childhood, or maybe their first experience of racism. I'm always humbled by how much people share."

“Simply presenting the ‘evidence’ will not bring about change. You first have to make people care about the problem. And that is what storytelling does.”

—Brett Davidson, *Open Society Foundations*

**Consider your type of engagement.** As described in another chapter of this guide, the four pillars of stories-for-change work are research, training and convening, storytelling, and infrastructure. Consider your goals and your strengths as a grantmaker to decide what pillars to support with financial or other resources.

**Deploy the foundation’s communications staff.** It’s not just grantees but also grantmakers who can tell stories to advance their missions. The [Pittsburgh Foundation](#), a community foundation, uses storytelling to support grantees and to engage donors and the broader community. The foundation ponied up for flip-cams and storytelling workshops so that grantees could tell their own stories; those stories needed a distribution platform, so the foundation sponsored an online nonprofit news magazine. They also wanted to take the pulse of the community they were serving, so they organized live storytelling events called “Tell Me Pittsburgh” (pictured), on themes including struggle and hope. The foundation also collects donor stories, which it then puts in ads in newspapers, bus shelters, and elsewhere.

## Evaluate

**Identify where the impact can be observed.** Interviewees for this guide offer a word of caution: It is difficult, even impossible, for grantees to conclusively answer broad questions about their impact, such as “How has the zeitgeist on criminal justice changed because of your film?” Instead, grantmakers might identify more specifically where impact can be observed.

**Have grantees answer a narrative-strategy question.** Many grantmakers are understandably concerned about overwhelming their grantees with data-collection requirements; however, such requirements might be less burdensome if they prompted the grantee to generate useful data for themselves, the grantmaker, and the field. For this reason, grant-application guidelines could call for applicants to state a question about strategy or tactics that they will address over the life of their project. The results could be published on grantmakers’ websites, adding to collective knowledge for the field.

## Further exploration:

- [“First Person Stories”](#) is a series of narratives that illuminate the issues addressed by The Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund.
- [“Hearts & Minds”](#) is a video that tells the story of how a group of funders called the Civil Marriage Collaborative helped make marriage equality the law of the land. See also this [op-ed](#) by Freedom to Marry founder Evan Wolfson about philanthropy’s role in the victory.

## AFTERWORD BY DEEPAK BHARGAVA



If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one; or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle.

—Frederick Douglass

Social movements make the impossible possible.

The end of slavery was not the result of a turn of the wheel of fortune, a lucky break that came with the old generation of racists dying off and a visionary president who understood the evil of it. It was the result of a movement that organized and forced government to take action, even at the expense of war.

That movement succeeded in part by telling stories.

Frederick Douglass understood this well. Here was a man who, in his youth, and at his own peril, learned to read and taught others to do so at weekly church services. A man who, after escaping slavery, told his own story in books and speeches to rouse support for abolition.

Douglass and other abolitionists did a lot more than just tell stories. But can you imagine the movement without stories? Can you imagine any movement without stories?

Through stories, we envision the change we want to make, and we build the power to make it.

At the Center for Community Change, we envision an end to poverty. We've got a 10-year program to help

achieve that goal. We are helping build a movement of, by, and for low-income people, so that they are the protagonists of their own stories, the authors of change.

In this campaign against poverty, as in any campaign, the question is whether we are telling good stories: stories that fire the imagination, stories that put hands and feet in motion.

If we don't tell such stories, the vacuum will surely be filled by someone else. For stories are also being told by the opponents of progress, who would have us build up walls at our borders and tear down the laws that protect our planet, our workforce, and our most vulnerable families.

It is this clash of forces that makes for struggle. Without struggle, there is no progress—and without struggle, there are also no stories. There is only stasis.

So let us plow up the ground, let us struggle on. And let the stories we tell be equal to the struggle we make for justice.

*Deepak Bhargava is executive director of the [Center for Community Change](http://www.workingnarratives.org).*







