



Markkula Center
for Applied Ethics
at Santa Clara University

Ethical Storytelling Guide for Nonprofits

Key Principles & Practices

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From annual reports to marketing materials to grant proposals, nonprofits tell stories on a regular basis. Storytelling offers an opportunity to share the ways your organization has made strides toward fulfilling your mission by demonstrating the concrete impact you have had on people's lives. At the same time, it may be tempting to use storytelling to elicit emotions such as fear and pity, which is ethically risky. In the absence of clear ethical principles for storytelling, nonprofits may lean too heavily on tales of despair to capture attention which can inadvertently damage their relationships to the communities they seek to serve, contribute to conserving myths about these communities, and emotionally exhaust their audiences of potential supporters.

This guide offers principles and practices for ensuring that your storytelling energizes and engages audiences, and is aligned with your mission to serve communities. Divided into four sections, the guide provides:

- (1) An explanation of three key ethical principles to keep in mind when storytelling
- (2) Techniques for implementing these principles
- (3) A 5-step procedure for assessing a story idea using an ethical lens
- (4) Additional resources for guidance from experts in nonprofit storytelling

1. Three Key Principles for Ethical Storytelling

The three principles discussed next are derived from major themes across research in nonprofit storytelling, as well as strategic communication in the broader social sector. With a growing number of articles and guides (listed in section IV) that provide sets of best practices, the synthesis below articulates the principles these practices share in common, and why they matter from an ethical perspective.

i. Substance Over Shortcuts

Substantive stories represent people in their full complexity, not as caricatures that rely on stereotypes. Stereotypes are shortcuts that simplify a group of people or an issue, but quickly

become pernicious. Even “positive” stereotypes like “model minority” should be avoided, since any stereotype flattens a community and may feed into problematic myths (such as the myth that people designated as part of a “model minority” never need outside support). Focusing on substance guides storytellers in the direction of offering developed portraits and context for who members of a community are, and why they receive services from a nonprofit.

Finally, substantive stories emphasize people’s dignity, which is the intrinsic worth every person has – regardless of their background, accomplishments, or mistakes. In contrast, shortcuts or stereotypes often disrespect this dignity by making generalizations about an entire community without consideration of the particular lived experiences within a community.

ii. Inclusion: “Nothing About Us Without Us”

Inclusion is a common ethical principle that reminds us to include the people that a nonprofit serves as central to the work an organization does. Certainly, stories can be told based on statistics or trends, but are enlivened when real characters are part of the story as well. That said, simply dropping in names and anecdotes does not satisfy the standard of an ethical principle of inclusion: moving beyond “ornamental” inclusion, substantive inclusion in nonprofit storytelling adheres to the larger rallying call of “Nothing About Us Without Us” (originally used in the context of disability empowerment, but also applied broadly across the social sector).

An ethic of inclusion involves partnering with the “subjects” of stories, to shift them from being scrutinized to participating in the construction of the narrative, with an understanding that “the story belongs to the storyteller.”¹ This minimizes the likelihood of **appropriating** a person’s story for tactical purposes, which may otherwise commodify their experiences and disempower the person who lived the experience and is now being leveraged for organizational gain.

¹ Bronson, E. (2018, July 1). “The Ethics of Storytelling: A How-To Guide.” <https://www.ywcaworks.org/blogs/firesteel/tue-07312018-1423/ethics-storytelling-how-guide>

Journalists experience a similar issue when covering communities they are not part of, and it is worth noting that this does not mean that journalists cannot or should not cover these communities. Instead, this distance means that sources need to be carefully brought into the storytelling process as a good faith effort to minimize distortion and misunderstanding.

iii. Constructive Narrative: Charting a Path Forward

A principle of **constructive narrative** is helpful for ensuring that stories are inclusive, future-oriented, and actionable. Constructive narratives represent the issue or inequality that creates an unmet need, and also chart a path forward for meeting this need. Doing so makes the contributions of the nonprofit clear, and shifts focus from a few individuals (either experiencing severe hardship or presented as cheerful and therefore fine) to the scope of why the nonprofit's services are crucial.

Increasingly, audiences (including potential donors) are becoming weary and cynical about the likelihood of affecting change. Across the world, the obstacles and impediments to affecting change seem daunting. Along with empathy fatigue comes desensitization or numbing, where people begin to turn away from distressing images instead of exploring how they can help – which bodes poorly for nonprofits to capture the attention and engagement they need from potential supporters. Constructive narratives provide a clear path forward for *how people can help* address a problem, which can improve people's sense of that change is both necessary and possible.

Constructive narratives have consistently improved audience's sense of **efficacy** and reduce **cynicism** about prospects for hope. Particularly when aimed at attracting support, stories told with a **constructive** ethic are more likely to garner and sustain this support since stories that demonstrate a path forward make it clear how – precisely – supporting a nonprofit will impact lives.

Dreary narratives of intractable inequity with a bleak outlook or optimistic narratives of resilience with a happy ending are both likely to make people wonder if a nonprofit – or their support of it – can make a difference. In contrast, constructive narratives point at long-term avenues and strategies that, with continued support, will affect change.

2. Techniques for Implementing Ethical Storytelling Principles

i. Substance Over Shortcuts: Countering Stereotypes

a. In-depth interviews and information-gathering: Telling substantive stories requires having substantive source material. Gather this material by doing online research from reputable databases in your area, and conducting in-depth interviews with people who have received services from your organization. In-depth interviews are usually 40 minutes to an hour, and involve asking participants to explain their journey, step by step, as well as their reflections on the experience. In-depth interviews do not need to involve complex questions, but instead require time for people to explain their experiences in detail. Interviews should shape the story you ultimately tell, rather than going into interviews with an expected storyline or frame.

b. Myth-busting: Make a list of the stereotypes of the communities you serve. Then, make a list of alternatives – these could be the opposite of negative stereotypes, or greater context for positive stereotypes to humanize more multidimensionally.

- Identifying these stereotypes can bring them to consciousness, and helps move away from implicit biases that may enter narratives unconsciously
- Try to have a conversation internally about the stereotypes your staff lists to trace where these stereotypes come from, what they mean, and how they need to change

- Starting from counter-stereotype can take the creative process in a different direction – e.g.: people who are homeless **often work full-time**, though many Americans assume people become homeless due to layoffs or poor work ethic. Myth-busting in the service of accuracy can foster momentum for why people should help.

ii. Inclusion: “Nothing About Us Without Us”

a. Concept development & production

- Treat the communities you serve as **partners** instead of **subjects**. Members of communities may not have time to partner with you at every step of story development, but will likely be up for providing 5-10 minutes of feedback
- **Listen** before developing a story concept or narrative frame
- Consider giving communities **veto power** – if they find the way the story is being narrated or represented objectionable, don’t run it
- **Solicit feedback** at multiple points in developing narrative – including conceptualization, draft, pre-launch, post-launch.

b. Post-launch

- In addition to reporting about the tactical effectiveness of a campaign (using metrics like sign-ups, subscriptions, or donations), consider adding reporting about feedback from communities represented. Ask them to provide their thoughts on what works, what doesn’t work, and what could be improved for the next narrative.

iii. Constructive Narrative: Charting a Path Forward

a. The Black Box Test

- Constructive narratives incorporate a message of hope over cynicism/pessimism. However, constructive narratives should also provide an explanation of how, precisely, this change can be achieved.
- Consider “The Black Box Test”: does the narrative present change without explaining how it came about? If so, consider adding an explanation of *how* change was achieved.

b. The One-Shot Test

- Constructive narratives need to **contextualize** the issue a nonprofit is trying to address. Otherwise, gaps in awareness may lead to audiences filling in the blanks with stereotypes or dominant (and distorting) myths. At the same time, too much context can get into the weeds and lose audience attention.
- To gauge whether your narrative is supplying sufficient context, try using “The One-Shot Test”: if this campaign is the audience’s **only** exposure to this issue/community, are people’s lived experiences and needs for the services you provide clear?

c. The Bad Luck Test

- Finally, constructive narratives explain the **origins** of an issue. For example, income inequality is an area that many nonprofits seek to address, but do not always make explicit *why* income inequality persists. As a result, some narratives may represent social issues like bad luck – unfortunate, but not much you can do about it.
- Apply “The Bad Luck Test” to your narrative: have you provided an explanation of what the issue is as well as where it comes from and why it

persists (and why it isn't something people can simply solve for themselves without a nonprofit providing services?)

3. A 5-step Procedure for Assessing a Story Idea Using an Ethical Lens (Adapted from the Markkula Framework for Ethical Decision-Making)

i. Recognize an Ethical Issue

- a. Could this story or campaign concept be damaging to a member of the community we seek to serve?
- b. Is this issue about more than what is legal or what is most efficient? If so, how?

ii. Get the Facts

- a. What are the key claims of this story or campaign? What underlying premises are at work? What is the historical significance of linking these themes to the communities we seek to serve? Do I know enough to make a decision?
- b. What individuals and groups have an important stake in the outcome? Have we shared the story concept with them? What was their response?
- c. What are the options for acting? Have all the relevant persons and groups been consulted? How did they react? If they are unavailable for consultation, try perspective-taking: based on all you know about the communities the organization seeks to serve, how might they react to this story concept?

iii. Evaluate Alternative Actions

- a. Evaluate the options by asking the following questions:

- i. Which option will uphold the dignity of everyone who has a stake?
- ii. Which option is aligned with the inclusive philosophy of “Nothing About Us Without Us”?
- iii. Which option is likely to foster audiences’ sense of efficacy to affect change with a narrative of hope?

iv. Make a Decision and Test It

- a. Considering all these approaches, how should story development proceed?
- b. If I told someone I respect - or told someone who is part of the community we serve but unfamiliar with our nonprofit - what would they say?

v. Act and Reflect on the Outcome

- a. How can my decision be implemented with the greatest care and attention to the concerns of all stakeholders?
- b. How did my decision turn out and what have I learned from this specific situation?
- c. How will I share what I learned with other members of the organization to ensure institutional memory?

4. Additional Resources for Guidance on Nonprofit Storytelling

- Ethical Storytelling – “a community of nonprofit practitioners and storytellers learning how to integrate a new standard of storytelling”
 - <http://ethicalstorytelling.com>
 - <http://ethicalstorytelling.com/pledge/>
- “4 key tips for reporting on and writing about people with disabilities” (Journalist’s Resource, Shorenstein Center)
 - <https://journalistsresource.org/tip-sheets/research/physical-mental-disability-journalism-tips>
- “5 Ways for Nonprofits to Tell an Ethical Story” (Nonprofit Quarterly)
 - <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/5-ways-organizations-can-empower-storytellers/>
- “Four Storytelling Sins (and how to avoid these story pitfalls)” (Center for Social Impact Communication, Meyer Foundation)
 - <https://www.meyerfoundation.org/news-room/four-storytelling-sins-and-how-avoid-these-story-pitfalls>
- “The Ethics of Storytelling: A How-To Guide” (YWCA)
 - <https://www.ywcaworks.org/blogs/firesteel/tue-07312018-1423/ethics-storytelling-how-guide>
- “How To Avoid Harmful Stereotypes In Your Nonprofit Videos” (GlobalGiving)
 - <https://www.globalgiving.org/learn/listicle/how-to-avoid-stereotypes-in-nonprofit-video/>
- “The ethical dimension of fundraising in the homelessness sector” (*Parity* magazine)

- <https://brisyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Parity-Vol30-09-November-2017-Ethical-Dimension-of-Fundraising.pdf>
- “Content creators, here’s an Equity Screen to use as you work on your next blog post, book, podcast, or video” (NonprofitAF blog)
 - <https://nonprofitaf.com/2019/08/content-creators-heres-an-equity-screen-to-use-as-you-work-on-your-next-blog-post-book-podcast-or-video/#more-6149>