

Strategic Storytelling

A well-developed, purposeful story is an effective and compelling way to emotionally connect policymakers to your work and help them understand how your work improves the lives of their constituents. A good story can transform a polite listener into an engaged champion of your work.

WHY TELL A STORY TO YOUR POLICYMAKER?

Representative Rush Holt (D-N.J.) has compared being an elected official to “being a television set on whom someone else [is] changing the channel every 10 minutes.” A compelling story can break through the information clutter that policymakers have to swim through every day.

When possible, use your story to underscore the importance of your ask. For example, if you’re inviting the policymaker to host a volunteer recognition event, make sure your story underscores the invaluable role volunteers play in helping you succeed.

SO, WHAT ARE SOME WAYS TO MAKE SURE YOUR STORY RESONATES WITH POLICYMAKERS?

BE PURPOSEFUL.

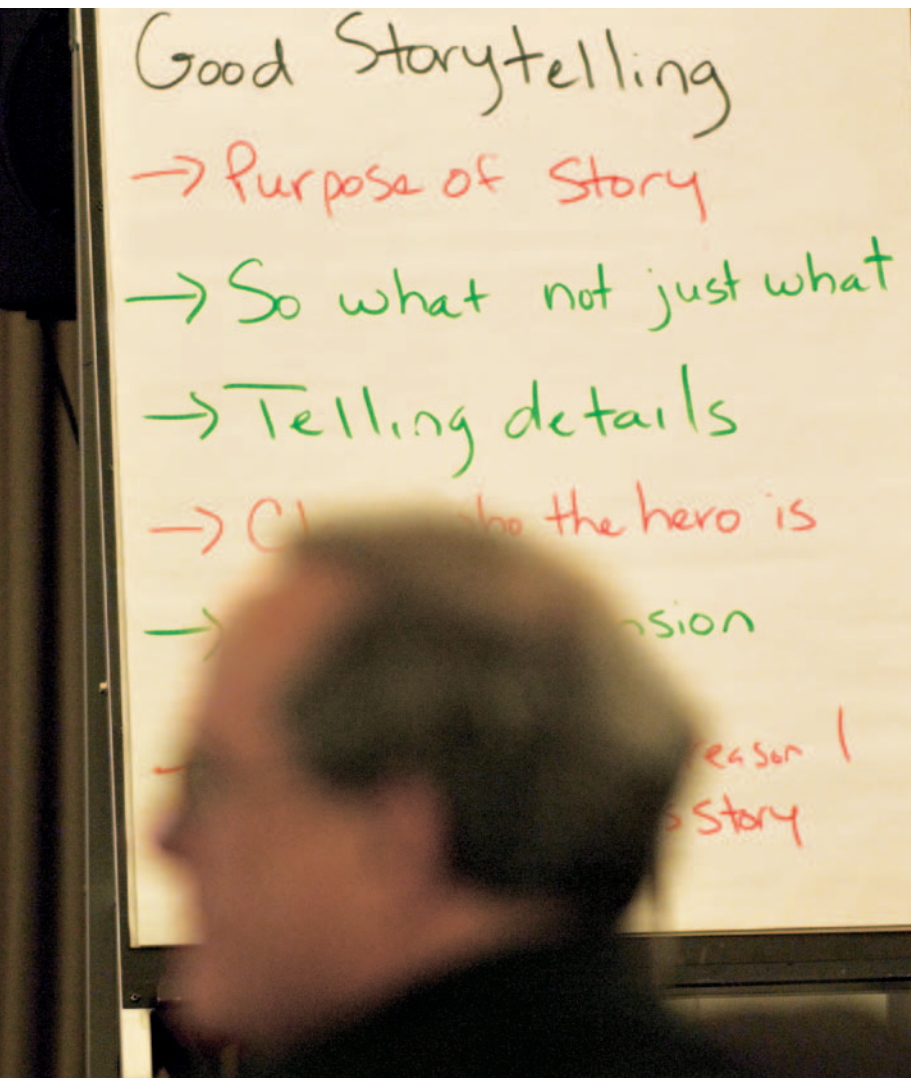
Use your story to illustrate a key point about your work—a success, a challenge, a unique way your work addresses the issue at hand. Craft your story in a way that gives policymakers a better understanding of a *specific* problem facing the communities they represent and how your work improves the lives of people in those communities. A well-told story will set up your ask by illustrating a specific problem that the policymaker or their staff member can address by agreeing to your ask. To make sure your story’s purpose comes through, end your story with “I tell you this story because...” or “The reason I share this story is to highlight the need for...” And then make your ask.

BE STRATEGIC.

Whenever possible, link your stories to the policymakers’ interests and to your ask. If your representative is on the Veterans’ Affairs Committee, you can pique his or her interest by telling a story about a veteran whom your work has helped.

Different types of stories offers advantages for distinct situations:

- **How We Got Started:** This is about your organization’s or your work’s beginnings, often focusing on one of your founders at the time your work began. This story can help establish credibility and build trust when you are beginning a relationship with a policymaker or their staff.
- **Why I Do What I Do:** This story is told in the first person, illustrating the problem your work addresses and the value of the solution you offer. It can also help to build credibility when you are beginning a relationship with a policymaker or their staff.
- **Nature of Our Challenge:** This can help policymakers understand the problem your work addresses and why it is important to their constituents. It most often focuses on an individual who is struggling and does not always have a happy ending.



- **Lessons Learned:** This illustrates how your organization has grown stronger by learning from past failings. This story can show a policymaker that you are committed to constant improvement or underscore why it is important to get past misconceptions about the problem.
- **Symbol of Our Success:** This often focuses on a person your work helped or a staff member or volunteer who has made a difference. It must have a happy ending. This underscores the message that your work can make good things happen.
- **Vision:** This is set in the possible future where your mission has been accomplished. It can help a policymaker understand the potential for your work to make real change and why it is worthy of their support.

MAKE AN EMOTIONAL CONNECTION.

Use your story to help your audience establish an emotional connection to your work. Policymakers and their staff crave real stories about real constituents. The purpose is to help them identify with someone your work has helped.

FOCUS ON ONE PERSON OR FAMILY.

Tell a story about one real person. Listeners will be more invested in the outcome when work has helped a real person. Focusing on one person or family also helps keep your story a story, and not just another description of your work.

USE TELLING DETAIL.

Use nuggets of detail to make your story interesting and memorable. Simple details, like using and repeating the person’s name and mentioning aspects of their life or neighborhood, help bring your story to life—and get your audience invested in the outcome.

Which of these examples leaves you wanting to hear more? “An elderly woman’s grandson called our hotline because he heard we could help people like his grandmother. She lived alone in a rural setting and had trouble getting to doctor appointments.” Or, “Mary Rose, an 84-year-old woman from Sergeantsville with 12 grandkids, used to tell her grandson James that if she couldn’t get somewhere on her own, she didn’t need to be there. James admired her independence, but he was worried about how many doctor appointments she was missing. She had diabetes, among other things. He called our hotline one day and...” And, although detail is crucial to a good story, use it sparingly and strategically. Only add specific details that will make your story memorable or bring out its purpose—listing all Mary Rose’s medical conditions or describing each stage of her resistance to accepting help would not make for an engaging story.



DON'T “BLACK BOX” YOUR WORK.

This means keeping the process of how it works hidden. Instead of telling your audience, “Sheila came to us with no place to live and a drug and alcohol problem. She is now living on her own, free of drugs,” say, “Sheila came to us and we connected her with a counselor in her neighborhood who called her each day before her treatment appointments and helped find her housing. She is now living on her own, free of drugs.” Be specific about how your work makes a difference.

WHEN IT COMES TO ENGAGING POLICYMAKERS, A GOOD STORY IS A *TRUE* STORY THAT:

- Leads into your ask.
- Is brief.
- Is about one real person or family.
- Has a plot with a beginning defined by challenge, a middle where the challenge grows and an end where the challenge is resolved.
- Explains specifically how your work helped overcome that challenge.
- Relates to a larger problem facing the community.
- Refers to specific towns and cities in the district or state.
- Relates to the policymaker’s own interests.
- Uses memorable details that describe the person, family or your work.
- Avoids jargon.

AS YOU WORK ON IDENTIFYING AND CRAFTING A STORY TO SHARE, ASK YOURSELF THESE QUESTIONS:

1. What did your representative do before being elected to office? What are his or her priorities (according to their own website and other sources)? What committees do they sit on? (Refer to the worksheet, *Research Your Members of Congress: Finding the Link to Your Work*, on page 7.)
2. How does your story appeal to the specific interests of your representative? What links to your member's interests can you include (e.g., if the member sits on the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, can your story feature a veteran)?
3. If you could leave your audience with one powerful memory about the work you do, what would that be?
4. Is your story focused on one person or family? What specific challenge did that person or family face?
5. Who is the hero of the story? Is it the person your work helped? Is it your organization?
6. What details give life to the story? Do you refer to the hero by name? Do you mention towns and cities by name?
7. Are there parts of the story that get bogged down with details without furthering your point? Your story can't convey all of the messages and nuances of your work. Could you leave some sections out, and, if so, which?
8. What specific action on the part of your policymaker does your story convey or suggest?
9. At the end of the story, how would you complete these sentences?

"I tell you this story because..."

or,

"I tell you this story to make clear the need for..."
10. With a little practice, can you tell this story in two minutes or less?