

Nonprofit Storytelling Series

# Donor Appeal

Turning Stories into Action

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A red ribbon banner with a 3D effect, featuring two cylindrical rolls at the ends. The word "Introduction" is centered on the banner in white text.

## Introduction

### As the buzz surrounding nonprofit storytelling continues to rise, so too does the sea of storytelling advice.

Much of this advice centers on schemes for creating storytelling processes, strategies and cultures.

But if you're like most nonprofit communication or development professionals, you're probably sinking in that sea, unsure of where to begin or simply overwhelmed by the amount of information.

That may be especially true if you work in a small or mid-sized organization where time and marketing funds are in short supply.

And although process, strategy and culture are essential to long-term organizational success, you're likely facing a far more fundamental challenge...

**Figuring out how to tell an effective story. One that leads people to action.**

**Turns out that's just what this eBook is about: Creating actionable stories.**

Once inside, you'll learn the **seven storytelling elements** that will help you forge an emotional bond between your readers and your cause. And then lead them directly to your call to action.

**Donor Appeal:** Turning Stories into Action

You'll come away understanding not only **what** you need to do to create an actionable story but **how** to do it.

So sit back, read and enjoy. And if you have any questions or comments, please feel free to contact me directly at [michael@casemountain.com](mailto:michael@casemountain.com).

Good luck!

All the Best,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first letter 'M' being particularly large and stylized.

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## Making Stories Actionable

### Nonprofit stories have been around ever since... well, ever since there've been nonprofits.

And there's a pretty good reason for it. Nonprofits perform intensely social acts. And stories convey the emotional experience of those acts like no other form of communication.

When you tell a story, you put a human face on abstractions like *service* and *mission*. In a sense, you hold up your organization—and the people it serves—as a mirror.

In that mirror, your audience sees itself reflected in **what you do** and, more importantly, **why you do it**.

The best stories transform audiences from passive listeners into active participants by touching their hearts, imaginations and memories as well as their intellect. Those feelings trigger an instinctive decision by each reader, listener, or viewer whether or not to support your organization.

The way you tell your stories directly influences that decision.

## Unfortunately, the traditional storytelling style is running out of steam.

It used to be that your donor appeal letter could open with a sympathetic description of a person, family or community in need. Then show how that need was satisfied by your organization. And then ask for a donation to help you help more people like those in the story.

But times have changed. And so have donors' reactions to the formulaic "sympathy + organizational heroism" story. In fact, those stories can often provoke unintended responses, such as...

- **It's boring.** This is particularly true for narratives that read like clinical histories.
- **Sounds like all the others.** If you tell the same stories in the same way as everyone else, how will you stand out?
- **What's the point?** A lack of connection between the story and "the ask" will only confuse readers and leave them wondering what you really want.
- **Out of my league.** Asking a donor to help you end persistent problems like hunger, poverty or social injustice can be overwhelming.

**The best stories  
transform  
audiences from  
passive listeners  
into active  
participants.**

## What works instead are actionable stories.

These are intimate stories that engage the right and left sides of readers' brains and lead them to specific and positive decisions. Maybe it's donating, volunteering, joining a steering committee, or leaving a bequest.

And while the objectives are the same as with traditional approaches to nonprofit storytelling, **the way in which you tell these stories is different.** That's because they...

- **Capture** and hold each reader's attention.
- **Create** empathy by combining real characters, a bit of suspense and a plot.
- **Conjure** universal feelings that bind us together as humans.
- **Connect** readers to your cause by detailing how their support benefits those you serve.

**Actionable stories  
lead audiences to  
specific and  
positive decisions.**

In short, they are in the style of memorable stories you read in books, see in movies, and listen to on the radio.

To help you get there, this eBook describes seven **storytelling elements**. Each element focuses on a specific concept that stirs readers emotionally and intellectually.

We'll start out with an example of a typical nonprofit story. Then we'll apply the elements, one by one, to turn that example into an actionable story.



## Now here's the best part.

Each storytelling element is independent of the others. Yes, you'll get the biggest bang by applying all seven to your stories. But you don't have to implement all of them at once in order to see positive results.

You can focus first on identifying and fixing your biggest story problems. Then apply the remainder of the elements as you figure out what works.

This incremental technique is particularly helpful to marketing and development professionals who need to raise the response rate of their donor communications, yet don't have much spare time.

**I bet that's you!**

### The Seven

1. **In the Beginning.** Use imagery to capture audience attention.
2. **Connection.** Emphasize your hero's human characteristics.
3. **Style.** Incorporate plot and personal interaction into the narrative.
4. **Perspective.** Decide who is telling the story and through whose eyes it is being told.
5. **Framing.** What is the larger social issue you want to communicate?
6. **Endings.** Happy, sad or unresolved: How you end the story depends on your reason for telling it.
7. **Meaning.** Offer your audience an intellectual rationale before the call to action.

## Sarah's Story

As a young girl, Sarah had always dreamed she would find a soul mate. Together they would live in a beautiful home and raise a loving family. And so when, on her twenty-first birthday, she married her high school sweetheart, Sarah knew that her dream had come true. That is, until the dream turned into a nightmare.

Sarah's husband began abusing her shortly after their wedding night. There were times over the next few years when the violence stopped and she felt that newlywed joy again. Yet inevitably, and without warning, the hitting and false accusations returned.

Five years and two children later, Sarah decided to take matters into her own hands. One morning after her husband left for work, she gathered the children and a few belongings then drove to a shelter a friend had suggested. But after four months of moving from one temporary home to another, Sarah felt like a fugitive with no hope of redemption.

A caring social worker referred her to us here at **Safe Shelter Home**. We helped her seek a restraining order, file for a divorce and enroll in a job training program. Now, 18 months later, Sarah is a fulltime customer service representative with a permanent home. Her children attend daycare, and feel secure knowing that they are no longer on the run.

There are thousands of Sarahs out there. Won't you help us turn their lives into success stories, too?

## The story you just read is fiction.

But what it lacks in reality, it makes up for in *representation*.

That's because Sarah's story sounds a lot like the stories found in many nonprofit appeal letters, blogs and newsletters.

**So here are a couple of questions:** If you received this story in the mail, would you open your wallet and make a donation? Would you even finish reading it?

After all, the need is genuine and the cause is critical.

But step into the shoes of a prospective donor. Give yourself five seconds to decide whether to continue reading, put the letter in a "maybe" pile, or throw it out. What would you do?

### **Fact is, the story just isn't all that compelling.**

On the one hand, it follows the traditional narrative arc. There's a *protagonist* (Sarah), a *confrontation* (the abusive husband) and a *resolution* (a more secure life for her and her children).

Yet, it doesn't quite resonate. And here are a few (though not all) of the reasons why:

1. **Slow out of the gate.** The dream-to-nightmare opening is a bit cliché and not likely to grab our attention.
2. **Empty empathy.** The story describes a factual timeline without letting us inside Sarah's mind and heart.
3. **Switching heroes in midstream.** Although the story initially centers on Sarah and her children, the folks at Safe Shelter Home swoop in and take charge. The message here is that it's only because of the heroic organization that she finds safety and stability.

## Donor Appeal: Turning Stories into Action

4. **Lost in transition.** The story moves abruptly to the call-to-action without any rationale for donating. A good story offers something concrete that satisfies the analytical side of our brains and provides some stickiness.<sup>1</sup>
5. **The hired help.** We're asked to lend a hand (in the form of cash) to Safe Shelter Home so they can continue their mission. Fair enough. But prospective donors want joint ownership in the cause, not simply to be treated as a revenue source.

With that in mind, let's see how we can apply the seven storytelling elements and make Sarah's story more engaging and more actionable...

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<sup>1</sup> For more insight on story stickiness, take a look at the book [Made to Stick](#), by Chip and Dan Heath.

## Element 1: In the Beginning

There are really two parts here: *Where* to begin the story, and *how* to begin.

The **where** part refers to the point on the narrative timeline when the story starts.

Sarah's story, for example, starts prior to her marriage. Another option would be to start the story at a transition point, such as when she decided to leave her husband. Or at the end of the narrative, perhaps after she and the children had reestablished their lives.

In the last two cases, you would need to backfill the story using flashback. Until you become comfortable with flashback, try starting at the beginning. For one thing, nonprofit stories tend to be short. Also, writing a flashback can be tricky.

Once you make the **where** decision, you'll then need to decide on **how**. Often referred to as "the hook," how you begin is to capturing the reader's attention.

**In theory, the *how* has a simple formula:** one part imagery, one part intrigue, and one part human connection.

**The formula for  
*how* to begin a  
story: one part  
imagery, one part  
intrigue, and one  
part human  
connection.**

In reality, plan on spending a good percentage of your time writing and editing the *how*.

Let's look at alternative ways to begin Sarah's story, starting with a rewrite of the original.

**Beginning (rewrite of original)**

Sarah always blushed when anyone complimented her poetry. In fact, her writing was so exceptional that her English teacher wasn't surprised when Sarah showed her the acceptance letter from NYU. But love and life have a way of changing the best of plans.

**Middle (point of conflict)**

Staring in the mirror at the bruise above her left eye Sarah told herself, "Today is the day." But still she hesitated. What if leaving turned out to be the biggest mistake of her life? Bigger than staying with him?

**End (resolution)**

The daycare teacher stood inside the door patiently waiting as Sarah gave and Alex and Katie one last hug. In the last year and a half she hadn't left her children alone with anyone other than her best friend Sally.

## Element 2: Connection

So what's Sarah's story about?

If it comes across solely as a tale of domestic abuse or as organizational heroism, readers won't remember it. And if they don't remember, they won't act.

We're much more likely to feel connected to stories that reflect something in our own lives. Think of your own favorite books, movies or song lyrics. They take on special meaning because you can see yourself in those situations or identify with a particular character.

In other words, a good story creates a universal connection to its audience, what screenwriter and teacher Brian McDonald calls, [\*The Golden Theme\*](#).

Each of the three examples from Element 1 suggests at least one theme.

- The **rewrite** example suggests life plans interrupted.
- The **conflict** example suggests betrayal or perhaps inner resolve in the face of an overwhelming obstacle.
- The **resolution** example suggests the parental drive to protect one's children.

### Realization

There should come point in each story where the main character (hero) comes to a *realization*.

It might be a recognition of some aspect of life, family, relationships, loyalty, responsibility, history, or culture.

Or perhaps a personal transformation based on that recognition.

A realization helps to strengthen an audience's connection to and empathy with the hero.

## **Donor Appeal:** Turning Stories into Action

When planning a story, select one (and only one) theme that will underlie your narrative. Identifying that theme up front will help you choose the right words and details for your story.

Here are examples of how each of Sarah's themes can be further explored.

### **Life Plan Interrupted**

It was during her first summer home from college that Mark proposed. He told her he couldn't wait another three years. Besides, he said, she didn't need a degree to be a writer.

### **Betrayal**

What hurt more than the physical pain was doubting whether she could ever trust her own judgment again.

### **Parental Drive**

When she was young, Sarah's grandmother always told her that a mother must always fight for her children's best interest. So when Mark texted her that he planned to sue for custody, Sarah dug in.



## Element 3: Style

*Style* is really a catchall for a group of presentation elements. Elements that will help keep the audience engaged, whether the story format is text, video or audio.

While there are many other presentation elements that will help, the following provides a solid foundation for actionable stories.

### Colloquial Voice

<b>What it is</b>	Writing as if you are speaking to a friend, relative or coworker.
<b>Why it's important</b>	Establishes authenticity and intimacy with the audience and eliminates jargon.
<b>Example</b>	Sentence fragments and questions mimic our conversational patterns.
<b>Compare</b>	What if leaving turned out to be the biggest mistake of her life? Bigger than staying with him? <b>Versus:</b> Sarah considered whether to leave and seek assistance for her and the children or to remain at home in an abusive environment.

### Supporting Characters

<b>What it is</b>	Additional characters that interact with the hero.
<b>Why it's important</b>	Demonstrates the hero's social connections and adds a deeper dimension to the story.
<b>Example</b>	The teacher's presence helps readers recognize Sarah's reluctance to leave her children with strangers.
<b>Compare</b>	The daycare teacher stood inside the door waiting patiently as Sarah gave Alex and Katie one last hug. <b>Versus:</b> Sarah drove her two children to daycare before heading off to start her new job.

### Vivid Imagery

<b>What it is</b>	Often referred to as "show, don't tell," imagery uses specific details to make larger points.
<b>Why it's important</b>	Evokes memories and emotional responses that connect the reader to the hero's situation.
<b>Example</b>	Describing a specific injury evokes stronger feelings than a factual statement summarizing years of abuse.
<b>Compare</b>	Staring in the mirror at the bruise above her left eye Sarah told herself, "Today is the day." <b>Versus:</b> Five years and two children later, Sarah decided to take matters into her own hands.

### Setback

<b>What it is</b>	Additional dramatic obstacle that must be resolved.
<b>Why it's important</b>	Draws the reader further into the story by introducing new barriers.
<b>Example</b>	A potential custody battle illustrates Sarah's determination to break away from a dangerous relationship and protect her children.
<b>Compare</b>	So when Mark texted her that he planned to sue for sole custody, Sarah dug in. <b>Versus:</b> We helped her seek a restraining order, file for a divorce and enroll in a job training program.

## Element 4: Perspective

Think of your personal *perspective* as your belief system: the set of assumptions, experiences and opinions that guide your world view.

A story is typically told through the eyes of one character, whose perspective provides a lens through which the audience views the narrative.

Each perspective suggests a different interpretation. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for example, would have suggested a much different interpretation had it been told from Atticus Finch's perspective rather than Scout's.

Most nonprofit stories are told from the perspective of a client, donor, board member or staff member. But you might consider other options in order to make your stories more interesting to a wider audience.

As you produce more stories, you will begin to think in terms of story groups. That is, covering the same topic from multiple perspectives.

So let's take a look at how Sarah's own story could be told from different perspectives. As you read them, think about how the choices you make also reflect the story's theme (see Element 2).

### Perspective and Voice

*Voice* is an element closely related to perspective. It describes who is actually narrating.

Nonprofits often write stories from the perspective of a donor or client, but in the third-person voice. Alternatively, you could tell a first-person story, letting one of the characters speak for herself.

First person narratives often have more emotional weight. But if you want to include background information that is unknown to the characters, then a third-person voice may be the better choice.

**Sarah's Children**

How does being the child in an abusive household affect his or her wellbeing and relationship with the abusive parent?

**Sarah's Friend**

How do you begin a conversation with a close friend when you know he or she is in danger?

**Legislator**

What are the barriers to identifying, proposing, passing and implementing domestic violence legislation?

**Psychologist**

What are the long-term effects of abuse on victims and what resources are needed to avert chronic negative consequences?

**Law Enforcement**

What actions are police permitted and not permitted to take when confronting a suspected abuser?

## Element 5: Framing

Your nonprofit also has a perspective. It's typically articulated in a mission statement or case for support and describes your organization's guiding principles.

Consider, for example, a domestic abuse agency that focuses on offering a pathway to legal support, healthcare and workforce assistance. The stories they tell should reinforce the idea that this integrated pathway is critical to transitioning abuse victims to better lives.

Framing influences how you select, organize and edit each story you tell, what aspects of the hero's background you emphasize, and what language and metaphors you choose.

A frame tells your constituents why your cause is important. You want them to think, "This nonprofit looks at the world the same way I do."

**Your audience  
should think, "This  
nonprofit looks at  
the world the same  
way I do."**

Using Sarah's story, let's look at two examples of how frames reflect a nonprofit's specialty. First is an agency founded to address the need for integrated recovery services. The second focuses on public education to help family and friends identify and assist abuse victims.

### **Integrated Services**

Once settled into a temporary apartment, Sally knew she had to file for divorce and figure out how to become an independent mother of two. She sat down with Jody, our head of transitional services, to begin laying out her plan.

### **Public Education**

Sally confessed she had suspected Sarah was being abused. But she feared that talking about it would ruin their friendship. She hadn't known what to do until she saw the brochure in her doctor's office from the *National Domestic Violence Hotline*. That's what convinced her to call Sarah.

## Element 6: Endings

Life experiences don't always end happily — and neither should your stories. In fact, some stories will be more effective without a final resolution.

But how do you decide between a good, bad or “to be continued” ending?

Well, it largely depends on the reason for the story. For instance, if you are writing to first-time donors, a happy ending might provoke an unintentional reaction, like...

- This organization is already successful. They don't need my support.
- The person in this story shows what you can do with a little gumption. Giving to people who don't help themselves is a waste of my money.

**How do you decide  
between a good,  
bad or “to be  
continued” ending?**

So in this case an unresolved ending might be more appropriate because it keeps the focus on your organization's cause.

Alternatively, longtime donors and bequest prospects need resolution to thank them for the good work they've accomplished and remind them that there is more that needs to be done.

Using Sarah's story, here are some guidelines for choosing an ending.



### **Happy**

Sarah has satisfactorily transitioned to an independent life.

- Appeals to current donors
- Donor thank-you letters
- Newsletters
- Bequests

### **Unresolved**

Sarah remains in temporary housing, addressing a variety of transitional issues.

- First-time donors
- Petition signatures
- Capital campaigns

### **Sad**

Sarah's ex-husband has threatened her and will soon be released from prison.

- Advocacy
- Policy change
- Community awareness
- Public safety awareness

## Element 7: Meaning

Plunging from the end of a narrative directly into a Call to Action (CTA) just might leave readers wondering what hit them. To make the transition more reassuring, give your audience a reason to act.

Now you might think that the original Sarah story did this already with, “There are thousands of Sarahs out there.” But that’s more of a broad-brush statement than a compelling motivator. Besides, if Sarah is to be the face of domestic abuse, she will get lost in the crowd if she’s suddenly one of thousands.

Instead, tie the hero’s situation to a **bridging trend**. One that leads your narrative to the CTA and links the emotional and analytical parts of the reader’s mind.

For example, let’s say there are recent developments in Sarah’s home state. Maybe government funding for domestic abuse victims is at risk. Maybe research shows the weak economic recovery is linked to a rise in domestic violence. Maybe educational programs that address abuse prevention are being dropped from the high school curriculum.

**Connect the story  
to a bridging trend  
that bridges your  
narrative to the  
CTA**

Using those examples, let’s look at some possible text that bridges the narratives to their related CTAs.

**Trend:** Funds at risk

**CTA:** Additional donor support

A \$10 million reduction in state funding means that we can no longer provide critical transitional services such as job training and day care. And without those services, Sarah will lose the one opportunity she has to create a safe and independent life for herself and her children.

**Trend:** Economic causes

**CTA:** Attend public meeting

The group's study indicates that the Great Recession is not yet over. Two out of five domestic abuse cases in the county have been linked to the lingering effects from high unemployment and stagnant incomes. Sarah's experienced more violence after Mark was laid off.

**Trend:** School programs cut

**CTA:** Contact state legislator

Public Policy Professor Fred Smith from State University testified at the legislative hearing that the proposed bill to cut abuse prevention classes in our state's high schools will lead to a 10 to 15 percent rise in the rate of domestic abuse cases. As a result, our state will bear higher levels of violence, higher costs of mental health care and higher rates of child neglect.

## Putting it All Together

**In the final analysis, stories are not about your clients, or your organization, or even your cause. They're about your audience.**

Stories become relevant to the lives of your readers, viewers and listeners when you reach inside and touch their memories, experiences and intellect. And if you do it well, those who believe what you believe will remember your stories and will act on them when you ask.

When you apply the seven elements, your stories will trigger the four C's described earlier. They'll **capture** attention, **create** empathy, **conjure** universal feelings and **connect** readers to your cause. Donors will see what you do not from the viewpoint of numbers, but from the viewpoint of the human beings behind those numbers.

**Your stories are  
about your  
audience.**

**So what's next?** Here are some suggestions for you...

- **Rewrite** Sarah's story in its entirety using the seven elements.
- **Review** your existing stories. How many of the elements do they embody? Do you "feel" the four C's when you read them?
- **Read** stories from other nonprofits and analyze them.
- **Create** an A/B test for your next donor appeal letter or email. Use one of your existing stories and a version modified based on the seven elements.

## About Michael

I focus exclusively on helping nonprofit organizations create visual stories that inform, inspire and engage.

By offering a selection of services that combine documentary photography, writing and digital marketing processes, you get campaigns that:

- Acquire and retain donors
- Grow brand awareness
- Strengthen community engagement
- Inform board members

I have more than 15 years of marketing experience, with nine as an independent consultant, plus 25 years as a photographer.

I've had numerous photographic exhibits and my writing has appeared in executive blogs and national trade publications.

To find out how you can communicate your mission more effectively, read about my [Visual Storytelling Services](#) for Nonprofits.

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