

How to Find and Tell an Amazing Written Story

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How To Reach People

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Agenda

- Introduction
- Two very short stories to illustrate the importance of story. How you tell a story is vital to connecting with your audience.
- 12 points on storytelling.
- Beginning, middle and end of storytelling.

We are not alone
in written storytelling.

Tell story 1.

Tell story 2.

What's the Point of Telling My Two Stories?

- How you tell a story matters tremendously.
- People won't necessarily remember all the details but they'll remember how you made them feel.

12 Points on Storytelling

1. Being able to tell your organization's stories is vital to connecting with your audience.
2. Story isn't new!
3. What story can you tell to share your message with your audience?
4. Understand your goal.

Continued...

12 Points on Storytelling Continued

5. Establish trust.

6. Always write for your audience.

7. If you write it, they won't come. You need a strategy to break through the noise.

8. Have a specific reason for a multimedia component of your story.

Continued...

12 Points on Storytelling Continued

9. Numbers are important.

10. What platform should you choose?

11. What about pitching to traditional news media?

12. The good news and the bad news.

Finding Your Story

- Talk to people.
- Sort through the organizational chaos.
- Read nonfiction stories.
- Narrow it down.

In the Beginning...

- “For five years Chea Chok sat by the shade of a tree in his yard outside Phnom Penh, Cambodia making fireworks by putting explosive ingredients into makeshift tubes. Then one day his attention slipped for just a minute and he thinks he probably added too much of one ingredient.”

(“Firework-Makers Risk Danger for Healthy Profits,” *Cambodia Daily*, Heather Ratcliff).

In the Beginning...

- "Rahul Udebham's wife tells me about the morning before it all happened, when the loan shark came to claim payment of all the debts, how he paced like mad among the cotton plants screaming: 'If you don't pay, this land will be mine!'"

("Graves of Cotton," *Narratively*,
Fernando Molina Cortés)

In the Beginning...

- “She wakes to the sound of breathing. The smaller children lie tangled beside her, their chests rising and falling under winter coats and wool blankets. A few feet away, their mother and father sleep near the mop bucket they use as a toilet. Two other children share a mattress by the rotting wall where the mice live, opposite the baby, whose crib is warmed by a hair dryer perched on a milk crate.”

(“Invisible Child: Girl in the Shadows: Dasani's Homeless Life,” *The New York Times*, Andrea Elliott)

In the Beginning...

- "It was an unseasonably warm summer night, and 14-year-old Grace was rushing down the narrow and secluded path from her village to Lake Victoria." Based on short summary text before the start of the story, you already know that sisters Grace and Sarah were assaulted.

("It Happened on the Walk for Water," charity: water, Tyler Riewer).

In the Middle...

- Why does your story matter?
- Setting the scene
- Adding flavor

In the Middle: Why Does Your Story Matter?

- “Yet Dasani is among 280 children at the shelter. Beyond its walls, she belongs to a vast and invisible tribe of more than 22,000 homeless children in New York, the highest number since the Great Depression, in the most unequal metropolis in America.”
- In long stories, you might have several paragraphs that further broaden and explain why the story matters.
 - “One in five American children is now living in poverty, giving the United States the highest child poverty rate of any developed nation except for Romania.
 - This bodes poorly for the future. Decades of research have shown the staggering societal costs of children in poverty. They grow up with less education and lower earning power. They are more likely to have drug addiction, psychological trauma and disease, or wind up in prison.”

(“Invisible Child: Girl in the Shadows: Dasani's Homeless Life,” *The New York Times*, Andrea Elliott)

In the Middle: Why Does Your Story Matter?

- “More than 270,000 Indian farmers, according to the National Crime Records Bureau, have taken their own lives between 1995 and 2011. Fourteen thousand did so in 2011 alone, or one every thirty-seven minutes. In India, farmers represent nearly seventy percent of the country’s population.”

(“Graves of Cotton,” *Narratively*,
Fernando Molina Cortés)

He then says that despite the decline of farming as a section, some 850 million people still rely on farming for a living.

In the Middle: Why Does Your Story Matter?

- “No matter how many miles you live from Lake Victoria, if your village lacks access to clean water, this is where you come for your daily supply. Women make four to six arduous trips to this lake every day to collect water for their families. Which means that they’re very familiar with the predators that lurk in and around it.”
- “By the time they were 11 and 12 years old, Grace and Sarah already knew the dangers that came with collecting water. They already knew the names of several women who had been killed by a crocodile or snake bite. But they also already knew that there was no alternative. So despite their fear, the inseparable sisters came here each day, together.”

(“It Happened on the Walk for Water,” charity: water, Tyler Riewer)

In the Middle: Setting the Scene

- “This child of New York is always running before she walks. She likes being first — the first to be born, the first to go to school, the first to make the honor roll.”
- “She heads east along Myrtle Avenue and, three blocks later, has crossed into another New York: the shaded, graceful abode of Fort Greene’s brownstones, which fetch millions of dollars... Dasani suddenly stops, puzzling at the pavement. Its condition, she notes, is clearly superior on this side of Myrtle.”
- “As Dasani’s family approached the entrance, Chanel spotted two abandoned baby turtles in a cardboard box. She stuffed them in her pockets. Six days later, the family arrived at Auburn [the shelter], along with its two forbidden pet turtles...”

(“Invisible Child: Girl in the Shadows: Dasani's Homeless Life,” *The New York Times*, Andrea Elliott)

In the Middle: Adding Flavor

- “She begins calling herself ‘ghetto.’ She dares the girls to fight her and challenges the boys to arm-wrestle, flexing the biceps she has built doing pull-ups in Fort Greene Park. The boys watch slack-jawed as Dasani demonstrates the push-ups she has also mastered, earning her the nickname ‘muscle girl.’”

(“Invisible Child: Girl in the Shadows: Dasani's Homeless Life,” *The New York Times*, Andrea Elliott)

In the Middle: Adding Flavor

- “I need her. I miss her,” he tells his sister. “I want to be with my mother. I see so many children with mothers. I want that.”
- “It’s OK for a mother to leave,” he tells a friend, “but just for two or four years, not longer.” He recalls her promises to return for Christmas and how she never did. “I’ve felt alone all my life.” One thing, though: She always told him she loved him. “I don’t know what it will be like to see her. She will be happy. Me too. I want to tell her how much I love her. I will tell her I need her.”
- “What kind of shoes do you have on?’ she asks.

‘Two left shoes,’ Enrique says.

Fear drains from his mother like a wave back into the sea. It is Enrique. She feels a moment of pure happiness.”

(“Enrique's Journey,” the *Los Angeles Times*, Sonia Nazario)

In the Middle: Adding Flavor

- “The ‘advantages’ for the kids are also apparent: bone deformities, skeletal muscle problems from repetitive movements, blistered hands and foot injuries.”
- “He puts the ball into play, kicking it with the tip of his foot. Minutes later, he’s screaming in pain: His big toe is bleeding because he broke a nail. ‘Put your shoes on your feet!’ I shout over to him. ‘They’re too small for me,’ he responds. ‘My feet are bigger than they are.’”

("Growing Upside Down," Narratively, Fernando Molina Cortés)

In the End...

- “The child skips down the hallway toward her mother and sisters. The front door swings open, bringing a rush of air. Together, they step out into the cold.” (“Invisible Child: Girl in the Shadows: Dasani's Homeless Life,” *The New York Times*, Andrea Elliott)
- “If I have the opportunity, I’ll go,” Maria Isabel says. “I’ll leave my baby behind.” Enrique agrees. “We’ll have to leave the baby behind.” (“Enrique's Journey,” the *Los Angeles Times*, Sonia Nazario)
- “Juan’s hands are already streaked with time. He’s spent too many summers on a metal seesaw that doesn’t see or saw. He’s flying a clumsy kite that can’t get off the ground because the wind is fickle. Juan is an adult in a child’s body. He’s a kid from the other side.” (“Growing Upside Down,” *Narratively*, Fernando Molina Cortés)

In the End...

- “Today, Grace, Sarah and all of the women in their village no longer walk to Lake Victoria to collect their water.
- Thanks to our local partner organization in Uganda, GOAL, they have a well in the middle of their village that women can access without fear of being attacked by anything or anyone. Not only are the families healthier, but the women have more time.”

(“It Happened on the Walk for Water,” charity: water, Tyler Riewer)

In the End...

- “In many countries around the world, women and girls put their lives in danger every day to collect water for their families.
- Many wake up before sunrise and spend up to four hours walking. And often, the water they bring home isn’t even clean.
- The long, exhausting and dangerous task of walking for water is just one of the many reasons charity: water works to build community water projects close to people’s homes.
- Having access to clean water within the community not only saves hours of time; it provides safety, health and hygiene. It directly impacts the future of women and girls in particular, and we believe it’s the first step out of poverty for rural communities all over the world.”

(“It Happened on the Walk for Water,” charity: water, Tyler Riewer)

The end...

“Crafted well, stories can have an amazing impact and can be part of a movement to effect change.”

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My slides are full of words. I know this isn't the norm, but since this is about written storytelling, I wanted to offer you those words on the big screen.

We are not alone
in written storytelling.

Storytelling has become the buzz word. But a lot of it centers on video storytelling. I can't tell you how many people have said to me, just watch the video, it's only 10 minutes! But 10 minutes is a long time! So no, I don't want to watch a 10 minute video. (Of course I know some stories are better on video). You all are probably sure of this too, which is why you're here to hear about written storytelling. But in case you wonder if others out there always love video, video, video, trust me, they don't. There was a recent 1-minute Onion video story about how much people hate watching videos:) Not appropriate content to show here, but Google it.

Tell story 1.

Tell story 2.

What's the Point of Telling My Two Stories?

- How you tell a story matters tremendously.
- People won't necessarily remember all the details but they'll remember how you made them feel.

How you tell a story matters tremendously! It's how you draw people in and make them remember pieces of it. It's how you start the story, how you keep them reading, and how you end the story. I'm going to give you examples on that later.

My guess is that from all that I say you're going to remember a couple of points, but you'll remember your impression and you'll remember how I made you feel.

What if you heard just one of the stories? You'd develop an impression. I think you'd probably remember more later if you heard story one versus two. And I don't think that's because of the length of the story. I think that's because it hopefully pulls you in more.

12 Points on Storytelling

1. Being able to tell your organization's stories is vital to connecting with your audience.
2. Story isn't new!
3. What story can you tell to share your message with your audience?
4. Understand your goal.

Continued...

1. Being able to tell your organization's stories is vital to connecting with your audience. It's what your audience will remember. This is how they will relate to you.
2. Story isn't new! After all we have cave drawings to prove that! Jonathan Gottschall tells the story of the Story People and the Practical People in his book, *The Storytelling Animal*. What is new is the communication tools we use.
3. What's your message? Poverty? Ok, what story can you tell to share your message with your audience?
4. Understand your goal. Do you want people to see your organization differently, or to take an action or make a donation? Do you have a plan to measure this goal?

12 Points on Storytelling Continued

5. Establish trust.
6. Always write for your audience.
7. If you write it, they won't come. You need a strategy to break through the noise.
8. Have a specific reason for a multimedia component of your story.

Continued...

5. For your audience to accept your great story, they have to trust you. Never give them any reason to doubt you when it comes to a story. Remember memory is faulty as heck. Always take detailed notes or a recording. If you're recording, still take notes!
6. Have your audience in mind when you write your story. In other words, don't water down your story to appeal to more people. Imagine a story being told around a campfire to children. Now swap out the children with adults. It's going to be a different story right?
7. There are hundreds of thousands of Google searches every minute. How can you break through this noise? It's different for every organization and story, and you need a strategy.
8. Images are vital now that most of our written stories will be online. Sometimes, including a very brief video or audio file works well too. Snippets.

12 Points on Storytelling Continued

9. Numbers are important.
10. What platform should you choose?
11. What about pitching to traditional news media?
12. The good news and the bad news.

9. While it's true, how you tell your stories will determine who will be moved by them and how they make people feel, numbers are also important. They should help explain why a story is important to the reader.
10. There are so many places to tell a story. It's difficult to know what platform to use. How should the story be told and on what social media platform?
11. In other instances, public relations managers focus their attention on getting the organization's message out to the traditional news media. While good media coverage still matters, someone in your organization should also be aware that a big part of what you should be doing is telling stories to your audience directly.
12. The good news: it's not easy. The bad news: it's not easy.

Finding Your Story

- Talk to people.
- Sort through the organizational chaos.
- Read nonfiction stories.
- Narrow it down.

Talk to people. Interviewing skills are essential. If you can, act like a roving reporter, go around and set up meetings with everyone. Ask questions.

What if you can't find the story in all the mess that is your organization? Go back to your goal. Focus on what your mission is again.

Read nonfiction stories. Think, how can I write something like that about my organization?

Narrow it down! You have a ton of background about your cause or your nonprofit. You can't dump the kitchen sink into your story.

In the Beginning...

- “For five years Chea Chok sat by the shade of a tree in his yard outside Phnom Penh, Cambodia making fireworks by putting explosive ingredients into makeshift tubes. Then one day his attention slipped for just a minute and he thinks he probably added too much of one ingredient.”

(“Firework-Makers Risk Danger for Healthy Profits,” *Cambodia Daily*, Heather Ratcliff).

I'll let you read the post to see what happened to Chea Chok but this is the start of a story I wrote a number of years ago when I was in Cambodia. I like the way it pulls you in.

Grabs you emotionally. Places you in the scene by telling you he sat in the shade of the tree. Leaves you asking questions!

You've got to draw people in with emotion. I recently helped organize a couple of events in DC wearing my NetSquared hat on storytelling. This was something that was agreed on over and over again by the speakers. You have to draw people in emotionally. You have to grab them.

In the Beginning...

- "Rahul Udebham's wife tells me about the morning before it all happened, when the loan shark came to claim payment of all the debts, how he paced like mad among the cotton plants screaming: 'If you don't pay, this land will be mine!'"

("Graves of Cotton," *Narratively*,
Fernando Molina Cortés)

Grabs you emotionally. Starts with this traditional line of "the morning before it all happened," so you know it will be told to you like a story. You know it will be easy and friendly to read. It places you in the scene by telling you the loan shark came and screamed at them. Leaves you asking questions!

People connect with people, not organizations. You can use your members, supporters, staff to tell a story that highlights your message.

In the Beginning...

- “She wakes to the sound of breathing. The smaller children lie tangled beside her, their chests rising and falling under winter coats and wool blankets. A few feet away, their mother and father sleep near the mop bucket they use as a toilet. Two other children share a mattress by the rotting wall where the mice live, opposite the baby, whose crib is warmed by a hair dryer perched on a milk crate.”

(“Invisible Child: Girl in the Shadows: Dasani’s Homeless Life,” *The New York Times*, Andrea Elliott)

Grabs you emotionally talking about children and terrible living condition. It places you in the scene with the details. Leaves you asking questions!

In the Beginning...

- "It was an unseasonably warm summer night, and 14-year-old Grace was rushing down the narrow and secluded path from her village to Lake Victoria." Based on short summary text before the start of the story, you already know that sisters Grace and Sarah were assaulted.

("It Happened on the Walk for Water," charity: water, Tyler Riewer).

Grabs you emotionally talking an assault during the summary text.

It places you in the scene with the details. Leaves you asking questions!

In the Middle...

- Why does your story matter?
- Setting the scene
- Adding flavor

In the Middle: Why Does Your Story Matter?

- “Yet Dasani is among 280 children at the shelter. Beyond its walls, she belongs to a vast and invisible tribe of more than 22,000 homeless children in New York, the highest number since the Great Depression, in the most unequal metropolis in America.”
- In long stories, you might have several paragraphs that further broaden and explain why the story matters.
 - “One in five American children is now living in poverty, giving the United States the highest child poverty rate of any developed nation except for Romania.
 - This bodes poorly for the future. Decades of research have shown the staggering societal costs of children in poverty. They grow up with less education and lower earning power. They are more likely to have drug addiction, psychological trauma and disease, or wind up in prison.”

(“Invisible Child: Girl in the Shadows: Dasani's Homeless Life,” *The New York Times*, Andrea Elliott)

Why Does Your Story Matter? That's what you need to answer in the first few paragraphs. It's meant to put the story in context for the reader. Let's look at a couple of examples.

In the Middle: Why Does Your Story Matter?

- “More than 270,000 Indian farmers, according to the National Crime Records Bureau, have taken their own lives between 1995 and 2011. Fourteen thousand did so in 2011 alone, or one every thirty-seven minutes. In India, farmers represent nearly seventy percent of the country’s population.”

(“Graves of Cotton,” *Narratively*,
Fernando Molina Cortés)

He then says that despite the decline of farming as a section, some 850 million people still rely on farming for a living.

In the Middle: Why Does Your Story Matter?

- “No matter how many miles you live from Lake Victoria, if your village lacks access to clean water, this is where you come for your daily supply. Women make four to six arduous trips to this lake every day to collect water for their families. Which means that they’re very familiar with the predators that lurk in and around it.”
- “By the time they were 11 and 12 years old, Grace and Sarah already knew the dangers that came with collecting water. They already knew the names of several women who had been killed by a crocodile or snake bite. But they also already knew that there was no alternative. So despite their fear, the inseparable sisters came here each day, together.”

(“It Happened on the Walk for Water,” charity: water, Tyler Riewer)

This is how Tyler Riewer puts it into context for you. Notice he shows you what the issue is. He doesn’t even mention charity: water’s work yet.

In the Middle: Setting the Scene

- “This child of New York is always running before she walks. She likes being first — the first to be born, the first to go to school, the first to make the honor roll.”
- “She heads east along Myrtle Avenue and, three blocks later, has crossed into another New York: the shaded, graceful abode of Fort Greene’s brownstones, which fetch millions of dollars... Dasani suddenly stops, puzzling at the pavement. Its condition, she notes, is clearly superior on this side of Myrtle.”
- “As Dasani’s family approached the entrance, Chanel spotted two abandoned baby turtles in a cardboard box. She stuffed them in her pockets. Six days later, the family arrived at Auburn [the shelter], along with its two forbidden pet turtles...”

(“Invisible Child: Girl in the Shadows: Dasani’s Homeless Life,” *The New York Times*, Andrea Elliott)

Not only do you have to give context for your story, you have to continue setting the scene. You actually have to tell the story now.

To get your point across, you might want to point out something like how the pavement makes a drastic and abrupt change from where Dasani lives to the area of town where homes are worth millions of dollars. She’s showing you, not telling you. She could have said something like house prices here are worth this much, and houses here are worth increasingly more. But she’s drawing Dasani into it because this is a story about Dasani.

Elliott delves deep into explaining more about Dasani’s mother, Chanel, in just two sentences. To report this, Ms. Elliott must have spent a great deal of time with this family.

In the Middle: Adding Flavor

- “She begins calling herself ‘ghetto.’ She dares the girls to fight her and challenges the boys to arm-wrestle, flexing the biceps she has built doing pull-ups in Fort Greene Park. The boys watch slack-jawed as Dasani demonstrates the push-ups she has also mastered, earning her the nickname ‘muscle girl.’”

(“Invisible Child: Girl in the Shadows: Dasani’s Homeless Life,” *The New York Times*, Andrea Elliott)

Here's where we can go back to audience. Adding flavor to the story can sometimes depend on who you are telling the story to. And this is the part that can be super fun to capture.

In the Middle: Adding Flavor

- “I need her. I miss her,” he tells his sister. “I want to be with my mother. I see so many children with mothers. I want that.”
- “It’s OK for a mother to leave,” he tells a friend, “but just for two or four years, not longer.” He recalls her promises to return for Christmas and how she never did. “I’ve felt alone all my life.” One thing, though: She always told him she loved him. “I don’t know what it will be like to see her. She will be happy. Me too. I want to tell her how much I love her. I will tell her I need her.”
- “What kind of shoes do you have on?’ she asks.

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Fear drains from his mother like a wave back into the sea. It is Enrique. She feels a moment of pure happiness.”

(“Enrique’s Journey,” the *Los Angeles Times*, Sonia Nazario)

In the Middle: Adding Flavor

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("Growing Upside Down," Narratively, Fernando Molina Cortés)

In the End...

- “The child skips down the hallway toward her mother and sisters. The front door swings open, bringing a rush of air. Together, they step out into the cold.” (“Invisible Child: Girl in the Shadows: Dasani's Homeless Life,” *The New York Times*, Andrea Elliott)
- “If I have the opportunity, I’ll go,” Maria Isabel says. “I’ll leave my baby behind.” Enrique agrees. “We’ll have to leave the baby behind.” (“Enrique's Journey,” the *Los Angeles Times*, Sonia Nazario)
- “Juan’s hands are already streaked with time. He’s spent too many summers on a metal seesaw that doesn’t see or saw. He’s flying a clumsy kite that can’t get off the ground because the wind is fickle. Juan is an adult in a child’s body. He’s a kid from the other side.” (“Growing Upside Down,” *Narratively*, Fernando Molina Cortés)

It’s true that some people don’t read to the end of your story. But many do. The people that make it to the end — and love the ending — are going to be your “super fans, or champions.” These are the people that matter the most.

There is a spoiler alert coming up on the ending of a couple of the stories. But in this case, I think the benefits kind of outweigh the agony from that. Because we really need to look at some examples to see how they work.

Keep in mind, what you want people to feel or leave people thinking about depends on your goal.

In the End...

- “Today, Grace, Sarah and all of the women in their village no longer walk to Lake Victoria to collect their water.
- Thanks to our local partner organization in Uganda, GOAL, they have a well in the middle of their village that women can access without fear of being attacked by anything or anyone. Not only are the families healthier, but the women have more time.”

(“It Happened on the Walk for Water,” charity: water, Tyler Riewer)

This one isn't quite the ending of the charity: water story.

After this Tyler Riewer goes on to talk a bit more about Grace and Sarah. But I like how the story ends with hope. It's amazing to learn that the girls no longer have to walk to the lake to get water. And then you learn how via charity: water's local partner. I like how they inserted this fact, but it in no way interfered with the telling of Grace and Sarah's story.

If you think about it this is how the story could have started. Charity: water did this with its partners so now Sarah and Grace don't have to walk for water. But once upon a time they did. It just wouldn't have worked as well.

In the End...

- “In many countries around the world, women and girls put their lives in danger every day to collect water for their families.
- Many wake up before sunrise and spend up to four hours walking. And often, the water they bring home isn’t even clean.
- The long, exhausting and dangerous task of walking for water is just one of the many reasons charity: water works to build community water projects close to people’s homes.
- Having access to clean water within the community not only saves hours of time; it provides safety, health and hygiene. It directly impacts the future of women and girls in particular, and we believe it’s the first step out of poverty for rural communities all over the world.”

(“It Happened on the Walk for Water,” charity: water, Tyler Riewer)

And this is how Tyler Riewer decided to end the story, talking about water collection around the world.

There is also a paragraph about charity: water after this in italicized print, so you know it’s not part of the story. It’s like adding a bio at the end. Then a link to the charity: water website, with a suggestion to donate, and a note from the author. But nothing that interferes with the actual story.

As nonprofits, I would suggest following something like what they have done. Tell the story. Let people soak up that story. Then if possible say how you solved the problem, or how you could solve it. Then offer the donate button, if that’s your goal.

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