

# A Changemaker's Eight-Step Guide to Storytelling

How to Engage Heads, Hearts and Hands to Drive Change



Street Soccer USA

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## Why Is Storytelling A Powerful Changemaking Tool?

*Anyone who has a new idea and wants to change the world will do better by telling stories than by any amount of logical exhortation.*

- Stephen Denning, *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling: Mastering the Art and Discipline of Business Narrative*

Humans are hard-wired for storytelling. We make sense of the world around us through narratives—they form a core part of our culture, belief systems, organizations and personal identities. They allow us to envision and showcase the change we want to see in the world.

As a changemaker, you have to be comfortable telling four main types of stories to engage the hearts, heads, and hands of your audience to help give wings to your project. Ashoka has encouraged these types of stories in its identification of leading social innovators for the past thirty years.

- The challenge story
- The big idea story
- The how-to story
- The impact story

New media and online distribution channels make sharing our stories easier than ever. Everyone has the power to tell their story. What makes great stories so powerful is their “stickiness,” their ability to draw our attention and engage our hearts and minds. The best stories spread good ideas like wildfire and inspire us to take action. And that's precisely what makes storytelling such a powerful tool for social innovators.

*We live in story like fish live in water. We swim through words and images siphoning story through our minds the way a fish siphons water through its gills. We cannot think without language, we cannot process experience without story.*

- Christina Baldwin, *Storycatcher: Making Sense of our Lives through the Power and Practice of Story*

Storytelling is about making sense of the wild world around us, connecting with people and inspiring empathy. Telling an authentic story can make your ideas accessible and acceptable to others and invite them to become part of your evolving journey to effect positive social change.

Everyone has a story. This guide will help you tell yours.

## Why Create Your Story?



### **GAIN VISIBILITY**

- When you share your story with your network through newsletters, email communications, an organization website, blog, Facebook, or Twitter ... it can serve as a powerful marketing and advocacy tool, and move people from awareness to action.



### **CREATE CONNECTIONS, GATHER SUPPORT**

- Connect with your audience and motivate them to support your social venture. Invite them to become champions of the change you seek to effect. A powerful story can transform people's core relationship to the issue(s) you work to address and lead to their long-term support. Sharing compelling stories allows you to keep your supporters engaged and make new connections with fellow changemakers, funders, thought leaders, journalists, and others. You can use your story for grant proposals, pitches, presentations, panel discussions, interviews, ...



### **TRANSFORM YOURSELF AND YOUR VENTURE**

- Storytelling is transformational for both the storyteller and the audience. The process of creating your story will enable you to reflect on where you came from, where you are now, and where you hope to go in the future. It allows you to refocus on your vision and maintain authenticity. Once you have distilled the core of your story, you can tell it in a multitude of ways, depending on the purpose for telling your story and your audience.

## Step 1. [Re]Discover Your Story

### Part A. Reflect

Remember two or three moments from your life when you stepped out of your comfort zone and tackled a problem to make a positive difference in the world. What was your “call to action”/“a-ha moment?” How did your action make you feel, and impact others? Recall these moments vividly, using all of your senses. Then select one of these moments as the basis for your story.

**Tip:** You might want to write freely about these moments, create an audio recording of your response, or draw a map.

### Part B. Build Your Story - The Narrative Arc

Every story has a beginning, middle, and an end. Describe the central conflict or challenge you hope to address in order to inspire hope with your solution. The following questions can be helpful as you build your story around one of the key moments you identified in Part A. Your goal is to inspire others to share your vision. The protagonists could be the founder(s) of the organization, staff members, or people who have benefited from your social venture.

**Tip:** Ask a friend or colleague to interview you and record or type responses to the narrative arc questions.

**Note:** You can adapt and use the following questions to tell a story from a different narrative perspective (i.e. staff member, beneficiary, supporter, community member, ...).

#### 1. The Hook - setting the stage

This is the opening that pulls your audience into the story and introduces the context and protagonist.

- Paint the scene. Describe the when and where of your story.
- Introduce the protagonist. From what perspective do you want to tell your story? First-person stories tend to be very powerful, but you might consider telling your story from the perspective of a staff member, beneficiary, supporter, community member, ...

#### 2. The Challenge – introduction to the central problem

This part of your story identifies your central challenge/problem.

- What is the need, problem, or challenge that you are trying to address?
- Describe the moment when you developed empathy for, and an enduring connection to, the problem. How has it impacted your life and the lives of those around you?
- Why is there a need for your solution? What are the deeper social causes of the problem? Describe the social, environmental, political, or economic climate.

#### 3. The Big Idea - the “a-ha” moment or turning point

This section introduces your solution.

- What is your solution? How did you get to your “a-ha” moment?

- What's unique or transformative about your solution? How are you seeing the central challenge in a new light? How is your approach different from the standard one to this problem in this space?

### **4. The How-To** – the strategy behind your big idea

This part details how your solution works.

- What is the current stage of your idea?
- How and why does your solution address the need you identified? What would be a good example or scenario to illustrate this?
- What has been most challenging? Why? How have you worked around the challenges?
- How are you involving the people directly affected by the problem, community members, partners, friends, business, government, ...?
- Who disagreed with your idea and how did you respond to or address the points that critics made?

### **5. The Impact** – the transformation

This section explores the impact your solution is creating.

- What impact have you made thus far? What qualitative or quantitative data could you incorporate?
- How did people directly affected by the problem respond to your solution? What's the positive difference in their lives? Think about one to three concrete examples.

### **6. The Call to Action** – key learnings and future steps

This part describes your key learnings, future steps, and makes a concrete call to action.

- How can your audience become part of the evolving story of your social venture, or the social cause that it relates to? What can they do to help?
- What are your plans and vision for the future? What would a world look like where you are completely successful in working on your problem?
- What is the broader significance of your venture?
- What is your call to action?

**Tip:** Depending on its context and purpose, your story does not necessarily need to have a clear resolution of the central challenge. An ambiguous ending might work well to create empathy for an issue and leave your audience wanting to learn more.

## Steps 2-7. Creating Your Story

### **Step 2. Select Your Key Audience**

Who wants and needs to hear your story? In order to create a compelling story, you need to understand your audience and what motivates them to take action. Make sure your story addresses your target audience.

Which audience(s) do you want to reach?

- **The General Public** want stories that are dramatic, inspiring, surprising, and emotionally moving.

- **Social Innovators** want stories that give insight into the process of addressing a social problem, turning insights into practice, and overcoming challenges.
- **Thought Leaders** want to know how the new solution fits within the bigger picture of creating social change and emerging trends, and what makes it innovative, unique, or transformative.
- **Funders** want stories that describe new solutions and contain convincing evidence of impact/return on investment potential. They want to see that you really understand the problem you are trying to address and that nothing else exists that sufficiently addresses the problem. **Tip:** Check out Changemakers' [Guide to Pitching](#) for more advice.

**Tip:** Capture the attention of your audience quickly. Surprise them. Teach them something. Speak to their interests and worldviews. Enable your audience to find themselves inside the story and make it their own.

### Step 3. Know Your Core Message

**Why** are you telling this story (e.g., to raise awareness or funds, or to advocate for a position on an issue, etc.)? What is your main message? Distill your solution and mission into one idea that is easy to remember.

**Tip:** Try telling your story in six words or less to get at its core.

### Step 4. Select Your Story Type

Choose the best story to create to reach your target audience. The following are proven story types that inspire people to take action.

#### The Challenge Story

This story is about a protagonist overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles to turn their idea into reality. It is dramatic, inspiring, accessible, and emotionally moving.

*Suggested audience: The general public*

[Lucky- Nepal](#) is a good example of this type of story.

#### The How-To Story

This story focuses on explaining the process of solving and implementing a social problem in a unique way. It gives social innovators and thought leaders insights into emerging best practices that are effective, and how they could employ these methods themselves. It also inspires and gives hope by showing exactly how change is possible.

*Suggested audience: Social innovators, thought leaders*

Look at [Rippling Impact Nigeria](#) for a good example of this.

#### The Big Idea Story

This story focuses on describing a novel solution and explores how it fits within the bigger picture of creating social change and emerging trends in the social impact sector.

*Suggested audience: Thought leaders, funders*

Check out how [Why Glasses?](#) by [Vision Spring](#) accomplishes this.

### **The Impact Story**

This story focuses on describing the impact of the solution, providing convincing evidence that illustrates return on investment potential. It includes some measures of impact and shows current and future funders that their support makes a difference.

*Suggested audience: Funders, thought leaders*

Check out how [Solid Women](#) by Fonkoze describes its impact.

## **Step 5. Create Your Call to Action**

What do you want your audience to do upon hearing your story?

- Share your story with their network
- Become a supporter/champion of your cause
- Sign up for a newsletter or blog posts
- Sign a petition
- Volunteer
- Donate to your organization
- Start their own program

**Tip:** Consider: How are you going to measure the success of your story? Do you have a clear ask associated with your story? Are you giving your audience action steps they can understand and complete? Clearly state the urgency of the action and make it unambiguous what you want your audience to do. Check out how [DoSomething.org](#) does this effectively. Think about setting clear fundraising, advocacy, or engagement goals.

## **Step 6. Choose Your Story Medium**

Once you have distilled the core components of your story, you can tell it through a variety of media. Choose the medium that best allows you to engage with your target audience. Explore the examples below for inspiration and best practices. Check out the tips and resources for creating stories using different media in the Resources section.

### **1. The Written Story**

These stories are mostly text, but may include some images. They may take the form of blog posts, articles, or books.

#### Blog Posts/Articles

[Story of Change: Rob Hopkins and the Transition Network](#) by Ashoka Fellow Rob Hopkins

[Story of Change: Ken Banks and kiwanja.net](#) by Ashoka Fellow Ken Banks

[Story of Change: Karen Mattison and Timewise](#) by Ashoka Fellow Karen Mattison

[Story of Change: Mohammad Al-Ubaydli and Patients Know Best](#) by Ashoka Fellow  
Mohammad Al-Ubaydli

[Story of Change: Lily Lapenna and MyBnk](#) by Ashoka Fellow Lily Lapenna



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[Junior Smart: Story of Change](#) by Ashoka Fellow Junior Smart

[Charlie Murphy: A Story of Change](#) by Ashoka Fellow Charlie Murphy

[The Road from Garbage to Gold](#), Ashoka Fellow Albina Ruiz's story by Beverly Schwartz, author of [Rippling](#)

[Creating an Empathy Movement](#), Ashoka Fellow Mary Gordon's story by Beverly Schwartz

### Books

Patel, Eboo. *Acts of faith: The story of an American Muslim, the struggle for the soul of a generation*. Beacon Press, 2007.

Yunus, Muhammad, and Alan Jolis. *Banker to the poor: the autobiography of Muhammad Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank*. Aurum Press, 1998.

Novogratz, Jacqueline. *The blue sweater: Bridging the gap between rich and poor in an interconnected world*. Rodale, 2009.

## **2. The Spoken Story**

These are spoken word stories told through presentations, speeches, interviews, panels, and conversations.

### Presentations

[TEDxABQ- Jill Violet: What Play Can Teach Us](#)

[TEDx Rotterdam- Bart Weetjens: How I Taught Rats to Sniff Out Landmines](#)

[TEDxGoldenGateED - Mary Gordon](#)

[Pop! Tech - Josh Nesbit: Mobile Healthcare](#)

### Interviews and Panels

[Interview with Ashoka Fellow Michael Kelly](#)

[Meet new Ashoka Fellow Catherine Rohr, founder of Defy Ventures](#)

### Speeches

[Jacqueline Novogratz - Commencement 2012](#)

[Muhammad Yunus at Duke University](#)

## **3. The Digital Story**

These stories can include a variety of media such as full-motion video with sound, animation, photographs, text, and audio. Try to keep your videos to 1 to 4 minutes in length. Production quality is far less important than having a clear, authentic message. Video is the best medium for emotionally resonant stories told by characters themselves. It is also the best medium for active, visual stories that portray your solution in context, in the shortest amount of time.

### Classic Full-Motion Video with Sound

[Follow the Frog](#) by Rainforest Alliance

[Puppies are Not Toys](#) by ASPCA

[African Men. Hollywood Stereotypes.](#) by Mama Hope

[MyBnk-What We Do](#) by MyBnk

[Grow HQ](#) by GIY

### Narrative and Imagery

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[Mountaintop Library Expands Horizons in Nepal](#) by Room to Read  
[Sasha Chanoff- Ashoka US Fellow](#) by Ashoka  
[Ashoka Fellow Jason McLennan on the Future of Green Building](#) by Ashoka  
[One In 8 Million](#) by New York Times  
[Trailer of Burbax, Ethiopia](#) by A Glimmer of Hope

### Animation

[The Girl Effect](#) by The Girl Effect  
[Water Changes Everything](#) by charity:water  
[Why Glasses?](#) by Vision Spring  
[We Are Kids Company](#) by Kids Company

### Call to Action and Annotations

[World Water Day](#) by charity:water  
[The Story of charity:water- The 2009 September Campaign Trailer](#) by charity:water

### “Choose Your Own Story”

[Read the Signs - Human Trafficking Interactive Game Help](#) by Crimestoppers UK

### Using Mobile Device/Low Tech

[It's In Your Hands](#) by Watershed Management Group  
[Rippling Impact Nigeria](#) by Youth Venture

## 4. The Audio Story

[StoryCorps Audio Stories](#)  
[Snap Judgment](#)

## Step 7. Create Your Story

Make sure to follow the following two principles in creating your story:

### **Be authentic. Be vulnerable.**

Establish an emotional connection with your audience—**inspire empathy**. Being vulnerable, authentic and truthful makes you more relatable and enables you to gain their trust. Through which voice(s) do you want to tell your story? (**Tip:** If you're writing, write the way you talk.) Which perspectives do you want to include? What is the overall tone of your story? How do you want your audience to feel during the different parts of your story?

[We Are Kids Company](#) by Kids Company provides a good example of being authentic and vulnerable.

### **Make it concrete.**

Make it **concrete, visual** and **jargon-free**. Paint the scene. Use sensory information and human actions. Engage the five senses—sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell. Use simple language. Be pithy, but know when and where to add color.

Check out how [Why Glasses?](#) by Vision Spring does this.

## Step 8. Sharing Your Story

It's important to choose the right channels and medium to reach your target audience. Use technology and your personal networks to advance your story.

- Share your story on Changemakers' [Change Stories](#). Also consider spreading your story through your website or blog, email newsletters, [YouTube](#), [Vimeo](#), [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), [Vine](#), Google+, [SoundCloud](#), [Pinterest](#), and other communications.
- Send your story to known supporters who can then share your story with their networks to maximize its reach. Are there any partnerships you can create with other organizations, companies, bloggers, funders, and others to further access your target audience/increase impact of your story?
- Use your story to build personal connections with key people to create a deeper level of engagement and commitment. Whenever possible, tell your story to others in person.
- Choose a compelling headline to make your story more shareable. Check out [Upworthy](#) for examples.
- Consider entering your digital story in contests such as [DoGooder Awards](#) and [TechSoup Storytelling Challenge](#).
- Social media and bite-size content is not a silver bullet. Long-form stories can be powerful way to explore important issues in depth and give the audience enough time to reflect and absorb them.

## Checklist: Eight Steps to a 'Sticky' Story

Everyone has a powerful story to share. Use this checklist to help create yours.

\_\_\_ **Step 1.** I reflected and built my narrative arc.

\_\_\_ **Step 2.** I identified my key audience (i.e. the general public, social innovators, thought leaders, funders):

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\_\_\_ **Step 3.** I selected my core message:

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\_\_\_ **Step 4.** I chose my story type (i.e. challenge story, how-to, big idea, impact):

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\_\_\_ **Step 5.** I created my call to action:

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\_\_\_ **Step 6.** I selected my story medium (i.e. written, video, audio, spoken):

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\_\_\_ **Step 7.** I created an **authentic** and **concrete** story.

\_\_\_ **Step 8.** I optimized channels for sharing my story:

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## Resources

The following are a selection of tips and resources to help you create powerful written, digital, audio, and spoken stories.

### The Written Story

#### 7 Tips for Effective Writing

1. Write like you speak. Use simple language.
2. Read your work out loud.
3. Use punctuation. Listen to the natural pauses in the sentence, and put your punctuation there.
4. Think about pacing. Writing requires balance. Follow a long, challenging sentence with a short, pithy one. Balance more technical explanations with simple translations. Think about rhythm and transitions.
5. Be brief, but know when and where to add color.
6. Consider your audience in choosing your tone.
7. Proofread your writing to check for typos, grammar, and spelling mistakes.

### Writing Your Bio

A great bio should do the following:

1. Introduce you as a professional with a unique point of view;
2. Share a story of your (professional) development;
3. Establish credibility through highlighting major accomplishments; and
4. Invite people into a relationship.

Be genuine, truthful, and concise. Customize your bio depending on your audience and keep it up to date.

### OEDb's Writing Resources

- Provides resources and tools around all aspects of writing including style, grammar, organization, and references.

Strunk, William. *The elements of style*. Penguin, 2007.

- A classic book providing resources on effective writing and style.

Zinsser, William. *On writing well: The classic guide to writing nonfiction*. HarperCollins, 2006.

- Contains resources on writing nonfiction.

### The Digital Story

Check out the following resources for detailed guides and information on creating compelling stories using video and other kinds of media.

[The Starter Guide to Non-Profit Video Storytelling](#) by ListenIn Pictures and CauseVox

- Contains guidance for thinking strategically about video, structuring a story, using video for campaigns and fundraising, and understanding the basics of the production process

[See3's Video Resources](#)

- Offers advice on what types of camera to use; where to get good, cheap equipment; video editing software; hosting videos; inexpensive images and music for videos; online video tools; training staff to learn how to shoot or edit video; and getting video releases.

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[Into Focus: Benchmarks for Nonprofit Video and a Guide for Creators](#) by See3, YouTube and Edelman

- Illustrates best practices in effective nonprofit video.

[Vimeo's Video School](#)

- Lessons and tutorials about video creation.

[Lynda Tutorials](#)

- Video courses about storytelling, video production, photography, and more.

Stanford d.school's [Storytelling and Visual Communication Studio resources](#)

[Animoto](#)

- Simple video creation service (online and mobile) that allows you to use your own pictures, video clips, words, and music.

[YouTube Nonprofit Program](#)

- Provides nonprofits with video tools such as linkable annotations, call-to-action overlays, and exclusive YouTube Channel features. Check out YouTube's [Playbook for Good](#).

Adams, Christian. *InstaBrand: The ultimate guide to visual storytelling through Instagram*.

- Gives insight into visual storytelling through Instagram.

Lambert, Joe. *Digital storytelling: Capturing lives, creating community*. Routledge, 2013.

- Details the history and methods of digital storytelling practices, covering the entire story creation process.

Lambert, Joe. [Digital storytelling cookbook](#), 2010.

- Provides advice on digital storytelling and includes examples of effective stories.

## The Spoken Story

Check out the following tips and resources for creating your spoken story.

### Presentations

Presentation Structure (from [TEDx Speaker Guide](#))

1. Start by making your audience care, using a relatable example or an intriguing idea.
2. Explain your idea clearly and with conviction.
3. Describe your evidence and how and why your idea could be implemented.
4. End by addressing how your idea could affect your audience if they were to accept it.

Duarte, Nancy. *Resonate: Present visual stories that transform audiences*. John Wiley & Sons, 2010.

- Provides resources for giving compelling presentations. Also check out [Nancy Duarte: The secret structure of great talks](#) on TED.

Reynolds, Garr. *Presentation Zen: Simple ideas on presentation design and delivery*. New Riders, 2011.

- Provides helpful resources on presentation design and delivery.

[TEDx Speaker Guide](#)

- Contains guiding principles and steps for giving a compelling talk.

## Interviews and Panels

5 pieces of advice for sitting on a panel:

1. Come prepared with a short statement about your work, concrete examples, and one to three key messages you would like to share with your audience.
2. Share examples packaged as short stories.
3. Anticipate audience questions.
4. Interact with the other panelists and make constructive contributions. Listen carefully and be respectful. You don't have to answer every single question if another panelist already answered it sufficiently.
5. Provide your bio to the moderator in advance.

## The Audio Story

The following tools might be helpful in creating your audio story.

### [Transom Tools](#)

- Offers free tools and resources for voice recording.

### [Hindenburg Tools](#)

- Provides voice editing and podcasting tools.

## Storytelling Techniques

Check out the following courses, toolkits, and books to learn more about effective storytelling techniques and story types.

### [Narrativ](#)

- Free course on the art of storytelling.

Aaker, Jennifer. [How to Tell a Story Workbook](#), 2012.

- Includes a step-by-step guide to creating a story.

### [See Change's Story Science Toolkit](#)

- Provides resources on the process of deciding what stories matter most and how to tell them effectively.

VanDeCarr, Paul. [Storytelling and Social Change: A Strategy Guide for Grantmakers](#), 2013.

- Gives an overview of storytelling projects, strategies, and resources for social change.

Booker, Christopher. *The seven basic plots: Why we tell stories*. Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004.

- Traces seven basic story plot types throughout the arts and humanities.

Heath, Chip, and Dan Heath. *Made to stick: Why some ideas survive and others die*. Random House Digital, Inc., 2007.

- Explores six principles for creating messages that stick.

Margolis, Michael. [Believe me: A storytelling manifesto for changemakers and innovators](#), 2009.

- Covers 15 storytelling axioms to influence people to believe in your message.

Simmons, Annette. *The story factor: Secrets of influence from the art of storytelling*. Basic books, 2006.

- Includes practical storytelling techniques and explores how story transforms relationships.

Sachs, Jonah. *Winning the Story Wars: Why Those who Tell-and Live-the Best Stories Will Rule*

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*the Future*. Harvard Business Press, 2012.

- Provides resources and examples on telling authentic and memorable stories.

Maguire, Jack. *The power of personal storytelling: Spinning tales to connect with others*. JP Tarcher/Putnam, 1998.

- Includes resources and activities for telling personal stories.