

We Are Made for Story

If you want people to remember something, tell it in a story.

By Max T. Russell

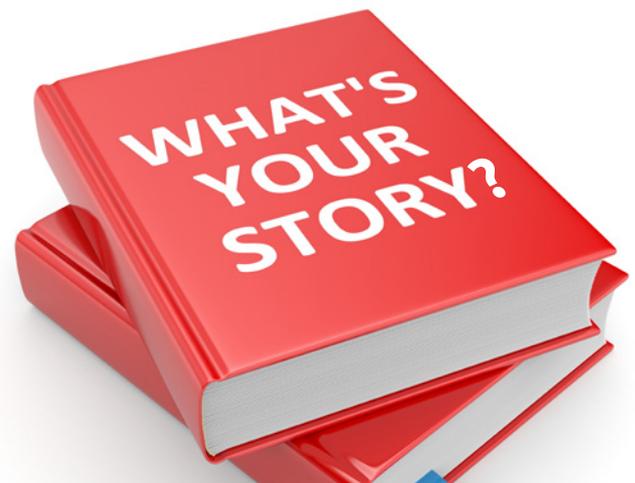
Almost everything I do involves my specialization in human learning and memory. It continually shows that humans are made for story. I like to say, “Everything’s a story. Anything that isn’t didn’t happen.”

We’re wired for stories. We remember stories better than we remember abstract information. That’s why you should tell stories whenever possible to convey concepts vital to your cause.

Stories have internal structure that gives linkage and flow to what you say. Which of the following paragraphs would your stakeholders and donor prospects remember best?

- Our organization now staffs 13 area representatives in five adjacent counties in the southeastern corner of the state, and we are preparing to expand operations according to recommendations deemed necessary by the governor’s task force.
- We started out two years ago with three organizing volunteers. The river had set a new record by rising 32 feet above flood level, carrying away houses, barns, and vehicles in each of the five counties we serve.

You probably agree that the second paragraph is easier to remember, although this may not be obvious at first. The proof comes after a little time goes by. And the more expository information you add, and the more narrative you



compare it to, the greater the difference becomes. Story is much easier to hold in memory and retell to others.

Factual information is still required. You can put it in a sidebar, a chart, a graph, or a list. Or you can sprinkle it carefully among the narrative elements of your message. Just remember that expository content doesn’t have the internal structure of narrative. So don’t hit your audience hard with it. Easy does it.

You can also tell stories with the expository content. For example:

“Here you see the river’s flood stages in the past 25 years. Notice that it’s not flooding as often, but it’s going higher. We don’t know if that’s a trend. We just know we can prevent another wipeout like we had two years ago, and we can reduce the damage from less-drastic flooding too. We can even keep the Drake Fish Farm from losing all its bluegill and striped bass. Most of their fish swam into the river two years ago and never came back. Two hundred fifty thousand dollars of fins and scales.”

When you talk like that, you won’t bother anybody with percentages, statistics, dates, and measurements. If your audience likes the expository content, they’ll digest it. If they don’t, they’ll concentrate on the narrative parts. This is so, no matter what format you use to present information.

Put narrative to work for you every chance you get. People will love you for it. 

“Put narrative to work for you every chance you get.”

Sharpen Your Storytelling Skills

To refine your abilities as a storyteller, see these articles at NonprofitWorld.org:

Why Telling the Right Brand Story Matters So Much for Nonprofits (Vol. 32, No. 3)

Revitalize Your Thank-You Letter with a Good Story (Vol. 37, No. 2)

How to Add an Emotional Hook to Your Fundraising Letters (Vol. 37, No. 1)

You Have a Story to Tell (Vol. 25, No. 1)

The Power of Story: Bring Your Brand to Life (Vol. 34, No. 4)

Telling the Story: Exploring Clients’ Lives (Vol. 17, No. 1)

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