

BREAK OUT OF BORING

FOUR RULES FOR GREAT STORYTELLING

AN EXCERPT FROM THE BOOK

WHO CARES?

BUILDING AUDIENCE-CENTRED ENGAGEMENT
STRATEGIES IN THE NON-PROFIT SECTOR

JOE BARRELL

WITH SARAH FITZGERALD

■ CharityComms

Here's a story.

Stop me if you've heard it before.

Once there was a person. One day something bad happened to her. Or she was born somewhere where people are poorer than you or me. Anyway, her life was a struggle, and here she is saying so (insert quote).

Luckily a charity turned up and rescued her, and now she's feeling better. The same charity (our charity, actually) has made things less bad for other people too.

But look – here's another unfortunate person who still needs rescuing. If the charity had more money (your money) it could go on making things less bad for more people.

Recognise it? I call it *The Story All Charities Tell*. It has a kind of comforting familiarity to it. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and a message of sorts. Told well, it could be – and sometimes is – crafted into something that leaves people moved and inspired to act.

But compare it with the stories you see and hear elsewhere, whether that's a great novel, a documentary film, or a favourite childhood fable. What makes these stories compelling and memorable? Often, it's the unexpected, or a mystery that eventually gets solved in an original but satisfying way. Maybe the author or filmmaker played with the timeline and told the story backwards. It could be any number of things. But in the middle of every one of these stories, you will find a protagonist who is trying to achieve something. You care about them, and you're completely invested in whether or not they get what they want.

The stories you tell are an essential part of the experiences you offer your audiences. They're the front line of engagement strategies, providing all of their emotional content – the stuff that makes audiences feel empathy or outrage, change their minds, or act. Stories can use familiar allegories to communicate complicated subject matter or remind audiences that – essentially – what you do is simple, and all about *people* (or sometimes animals or the planet). Stories connect people to your cause and bring warmth and humanity into the relationship. Stories can bear witness, by documenting injustice. And stories can empower the storyteller, giving them a chance to tell it *their way*, to set the record straight, or hold up a mirror to expose society's shortcomings.

There are some great storytellers in the charity sector, and I've put a couple of examples in this section. The rest of us could get a lot better at storytelling.

'Take a risk and communicate about something in a slightly different or unexpected way, as long as you're confident that it will resonate with your audience.'

STEPHEN NUTT, SENIOR MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER, NSPCC



CharityComms survey

■ ■ STORIES CONNECT PEOPLE TO YOUR CAUSE AND BRING WARMTH AND HUMANITY INTO THE RELATIONSHIP

BREAK OUT OF BORING: FOUR RULES FOR GREAT STORYTELLING

OK, so what makes a good story? I've assembled some home truths here that are used widely by filmmakers, authors, and journalists – and by me.



WHOSE STORY IS IT?

Pretty much every good story has a central protagonist with an aim. Without this basic ingredient there is very little reason to keep watching, listening, or reading. Think about it: when you dislike a film, it's often because you don't know which character you're supposed to care about, or what they want – am I right? So, in any story, you need to first decide *whose* story you want to tell.

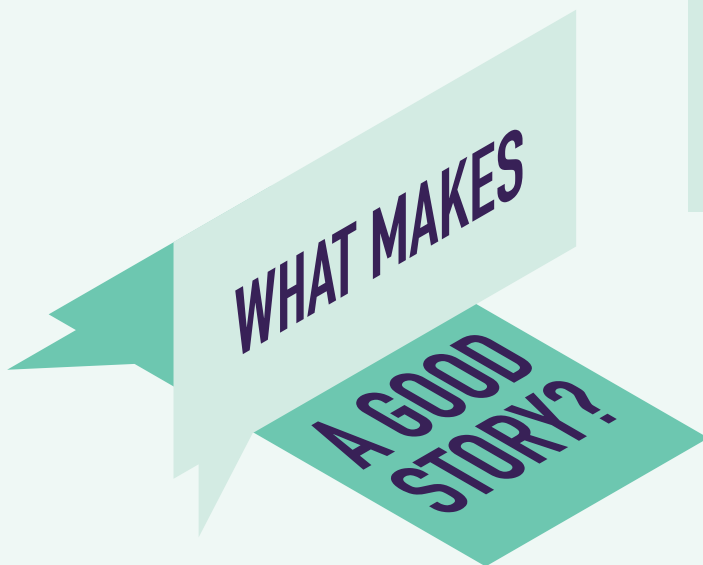
■ ■ **IN STORIES, AS IN LIFE,
PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVES OF ANY
SITUATION ARE INCOMPLETE**

When we tell someone else's story, we're not trying to tell a story *'about them'* – as if observing from a distance – we're trying to tell a story from their *perspective*. So we have to consider two things. Firstly, just like you, they're preoccupied by pursuing their own aims and by ensuring their own survival. Secondly, in stories, as in life, people's perspectives of any situation are incomplete – nobody has all the facts. So, our job as storytellers is to make the audience identify with the central character, willing them to win using the limited knowledge and resources they have.

A mistake a lot of us make is that when we tell other people's stories we're actually telling *our* story, giving our point of view and not theirs. This is how we've ended up with this tired template: *The Story All Charities Tell*. So instead of saying *'charity helps person find a home'*, we should say *'person finds charity and gets a home'*. It's their achievement, their destination, not ours. They've used their resources to improve their lives. We're just a walk-on part.

'Effective storytelling is something that appeals to the heart, before the head has had time to catch up.'

**ANNE BUCKLAND, CREATIVE DIRECTOR,
WE DO STORIES**





USE TEMPLATES ...

Learn the rules of storytelling, and use them.

As I said in the earlier section, *How to Have Ideas*, templates don't constrain you – they set you free.

The best documentary photographers can tell a captivating story in a single image. They do this through following conventions and rules: for example, creating mystery by putting the focal point out-of-frame. In longer-form storytelling, there are countless templates and rules you can use, from ancient Greek dramatic structures to Christopher Booker's Seven Basic Plots to Steve Kaplan's Straight Line/Wavy Line to Pixar's 22 Rules of Storytelling. Go ahead and look these up.

Personally, I'm still a devotee of Syd Field's three-act paradigm because I like its simplicity. It was originally developed for film-making, but works for any form, and can be compressed to a couple of minutes. It goes something like this:

ACT 1: SET-UP (FIRST QUARTER OF THE STORY)

We start by establishing the central character. Then something happens to them that means their previous everyday existence is over or their way of seeing the world has changed. Near the end of Act 1, the first 'plot point' establishes the protagonist's aim, on which the remainder of the story hangs. Will they succeed or not?

ACT 2: CONFRONTATION (MIDDLE HALF)

In Act 2, the central character does nothing but try to achieve their aim, and is constantly thwarted in their efforts. Near the end of this act, a second 'plot point' is the *point of no return* – after which the character can never go back to the way they were at the start of the story. This might be positive (like the final piece of information they need to achieve their goal) or negative (like a major setback preparing them for the final battle).

ACT 3: RESOLUTION (LAST QUARTER)

This is where we get the conclusion of the story. Just as it looks like order will be restored – the battle won – things become even more difficult. But in the nick of time, the central character overcomes their final obstacle. The conflict has been resolved, the aim achieved, and everyone involved is changed by the experience.

These key ingredients – a character with an aim who experiences conflict, resolution, and change – are constants, and you'll find them in any storytelling template. But the stories that build on them are infinite in number and variety.



... BUT EXPLORE THEIR BOUNDARIES

Now I've shown you Syd Field's three-act paradigm, you will see it everywhere – sorry! I've seldom found a film – or any kind of story – that both (a) doesn't use it and (b) isn't boring. But following a template doesn't guarantee that your story will be interesting – especially if they're just used as lazy formulas. That's why you can watch the first five minutes of many Hollywood romcoms or action movies and broadly predict with reasonable accuracy everything that will happen in the rest of the story. When we slavishly follow rules, without bringing something new to them, we end up with clichés.

In the stories *you* tell, is there a way you can respect the rules but still defy expectations? Try some different approaches: hold back some important information until late in the story, add a twist, switch perspectives, or mix up your timeline. Devices like this can delight your audience.

WHEN WE SLAVISHLY FOLLOW RULES, WITHOUT BRINGING SOMETHING NEW TO THEM, WE END UP WITH CLICHÉS

PERFECT TIMING

There's a beautiful short film called *Time Machine* from the charity Breast Cancer Now. The hero is a young girl whose goal is to make a time machine, which she does using cardboard boxes and household objects. It's only as the film unfolds that we understand why. She wants to transport her mum to 2050, when no one will die from breast cancer.

At the end of the story, the mother, when invited into the makeshift time machine, plays along with her daughter and sits with her, waiting to be transported. And it's only in this moment that we finally understand what the child is *really* trying to do: show solidarity to her mother. Nobody in the film believes the time machine will actually work. It's brilliant and touching.

The storytelling nerd in me would say the reason this simple film is so creatively successful is that it plays with the rules a little. Convention tells us that we should know the girl's aim from the start (build a time machine), where in fact her true aim (show solidarity to her mum) is only revealed at the end. Very smart.

WE HAVE A HABIT IN THE CHARITY SECTOR OF TRYING TO SAY EVERYTHING, EVERYWHERE

BUY THE BOOK

amazon

Buy from Amazon

eden stanley

Buy from author (UK only)



SHOW DON'T TELL

Show don't tell is a basic tenet of all good storytelling. It means telling a story through actions, thoughts, and feelings, without having to rely on *exposition* – explaining to your audience what's happening. The pleasure we take in stories relies on 'discovering' what's happening, by observing the characters and trying to guess the intention of the storyteller. *Show don't tell* puts a small burden of effort on the audience, and in doing so pulls them into the story.

Like all rules, this is not rigid. Sometimes you will need to explain things. But keep asking yourself: instead of saying this, can I imply it through dialogue, actions, or images? I'm sure we've all been bored rigid by a film when its entire plot is pushed along by people in a series of different locations, just explaining to each other what's happening. So, instead of telling the audience about a disabled person who can't get into their workplace, show them trying and show how they feel about it. You may not need any words at all.

Admit it: we have a habit in the charity sector of trying to say everything, everywhere. Many of us do achieve clarity and simplicity, but too often we unload every nuance into our web pages and policy reports for fear that – God forbid – someone might miss some vital detail or draw their own conclusion. I call this info-dumping, and the result – always – is that people switch off.

If info-dumping is self-defeating, it also stretches credibility. In the real world, a meeting between an addiction support worker and a service user probably wouldn't start with the worker saying: '*Hello, John. It's been six months since we started meeting up every week, after you were referred to us by a national addiction recovery charity, following your third arrest for offences relating to your use of heroin, which you started taking after you lost your apprenticeship.*' Therefore, don't put it in your video script.