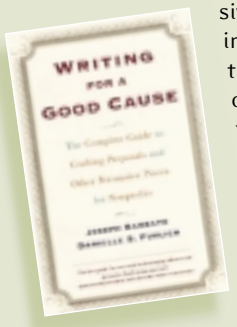
Before Going to Print or Podium

Writing for a Good Cause

by Joseph Barbato & Danielle S. Furlich
(Simon and Schuster © 2000)

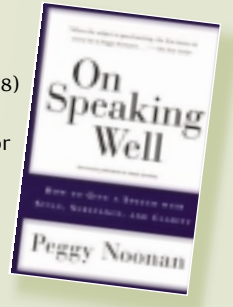
While this book's subtitle reads, "The Complete Guide to Crafting Proposals and Other Persuasive Pieces for Nonprofits," it should also include the disclaimer "Not for grant writers only." There is plenty here for the executive director, communications director, and program officer who want to write more convincingly about their work—storytelling included. Part 3, "The Writer's Craft," can help you get started (sometimes the hardest part of writing), put your first draft down on paper, and recognize the importance of rewriting. Barbato and Furlich have worked extensively in the public interest sector, so their advice is based on plenty of field testing, and it comes with just enough humor to make the book an enjoyable read as well. ■



Here are two books that can help you craft more concise and compelling stories for both publication and presentation.

On Speaking Well

by Peggy Noonan
(Regan Books © 1998)



As a speechwriter for former Presidents Reagan and Bush, Peggy Noonan may have written the words that made you throw a shoe at your television (perhaps even a closetful of shoes), but the Washington veteran clearly knows her stuff. Her book is filled with practical advice on trimming a speech to the best length (20 minutes), ingratiating yourself with an audience (show 'em you know 'em), handling Q&A (keep it moving) and more. A closing essay entitled "Mother Teresa Knocks 'em Out" may have progressive readers throwing this book out a window—Noonan lovingly describes how a D.C. crowd sat enthralled as Mother Teresa bluntly condemned abortion—but just remember: you can use every good piece of advice Noonan offers to fight back. ■

a goodman
GOOD IDEAS FOR GOOD CAUSES
3250 wilshire boulevard, suite 1400
los angeles, ca 90010

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Newsletter edited by Carolyn Ramsay.

Fact, Fiction and Telling Your Truth

"I feel like I'm lying."

Kate O'Connor, communications director for Missouri Senior Service, had just handed me a story about her nonprofit, one that matches volunteer tutors (ages 60 and up) with elementary school students who are falling behind in reading and writing. When I asked Kate to describe her literacy program through the story of a typical student-tutor relationship, she was reluctant. "Each pairing is different," she said, "and I can't think of one that really captures all the benefits of the program."

When confidentiality or other reasons prohibit using factual accounts about your work or the people you serve, developing stories based on these people and events can be just as persuasive and, yes, just as truthful.

I suggested she create composite characters, drawing from real seniors and children, to tell a more illustrative story. And that's precisely what Kate had done, but it was also why her face—clean-scrubbed, Midwestern, and seemingly incapable of lying—was scrunched up in a frown. "These people don't actually exist," she said. "Is it really okay to tell our story this way?"

In helping nonprofits hone their storytelling skills, I have heard Kate's question before. The answer is an unequivocal yes, and it's supported by a study conducted at Columbia University in 1999 as well as a novel written over a century earlier that has become an American classic. ►

Fact, Fiction and Telling Your Truth

Uncle Tom's Impact

Legend has it that when Abraham Lincoln met Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1862, he said, "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war." We'll never know if Lincoln uttered those very words, but historians do not doubt the sentiment. When *Uncle Tom's Cabin* debuted in 1859, it sold 10,000 copies in the United States in its first week of publication. The book became a bestseller (second only to the Bible), energizing abolitionists and helping to galvanize the northern states to unite in a war to end slavery.

Because Stowe's novel is, by definition, fiction, critics used this designation against it, calling *Uncle Tom's Cabin* a fabrication that grossly distorted the picture of life in the south. In 1853, Stowe responded with "A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin," a defense of the book in which she wrote, "This work...has been a collection and arrangement of real incidents—of actions really performed, of words and expressions really uttered." That it was a work of fiction, she argued, did not make it any less truthful.

Which brings us back to Kate O'Connor's question. Is it permissible to use composite characters and events drawn from different case histories—in short, fiction—to inform and engage an audience about an important social issue? *Uncle Tom's Cabin* shows the immense impact long-form fiction can have, but what about a story of 750-1000 words such as Kate's?

News vs. Fiction

In 1999, researchers Jeffrey Strange and Cynthia Leung conducted a study that speaks directly to this question. Strange and Leung assembled 95 Columbia University students and divided them into three groups. The first (or control) group was not given anything to read. The second group was asked to read a 900-word story entitled "Downward Bound" about a teenager named Michael who drops out of high school due to emotional problems. Here's some of what the students read:

Michael's mom, Angela, worries about him a lot lately. "He never was a great student, but he got by," she says. "In any case, he used to come home smiling, or at least not all uptight like he is now. He did sports, began to learn saxophone. He got on well with his friends and I think he even liked school. That's changed now. It's not that he gets into trouble—he's just quit doing the work."

The third group read an alternate version of "Downward Bound"—also 900 words, but in this telling Angela cites a different reason for her son's problems:

"Sure, I knew the school would be worse than Somerset. This is where I grew up. But it wasn't so bad then. Just look at the building—it's fallen apart since I was here. What you've got now is a disgrace. For goodness sake, Michael's science teacher was trained to teach social studies. He knows as much about science as I do."

Within groups two and three, half of the students were told that the story was a factual account from a news magazine. The other half was told that the story was a fictional piece from a literary magazine. While Strange and Leung were curious to see how the students would react to different suggested causes of the drop-out problem (emotional vs. situational) they also wondered if a story's form (fact vs. fiction) would influence how seriously the reader took its content.

After reading the stories, students were asked for their thoughts on why teenagers drop out of school, and the interviews revealed that the stories labeled fiction were just as influential as those labeled fact. "This study showed that encounters with invented characters in imagined situations can influence our decisions about real-world policy concerns," Strange concluded. "They can influence what we think causes the problems, how we think such problems should be solved, and which of the myriad problems we face warrant our attention."

I couldn't repeat all of this to Kate O'Connor because, as you may have already guessed, she doesn't exist. Kate is a composite drawn from similar people I have met in storytelling workshops, and Missouri Senior Service is also a fiction based firmly on fact. But if Ms. O'Connor drew you into this article and made it more accessible, she has done her job precisely as Jeffrey Strange predicted she would. And my larger point is no less valid for her assistance. If your organization is too young to have completed case studies, if your work is too sensitive to name names, or if other reasons intervene, creating characters and stories is both an appropriate and effective way to engage and energize your audience.

But please try to avoid starting another Civil War. ■