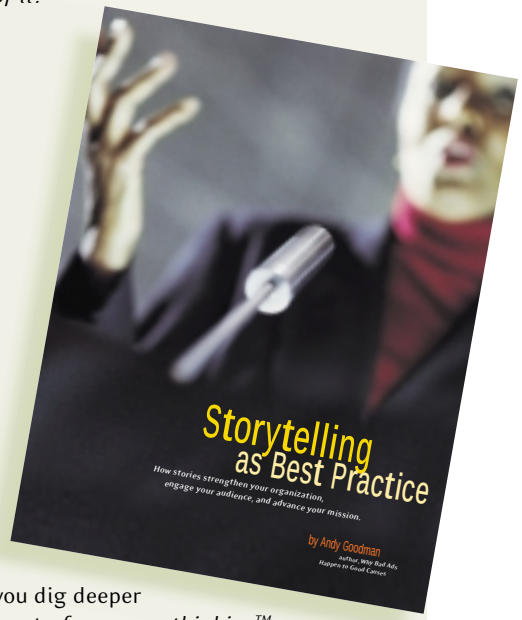
For More Happy Endings

Whether you work at a small nonprofit, large foundation, or any public interest organization in between, storytelling remains your single most powerful communications tool. The only question is: *are you making the most of it?*

Storytelling as Best Practice can help ensure you do. Written expressly for public interest communicators, this booklet culls the best advice on storytelling that has been featured in *free-range thinking™* over the last four years. You'll find articles on:

- How to create, maintain and effectively use a story bank.
- How story memos make program officers better communicators.
- Why managers need to pay close attention to stories told inside your office.
- How stories can make you a more persuasive presenter.



You'll also find a reading list (with capsule reviews and excerpts) to help you dig deeper into this topic. For long-time subscribers to *free-range thinking™*, *Storytelling as Best Practice* can be a valuable refresher course. And for new readers, this booklet will be a convenient compilation of articles you may have missed since the grazing cows started gracing your inbox. ■

To order Storytelling as Best Practice, please send a check for $10 ($7.50 per copy plus $2.50 first class postage and handling) to:

Andy Goodman 3250 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 1400, Los Angeles, CA 90010

Please make check payable to Andy Goodman. *(Sorry: we are not prepared to accept credit card payments at this time)* Allow 1-2 weeks for delivery.

Free-range thinking™ is a monthly newsletter for public interest groups, foundations, and progressive businesses that want to reach more people more effectively. For a free subscription, send your request to: andy@agoodmanonline.com or call 213.386.9501. Back issues are available on the web at www.agoodmanonline.com *Newsletter edited by Carolyn Ramsay.*

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free-range thinking™

Good stories cut through the clutter and connect with people's hearts, opening their minds to your point of view. Dull stories don't, and all too often, that's what public interest groups are telling.

Seven Questions to Sharpen Your Stories

Ask someone from a typical nonprofit to tell the story of "The Wizard of Oz," and you're liable to hear something like this:

An at-risk youth from a blended family in the farm belt is rendered unconscious during an extreme weather event. When she awakens, she undertakes a long, hazardous journey in which she is aided by an assortment of variously-challenged adults while also being pursued by a person of color. Upon reaching her destination, she learns that her journey was all a dream and wakes up in her own bed with a newfound appreciation of the importance of family and community.*

Alright, perhaps it wouldn't be quite that bland, but storytelling in the public interest sector is often flatter than the Wicked Witch of the East. In their devotion to data, many nonprofiteers have forgotten how to tell a compelling story, even when they have plenty to tell. And that's a problem, because stories help engage audiences, making them more receptive to the facts. So here are seven questions to ask yourself before launching into your next story.

** Green, in this case.*

Seven Questions to Sharpen Your Stories

1. Who's the protagonist?

Just as a car needs a driver to get it where it's going, stories need someone to drive the action. This person (or group of people) is called the protagonist, and traditionally structured stories follow protagonists in pursuit of clearly defined goals. To help your audience identify with the protagonist and enter the world of your story, don't be afraid to name names (when appropriate) and provide enough physical description or background to let them see this individual in their mind's eye.

2. What's the hook?

Another technique for drawing people in is beginning the story *where the audience is.* This is your story's "hook"– the description of a place, circumstance, or premise that everyone understands and with which they readily identify. If the subject of your story is global warming, for example, starting with facts about concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is not going to engage the average person. On the other hand, saying, "Have you been reading about the incredible heat wave in Europe?" is more likely to get heads nodding.

3. What keeps it interesting?

Predictable stories are boring, and no matter how proud you are of a recent victory, if your story boils down to "We identified a goal, we pursued that goal, we reached that goal!" you're not likely to have audiences rapt with attention. "The stuff of storytelling," says Robert McKee, a renowned Hollywood script doctor *(see box),* "is the gap between what we think will happen when we take an action, and what actually happens." Take another look at that success story of yours and see if you can recall any barriers or surprises that cropped up along the way. From the listener's perspective, *that's* where the story gets interesting.

4. Where's the conflict?

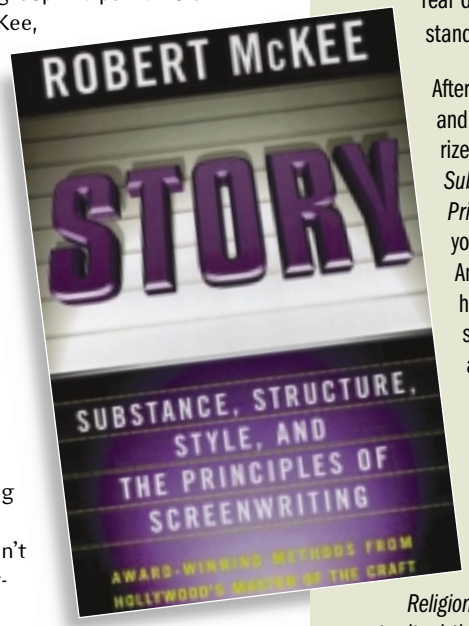
There is no drama without conflict, and comedies, for that matter, also fall flat without it. Heroic action always comes into sharper focus when juxtaposed against villainous misdeeds, and while your stories will probably not reduce to simple-minded battles of good versus evil (unless your name is Bush, that is), it helps to have clearly defined heroes and villains with different notions of how the story should end.

5. Have you included telling details?

Recently, I heard a story about a small community in West Virginia whose economy collapsed when its primary industry, coal mining, was shut down. The narrator described the place as "a company town," but the image of a controlling and penny-pinching company became vivid when she added that every home was required to turn on its porch lights at 7:00 pm each evening "...because that's how the mining company made sure the streets were lit." A single telling detail such as that can replace a paragraph or more of description, and good stories have just enough telling details to set the scene and people it with colorful characters.

6. What's the *emotional* hook?

By consenting to read or listen to a story, the audience subconsciously enters into a contract with the storyteller. In return for their time and attention – an increasingly valuable commodity, not so incidentally – they expect more than a recitation of facts. They want an emotional experience that makes the time worthwhile. "Our appetite for story is a reflection of the profound human need to grasp the patterns of living," says McKee, "not merely as an intellectual exercise, but within a very personal, emotional experience."



7. Is the meaning clear?

Finally, your story should have a crystal clear moral, a reason for taking this particular journey. "We don't need more information," writes Annette Simmons in *The Story Factor,* "We need to know what it means. We need a story that explains what it means and makes us feel like we fit in there somewhere." ■

Learning from Hollywood's Story Guru

Robert McKee is legendary in Hollywood for teaching aspiring television and screenwriters how to structure a compelling story and people it with interesting characters. He was the expert to whom Nicolas Cage's character turned for help in the movie "Adaptation," and having taken his course myself, I can offer my endorsement as well: McKee is the real deal when it comes to understanding the intricacies of storytelling.

After years of teaching in Los Angeles and New York, McKee has summarized his course in the book, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting.* Even if you never hoped to write the Great American Screenplay, McKee will help you write and tell better stories, and that's an asset in any field of communication.

"Science, once the great explicator, garbles life with complexity and perplexity. Who can listen without cynicism to economists, sociologists, politicians? Religion, for many, has become an empty ritual that masks hypocrisy. As our faith in traditional ideologies diminishes, we turn to the source we still believe in: the art of story."

from **Story**, *by Robert McKee*