

Storytelling – communicating through stories

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1. What is storytelling

Storytelling simply means *telling stories*. Storytelling is a neat way of packaging information. Why should you as an association also present your information and messages in stories? The answer is simple: stories entertain, they arouse interest and ensure people pay attention – what is read and said is retained better.

Professionals have long used storytelling in communication, marketing and journalism. Associations can also share their own stories by recounting challenges, successes as well as funny or surprising events to communicate their core messages and values in order to, for example, attract new members or inform current members about past or pending events. Use the power of storytelling through words and pictures on your association website, on social media, on flyers, in your association magazine or during speeches at general meetings.

2. Quick guide: 12 storytelling tips

1. First think about who your **audience** is and what interests them.
2. Think about **which channel** you want to use to reach your audience.
3. Then decide how best to **prepare** your story - for your audience and channel (in a written/spoken text, picture, video or sound recording or combination thereof).
4. Define three main parts of your story:
 - a **central character** (or **object**), around which the story revolves
 - a **wish**, which this person (or object) has,
 - an **obstacle**, that the person has to overcome to achieve their wish.
5. Start with your story and keep the **punchline** – the conclusion of the story – as close to the end as possible.
6. Avoid **adjectives** as much as possible. Describe the situation.
7. Think about whether you can film the scenario you are describing. This helps stir emotions and plants **images in the mind**.
8. Choose creative **verbs**.
9. Write in **main clauses**. Avoid complicated sentence constructions and too many fragmented sentences.
10. Write in the **active** not passive voice.
11. Change your position, location to awake **your creativity**.
12. **Test** your story – read it out loud or request honest feedback from peers.

3. What makes a good story?

3.1 The three main components

There are three main components to every good story:

1. A **person** around whom the story revolves (Little Red Riding Hood for example),
2. a **wish** of this person (she wanted to bring her grandmother cakes),
3. an **obstacle** in the way of achieving the wish (remember the big bad wolf?).

Instead of a person, you can also choose an **object** as the main character on which to base the story, so you tell the story from the perspective of that object. To do that, you have to develop the object's perspective. What does it see? What does it feel? How does the object perceive the situation?

3.2 The right narration strategy

You also need the right narration strategy: you need a **punchline** to hold the audience's attention – the moment when the person overcomes the hurdle. Delay that moment as long as you can - that way you keep the suspense going and hold the attention of your audience. Don't explain everything as if you're talking to a simpleton. Let the audience read between the lines. But stay realistic. A **logical** and **realistic** narrative will keep the audience interested.

3.3 Surprise your audience

Think about who you **are telling your story to**. New or existing members? Children? Women? Older people? People from a migratory background? People from other municipalities? **What are they interested in?** What do they already know about the subject? How can you surprise your audience? Amuse them? Keep them in suspense? It could be the content itself. You could have rhyming text, a non-linear narrative, or an object as the main character of your story. Why not present the event from the microphone's perspective? The empty hall at the start, all the people coming into contact with it in different ways, the "microphone tappers", the "'one-two, one-two' persons", the "persons standing too far away" - and the punchline? That would have to be the speaker who was so convincing that she won over everybody, including the microphone.

3.4 Arouse emotions – evoke pictures

Always have your audience in mind when writing. How do you relate to the event you are writing about? What emotions do you associate with it? Try to bring out those ingredients through your words. **Avoid adjectives as far as possible.** "A *beautiful* room" does not stir the emotions. "A room that glittered and glimmered and shone like grandmother's eyes as she unpacked the cake." That's more like it.

Be **creative in your choice of verbs**. If you say "100 members attended the general meeting," you've lost your readers by the second word. If you say "A swarm of bees would have been jealous. The air *buzzed* and *hummed*, as 100 members all *streamed* into the hall almost all at once ..." you grasp the audience – look for verbs that generate images in your head.

Make your story easy to digest: write in straightforward language; avoid shoehorning in too many intricate partial sentences or subordinate clauses. Stick with main clauses. And write in the active tense: instead of "the attendees were welcomed by the President," write "the President welcomed the attendees."

4. How do I find a story?

4.1 Look within yourself

Do you want to find new members for your association? First of all, think about who you want to reach and via which channel. Once you know your target audience and where your message will appear, think about your story. And you're in luck. Associations are like treasure troves. Are there members or events that identify in particular with a position or a value of your association? Tell this story. Or the association's past is bound to include stories that will stir emotions among potential members:

- ask older members for anecdotes,
- go through old documents (minutes, magazines, photos),
- think back to how you came into contact with the association and what it was like for you at the start.

Are you reporting on an association event? If so, again define your audience. Don't just talk about the event in a linear narrative. Think back to the event. What emotions did it stir within you? (How did it smell in the gym? What did I feel in the concert hall? How was the event for me?). Did something out of the ordinary happen? Aim to trigger these emotions in your audience, tell them your story based around this extraordinary occurrence.

The way in which you tell your story depends on what your audience likes and where the story is to appear. Stories can be spoken or written down, in images, videos or combinations of (moving) images and text. (Moving) images or videos and short text snippets are good for social media. You can have longer text for an association magazine or website - provided your target audience is happy to read. One rule of thumb: no picture without a story. Do you have photos, videos? Can you use the same material again or do you have to rework it?

4.2 Do something different

Are you still having trouble finding a story? Do something different – go to another room, find another place to work or just change your position (stand or walk instead of sitting). Change the way you write. Write by hand instead of typing on the keyboard or vice versa. Or establish some sort of framework: each sentence must start (or end) with a certain letter; or the sentences have to rhyme. Write "aloud", i.e. read out what you have written. You can also read out your work to see whether your story really works: does it make you smile, feel anxious or disgusted? You can also ask your peers for honest feedback. Do they not understand the story or does it fail to excite? If so, put it down to experience and go back to the drawing board.

5. More information

5.1 vitamin B sources and other factsheets (in German)

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Checkliste Storytelling

Storytelling A-Z

Socius factsheet "Über ein Altersprojekt schreiben"

Tipps und Tricks für erfolgreiches Storytelling

Vereinsgeschichte sichtbar machen: Beispiele

5.2 Online tools: how readable is my text? (in German)

www.blablameter.com

www.leichtlesbar.ch

www.fleschindex.de

www.letter-factory.com

5.3 Literature tips (in German)

Walter Fischer: Tue Gutes und rede darüber. Erfolgreiche Öffentlichkeitsarbeit für Nonprofit-Organisationen. Orell Füssli Verlag publisher, Zurich (1st edition 2002).

Frank Littek. Storytelling in der PR. Wie Sie die Macht der Geschichten für Ihre Pressearbeit nutzen (2011).

Pia Kleine Wieskamp. Storytelling: Digital - Multimedial – Social. Formen und Praxis für PR, Marketing, TV, Game und Social Media (2016).

Christian Mossner, Liliane Forster, Johann Mannes. Video-storytelling. Eine praxisorientierte Anleitung für innovative Unternehmen (2022).

Christa und Emil Zopfi: Leichter im Text. Ein Schreibtraining. Zytglogge Verlag, Bern (2. Auflage 2001). Begleitbuch für das persönliche Schreibtraining mit über hundert erprobten Übungen.