

# Everybody Needs a Story

How the tools of storytelling  
can chart the course of your  
business or non-profit



**by Carl Vonderau**

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# Introduction

“There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories.”

**Ursula K. LeGuin**

“Let’s all pretend to be someone else, and then perhaps we’ll find out who we are.”

**Jean le Carré**



I was a banker for more years than I’m going to admit and I never really tried to sell with stories. Now I’m a writer who tells stories about serial killers and money launderers. Just so you know...it’s fiction.

Why didn’t I combine these two worlds when I was a banker? I was afraid that my stories would be too revealing, that they might cast me or my institution in a negative light. Or that the stories would flop and make me look bad. I thought the concept of an exciting banker story was contradictory. What was wrong with me? Of course bankers have stories. Wonderful stories.

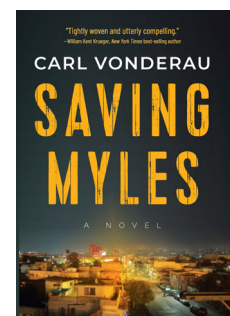
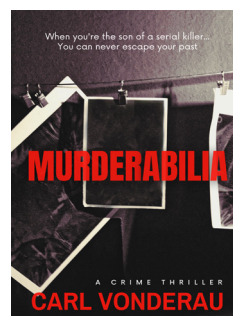
So what did I do? I secretly took writing courses on weekends and hired people to critique my writing to learn how to craft fiction. No one at work knew about the writing conferences I went to. I suffered through failed scene writing, scathing criticism, and rejection after rejection from agents and publishers. Like most dreams it seemed hopeless in real life.

And where did it get me? At last I became a competent writer. In 2019 my first thriller novel, MUR-

DERABILIA, was published. Three years later, my second book, SAVING MYLES, came out. They both won prizes.

Over the years I learned so much about creating stories, but I didn’t use that knowledge at my day job, or even when I did volunteer work with non-profits. What a mistake!

In the next modules I’ll be pointing out some of the things I’ve learned about how stories are put together, as well as how you can perk up your own story and the story of your organization. I’ll give you short snapshots of concepts and examples that apply to the business world, the nonprofit world, and even the stories you make up. And I won’t use Powerpoint slides. I promise.



# Why Do We Need Stories in the First Place?

“Life is not what one lived, but what one remembers and how one remembers it in order to recount it.”

**García Márquez**

“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

**William Faulkner**

Long ago, before writing, even before the wheel, groups of people needed to learn how to survive in an unforgiving world. They had to know where they came from and what their tribe had learned. What did their children need to help them survive? Later they asked, Why was I born and for what purpose? What am I willing to give my life to?

But if there was no writing, how did they explore those ideas?

With stories.

These were the original business stories—full of lessons and mission statements. They were not executive summaries. They were stories they remembered with both the rational and the emotional parts of their brains. They were full of all kinds of murder mysteries. (A crime writer has to notice that.)

And then there is now. How many presentations full of assumptions, facts and success statistics have you suffered through? Tables of numbers and hockey-stick-shaped growth in revenues and profits. You have to force yourself to concentrate. Plus there’s another risk here. The rhetoric of an organized presentation feeds the skeptical side of listeners. They have their own sta-

“Life isn’t about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself.”

**García Márquez**



tistics and facts that argue against what you’re telling them. But they’ll almost always listen to a good story or a joke and not be nearly as critical. And they’ll remember it.

Why? Researchers have performed fMRIs of people’s brains when they listen to a story. Their brains light up more than they do with just facts and reasoning.

Facts and numbers activate only the language processing zone. Stories activate up to seven areas at once, including the zone that processes images (60,000 times

faster than language), emotions and senses. A study in Psychological Science reported that regions of the brain that process sights, sounds, tastes and movement are stimulated when we're captivated by a story. When the story says lavender, it activates the sense of smell. We're sensing and feeling what the hero does, as if it is happening to us. That vividness makes us remember it better. It also impels us to act out what we've learned. (Says the author who writes about murder. Hmmm.)

When's the last time a credit report made you cry? Well, maybe for another reason. But that involves a story.

When you think about it, isn't it obvious? We pay to go to superhero movies and our organizations pay us to listen to Powerpoint presentations. Those movies are based on myths and patterns that have aroused us for thousands of years.

Hercules, the demigod son of Zeus, would often cause trouble and messes due to his incredible strength. He knew he was destined for great things but had no idea how he could get there. Sound like any child? First he had to strangle a serpent Hera sent to his cradle. Then he had to fight off Hades' hellhound Cerberus, while also having to accept the fate of his paternal lineage. Luke Skywalker, another beloved hero of ours, needed to go through similar travails, fighting to prove he was strong while also accepting who his father was. Like Hercules, Luke needed intense training from Master Yoda to become a Master Jedi himself. In both tales, we see lessons about resilience and perseverance. No matter how hard a situation, there is always a way to come out on top. These patterns repeat themselves in film and literature. They are the lessons we yearn for in a story.



# How Do You Tell Your Own Story?



“Only a mediocre person is always at his best.”

**Somerset Maugham**

Your first story is, Who the heck are you? And your listener’s unspoken hope is: Please don’t be boring. Let’s start with a story of success

How would you react if someone introduced themselves as a Harvard MBA honors student who’s succeeded in everything he or she has done. They list all their impressive accomplishments. In conclusion they tell you how these successes have really humbled them. Are you already starting to gag? You might hire them, but part of you would secretly be hoping they’d fail.

Or would you be more inclined to root for someone who dropped out of college because they had a question that fascinated them. *What if I started my own business?* They jumped into it but the idea didn’t work and they ran out of money. Now they are in someone else’s organization and use the lessons they learned from their failed pursuit. Every job they do at the new company represents a small business that needs to be studied and nurtured. To best help each client they get close to the right mentors and influencers. Every setback must be faced. Yes, the first years were tough at the new company, but now they are one of the top performing people. Are you already on this person’s team?

The same thing applies to a nonprofit. Suppose you’re a donor and a charity’s CEO tells you that giving back has always been important to him or her. They might say that they want to do their part to change the world. Okay. But look how affecting it is with some personal information. Suppose they describe the poverty they grew up in, or how they gave up an MBA to work with an inspiring nonprofit leader, or how their father’s death motivated them to fight diabetes. A whole other emotional layer is added. Few things are as captivating as a personal story of triumph over extreme adversity.

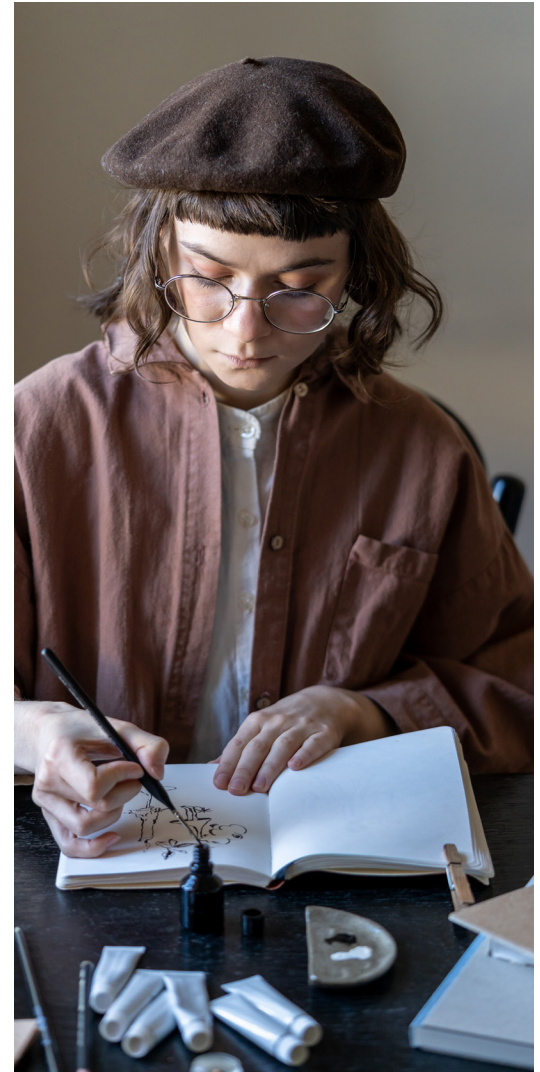
Most of us avoid these kinds of introductions. We’ve been taught to blend in and be boring. It’s a

comfort zone. So we go to a networking event and we try not to attract attention, or we list the benefits our organization provides. Does that make sense?

I once thought of a perfect first line for a networking event but never used it. What an opportunity I lost. The line was "Hi, I'm Carl Vonderau and I believe that the world is flat." Most people would raise their eyebrows when confronted with that state-

ment—especially from a banker. They'd be willing to give me a few more sentences before they decided I was nuts. I could have explained it: all businesses are interconnected as if the world is flat. But, alas, I never used it.

Share your personal lessons. What failures have you had that have been keys to your success? Who inspired you?





Here's an example of how Marc Benioff, the founder of Salesforce, could introduce himself. "I was a loud and brilliant child. I wrote my first software at 15 and my programming skills paid for college. I did an internship and then went to Oracle Corporation, where I became the youngest vice president and was mentored by Larry Ellison."

Do you admire him? Yes. Do you like him? Not so much. Do you relate to him? No.

Here's another way he could start his introduction. "The hit in the gut that made me successful was the

day my mentor, the man who'd invested two million in my company, fired me and took away my shares in the company."

Have your ears perked up? You know he was successful and you want to know how. Do you want to hear how you might use what he did to turn your own failures into successes?

Here's another possible introduction.

"Hi there, I'm James Dyson, and I have failed over 5,000 times." Are you listening?

# What Do You Need in Every Story

“At the end of the day people won’t remember what you said or did, they will remember how you made them feel.”

**Maya Angelou, Pulitzer Prize winning author**

What is in every good book or movie you’ve seen? Emotion. That’s why every news reporter asks victims how a tragedy made them feel.

In a story there has to be something universal that tugs at a listener and in the end satisfies him or her. That means a low and a high. And what is an effective way of creating that in the person you’re telling the story to? Conflict. In a story it is often two people with clashing goals or understandings of the world. But it can also be a mistaken conception. What is at stake?

Here’s how the author, John le Carré, put it:

“‘The cat sat on the mat’ is not a story. ‘The cat sat on the dog’s mat’ is a story.”

That applies to both a company and a nonprofit. It’s where the ideal meets cold reality. Conflicts can arise from difficult or mistaken leaders, employees stuck to old ways, a process that seems impossible to change, a competitor that has changed the game, unreasonable bankers (Aren’t they all?), a pandemic, the loss of a client or a donor, and on and on.

In Hollywood, TV writers often display the characters of a series in a circle on a whiteboard and then draw lines between them. The lines are the possible conflicts between characters that can create and extend stories. These conflicts inspire episodes for the coming weeks.

It even applies to dollars and cents. In an experiment, scientists took blood samples before and after story videos to see how the videos affected fundrais-

ing. The emotion from the stories produced oxytocin. Those with more oxytocin donated more to the charity.

What were the conflicts and emotions in your organization? What are they now? How can you weave them into your story so that the listener feels what you do?

There had to be many emotional disagreements, and telling them all could go on forever. But not in a story. Characters must make a few decisions, one way or the other. Their hearts are revealed in the choices they make under pressure. Which takes us to plot.

Plot is not a day-to-day journal of events. Like: “We started on 9th Street, then we got an office on 10th. and hired twelve more people. Our sales increased by twenty percent.” My eyes roll just reading those sentences. Your client wants a story with an arc to success and a lesson learned.

That means that the plot has emotional ups and downs. What are the three to four key moments that took you from disaster to victory? All the other moments are irrelevant. Was there a point where you all hated each other, another point where someone did something really nice for another? These highs and lows make someone root for you.

The listener expects you to head to a happy ending. So what they want to hear is how you got there. The transformation. The questions they ask are: Why were you like that, what motivated you to change, how did it work, and what did you learn? The question they want to know and rarely ask is: How does that make me feel? The subconscious basis for that thought is: How did it make you feel? They want to recognize themselves as the hero in your story. What lesson can they take from you that will make them the hero in their own story?

Fundamentally the heart of a story is about transformation.

# What Are the Basic Materials of a Story?

“The essence of drama is that man cannot walk away from the consequences of his own deeds.”

**Harold Hayes**

We all know that most stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Aristotle said so in *THE POETICS*. But there’s more to structure.

Chris Winfield, an entrepreneur, writer and coach, defines 4 elements in his story. I think they apply to everyone.

- ✓ There is a problem.
- ✓ The storyteller has a spark of insight.
- ✓ He or she fixes it.
- ✓ The solution translates to a mission that is applicable to everyone.

“Better the illusions that exalt us than ten thousand truths.”

**Alexander Pushkin**

Robert McKee is the world’s best-known and most respected screenwriting lecturer. His students have received scores of Academy nominations. This is one way he defines what a story is.

- ✓ It begins with life in balance.
- ✓ An event happens causing expectations to crash with objective reality. This incites the hero to action.
- ✓ Opposing forces make the protagonist dig deeper and make difficult decisions and take actions with risks.
- ✓ The protagonist discovers a truth that saves the castle.

Here’s how it might work for a hero at your organization. In the beginning all is good and everyone is happy with work. But soon there is a problem or an unattainable treasure. This is the catalyst that spurs your hero to a goal. But an obstacle or villain is in the way. Your hero may debate whether he or she should be the one who resists. But eventually the hero takes action. Writers call this “seizing the sword.” Unfortunately every solution leads to more





disasters and unexpected problems, which lead to more goals and actions. The heart of your hero is revealed in the choices he or she makes under these increasing pressures. They learn lessons that will bring out the best in them. In the last act, the hero uses what that person has learned to succeed at an impossible task. And the audience is left with a lesson to use to win the battle.

Throughout there are the twists, particularly in the middle. Here's one from a startup brewery as published by Patriot Software.

“Well, we're about a month away from brewing, and we're all itching to get started. But, when we were digging up the floor to slope it, we found a 3,000 gallon underground oil tank. Oh boy.”

That last “Oh boy” is a voice your listener hears inside their own head.

If you want to see this formula played out beautifully, look at the Star Wars movies. Or look at the movies Star Wars was based on—westerns.

In 2003 Bethany Hamilton was a 13-year-old girl so good at surfing that she was on her way to becoming a professional. Her life was happily in balance. Everything changed for her one morning when she went out to surf and a 14-foot tiger shark bit off her left arm. She had to replace her dream of competitive surfing with something else. She found inspiration when she volunteered in Phuket, Thailand to help tsunami victims. She saw Phuket children afraid of the ocean, and helping them overcome their fear was her call to action. She discovered that her own experience inspired other young people wounded by trauma. And helping others convinced her not to give up on what she loved. Bethany went on to win her first national surfing title just two years after the attack. That led to a new calling. Hamilton and her family now run a nonprofit called the Beautifully Flawed. Isn't that a great name? The organization reaches out to shark attack survivors or others who have had limb amputations. It focuses on younger girls.

# What About Character?

“If you think you are too small to be effective, you have never been in the dark with a mosquito.”

## Anonymous

In any book or movie, if you don't care about the hero or the victims you lose interest and don't remember it. But when you laugh or cry, the story will resonate for a long time. What does this mean for your story? It isn't just about what the organization stands for and all the challenges and successes it has had. It's about how the people in that organization changed themselves.

How can you tell the history of Apple without describing Steve Jobs? He was a man who had a Reality Distortion Field around him. A fundamental part of how he achieved his vision was by being unsatisfied with what his employees told him was true. He often publicly humiliated them. But his perfectionism and vision were what made Apple. His quirky character is the story.

If you look at the success of the nonprofit Cesar Chavez Service Clubs you have to look at Cesar Chavez. He had incredible determination and resiliency, but also a gentleness. He was demanding but could also nourish other people to become leaders. The clubs take ten of his principles to inspire youth to become leaders. But how can you talk about what the clubs do without delving into the main character in the story—Cesar Chavez?

So who are the personalities in your organization who've made it succeed? This not only means describing how they have run the organization but their backstory as well. What characteristics and mistakes did they make on that journey? How did their past struggles mold them into becoming change-makers for the problem they were born to solve? How did their past struggles mold them into becoming change-makers for the problem they were born to solve? Maybe your boss helps people

“I am big. It's the pictures that got small.”

**Norma Desmond, *Sunset Boulevard***

by bringing up Nascar racing. Why would he have five kids and parasail off cliffs? Because he believes that risks are part of life and there is joy in how you manage them. You probably don't agree with everything these people have done, but that tension brings vibrancy and credibility to the story you are part of.

Imagine you have a boss who regularly goes off on “nutters,” This is when he shouts out phrases like “Are you lazy or incompetent?” Or, “I'm sorry, did I take my stupid pills today?” Or, “If I hear that idea again, I'm gonna have to kill myself.” Who am I talking about? Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon. The employees who have stuck with him thrive on that personality quirk. They say that he is usually right on target. In 1998 he had an “all-hands-on-deck emergency because more orders came in than shipments going out. What did Bezos demand? All employees, including executives, had to go help at the warehouses. Some of them brought friends and family. They ate and drank coffee together. Some slept in their cars. Bezos's demands were harsh, but those edicts also built loyalty and culture. And pride. Any employees who participated in the “Saving Santa” incident will tell that story.

I think the point is that most bosses and founders have admirable and annoying qualities. In order to truly present that person, your story must tell how that batter enabled you to succeed.



# Do You Lose Credibility in Admitting Weakness?

“Like all weak men, he laid an exaggerated stress on not changing one’s mind.”

**Somerset Maugham**

“I have not failed. I’ve just found ten thousand ways that won’t work.”

“Many of life’s failures are people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up.”

**Thomas Edison**

you’re going to fail for them. Most of us think that way.

That’s not what we root for in movies and stories. In entertainment we want to see disaster. But in our potential business partner we want to only see glory? What fun is that? In writing fiction, we’re told to put the hero in a tree with no way down. Then throw stones at him (or her). Everyone roots for someone who has come back from dismal failure.

Then there are the secrets. These are what your listeners want to hear most. The answer to a humiliating secret will drive you to read a whole book. Can you actually tell these to the people you work with, or to the people you want to have as clients? Well, maybe you want to leave out how you stole money—especially if you handle your organization’s finances. Be careful with this one.

Harvard Business Review interviewed Robert McKee, the Hollywood screenwriting icon, about storytelling. He urged CEOs to avoid denying the negative (Is that a double negative?). He said a story is about the struggle between expectation and reality in all its nastiness. A positive picture often doesn’t ring true. Do you believe a press release that only brags about increased sales and a bright future? Audiences appreciate the truthfulness of



Okay, if you tell someone that your charity was always great, have you lost them already? No one believes that. Already you’ve started with a base of distrust. Bragging with a laundry list of accomplishments annoys people.

Why? Because your audience wants to hear about your failures. They connect more to your successes when they know how you failed first. After all, all of us fail. But if you admit to mistakes won’t your donor, or your customer, mark that down as weakness? They will think that, if you failed before,

someone dealing honestly with bad events, human flaws, fallibilities, and shortcomings. They will listen more intently to how you dealt with them. I guarantee they'll be paying attention if you say, "I was so ashamed." That takes courage.

Position the problems in the foreground and show how you overcame them. Why? Because we've been doing it this way for thousands of years. It's innate. Look at the myths. They embody the dark side before they guide the listener to how a hero snatches up victory.

Henry Ford's life was filled with as much failure as success. He wanted to bring revolution to the very competitive automobile industry the second he got his first look at a gas-powered engine. Working at night, he built his first prototype during the day. It didn't work. But the second prototype was a success. Now he needed financing. One of the most

prominent businessmen in Detroit backed him, but the company dissolved. His backer gave him another chance, but insisted that an outsider supervise his progress. Ford couldn't stand that and quit the company. Now he was truly written off. He took months to find the right investor, a man who would not interfere with his vision. Then Ford created the Model A and designed the assembly line.

Here's another example. Should you start the story about Adriana Huffington by saying her website has over 200 million readers and employs more than 2,000 people? Or should you start by describing a political commentator who decided to start her own media company online. She almost went bankrupt and had to lay off most of her staff and sell her home to keep going. But she turned disaster into victory, and this is how she did it.



# So How Do We Set Up the Story?

“When your back is against the wall, there is only one thing to do, and that is turn around and fight.”

## John Major

You have to know where to start because that is what anchors your listener’s reference point and expectations. That means establishing some groundwork without being boring. What do you immediately have to get across? This has to be done quickly and evocatively. We authors love to plop our readers down in the middle of the action and then tell how they got there. We follow the screenwriter’s rule: Arrive late and leave

“Arrive late, leave early.”

## Screenwriter’s mantra

early. That means to start in the middle of the conflict. In your stories you want to do the same thing if you can.

*Five years ago, I was fidgeting in a chair in front of my client’s desk. I needed to win this deal to keep my job. That’s when I realized that I could get fired for what I’d just done. As soon as I left, my client was going to call my boss.*

Then you can tell how you got there.

What about the painful flaws that the listener identifies with and feels? Those create suspense too. How will you think your way out of your own problems? Here’s how Sally Hogshead started her book, *HOW THE WORLD SEES YOU*.

*I stood alone on stage, paralyzed. Seconds ticked by, each more excruciating than the last. The spotlight that had seemed so luminous a moment before, now burned me with its bitter circle. I’d let everyone down.*

*It was in this moment that I learned how to be boring.*

This opening is full of the insecurity we sympathize with, as well as a great twist at the end. Do you want to hear her back story? Absolutely.

You can even start at a low point that your listeners will identify with. Note how efficiently Mike Kappel of Patriot Software does it through setting.

(We worked) “...in the basement of a factory with no heat, no air-conditioning, and floors that would flood. Instead of customers we had rats, birds, snakes, and flies. We ran out of money, maxed our credit cards, and borrowed from relatives.”



Do we understand that times were tough and desperate? Do these details convince us more than words like “living close to failure,” “close to death,” or “we couldn’t afford expensive offices.” Those are overused, abstract descriptions. The listener needs to be grounded in the concrete world you’re talking about in order to feel the predicament.

No one has time to dither so you’d better grab that person’s attention fast. That first sentence has to awaken them. Authors are always looking for a first sentence that will stick to a reader. I still re-

member Mona Simpson’s first line of a story called “Lawns” that I read forty years ago. (Simpson was Steve Jobs’ biological sister who was adopted by another family.) “The story begins with: “I steal.” I never had the courage to use that one. “Hi, I’m a banker and I steal.” Wouldn’t that have caught someone’s attention? I’m a writer and I could have figured out a way to explain it. But, alas, I didn’t.

What about your story will immediately grab the heart of a listener?



# What Should I Know About the Hero's Journey?

“The cave you fear to enter holds the treasure you seek.”

**Joseph Campbell**

“It’s not the size of the dog in the fight, it’s the size of the fight in the dog.”

**Mark Twain**

“Sometimes, Tom, we have to do a thing to find out the reason for it. Sometimes our actions are questions, not answers.”

*Magnus Pym’s father in John le Carré’s A PERFECT SPY.*

In fact, you grew up with the hero’s journey. This is an ancient form of storytelling that Carl Jung looked at and Joseph Campbell codified. The pattern is present in most ancient myths across all cultures. Some people think the form is hard-wired into our brains.

There are 12 stages to the hero’s journey, but I think they can be collapsed into 6 items. Some people even collapse them into three.

- ✓ The starting point is the ordinary world, where we meet your hero and all is well. But the hero always has flaws. Everyone knows the hero needs to change but won’t.
- ✓ The first disruption to the hero’s world is the call to adventure. This can also be a disaster that forces him or her to consider something new. It is a catalyst that disrupts the existing world. But the hero doesn’t immediately accept the challenge. There is debate and doubt. Often a mentor helps the hero gain confidence and learn what he or she needs to know to embark on the journey.
- ✓ The hero crosses the threshold from the ordinary world into a new one. This is commitment. Some people call it seizing the sword.
- ✓ Your change-maker confronts tests, successes and defeats, allies and enemies and side-kicks. These educate and prepare the hero to confront their greatest fear and most difficult challenge.
- ✓ The hero returns to the world they came from for a final test that is a threat to their community. They succeed only because of the new knowledge they have gained.
- ✓ There is a final reward.

Steve Jobs is a good example of an entrepreneur whose life could be told through this structure.

- ✓ His ordinary world was being an adopted but renegade son in a supportive family.
- ✓ Jobs's call to adventure was his yearning for his own creative space. He dropped out of college and slept on the floors of his friends' dorms. He recycled Coke bottles for money, and received weekly free meals from the local Hare Krishna Temple. Jobs even studied calligraphy. Still not finding what he was looking for, he traveled to India to find enlightenment and discovered Zen Buddhism. He was the only one who didn't see these as false trails. These were lessons he needed in order to face what he eventually had to do.
- ✓ Jobs crossed the threshold by starting his own computer company with Steve Wozniak. His "Yoda" mentor was Bill Campbell, former chairman of Intuit.
- ✓ There were many successes and defeats. Successes were Apple II, the mouse, the Macintosh, and Pixar. Failures were the Lisa, being expelled from Apple, and the NeXT computer.
- ✓ In 1997 Jobs returned to the world he came from. What he'd learned enabled him to lead Apple from near bankruptcy. The new company philosophy was "Think different." I believe that encapsulated what he'd learned in his long apprenticeship in the world.
- ✓ Jobs got his reward with the successes of the Apple Store, the iPad, the iPhone, and iTunes.

Steve Jobs also died a kind of hero's death. His last enemy was cancer. He held to his convictions and refused standard treatment to fight an implacable enemy.



# How Do the Villains Fit Into the Plot?

“Great poetry is always written by somebody straining to go beyond what he can do.”

*Stephen Spender*

Of course, every story needs a villain. You certainly have many to choose from. There is the big bully that dominates the market, or competitors who steal ideas, or the donors who insist that their money be spent their way. But what about internal villains? Like a toxic culture, or an ineffective leader, or uninterested staff, or the wrong goals. Any of these is the villain that you had to fight against. How the tension between the protagonist and the antagonist plays out is the plot.

Yes, the plot can be a description of all the bad things that happened because of these villains. But here’s another approach. What did those villains teach you? When you tell a story about all the things that bad actors did to you, the listener automatically assumes that you are covering up your own weaknesses. But who can resist when a person draws strengths from his or her enemies?

Simon Sinek tells a story of talking with Microsoft and Apple. Microsoft was hyper focused on making a better device than the iPod. They wanted to beat Apple. Apple, on the other hand didn’t care if Microsoft made a better device. They were focused on what their clients wanted and how they could help them in the future. Apple understood that sometimes you do better than a competitor, and sometimes the competitor does better than you. They studied and learned from their villains. They saw their weaknesses and how they could succeed where their competitors couldn’t. Combining that knowledge with what their clients wanted determined what they did next. A couple years

“It takes a great enemy to make a great airplane.”

**Air Force saying**

later Apple released the iPhone. It wasn’t nearly as durable as the Nokia, but they weren’t competing with Nokia. The iPhone had all kinds of features that other phones didn’t have. Apple established a smaller market, but one they had all to themselves. The idea here was to be good at what your competitor was bad at. Alex Smith in his TED talk called this refusing to compete. So who was the villain for IBM? Was it Apple, or was it the wrong way of thinking about what their goal was?

In 2019 A Reason to Survive (ARTS) inhabited a 20,000 s.f. building in San Diego. They taught students to use creativity to transform themselves into community builders. What was their villain? Covid 19. When the pandemic hit, they couldn’t use their building or have public gatherings. What did they do? They listened to the families they helped. ARTS transformed itself to a virtual learning community. Covid taught them to invent “Arts at Home” virtual classes and send arts-care packages to students who were stuck at home. Like a hero in a story, the enemy propelled them to learn something that made them stronger. ARTS now reaches more people and has built a bigger budget.



# Creating Suspense

“What we want is a story that starts with an earthquake and builds to a climax.”

*Samuel Goldwyn*

A good start is essential. But it is the sag in the middle where most authors fall down. Speakers too. For instance, you might describe how your whole organization was about to run out of money, your employee morale was terrible, and you were losing clients. I'm there. I'm with you. Then you talk about all the business stories you researched. You tell what you had to eat at employee lunches. You describe the weather... Yawn.

Suspense is created with a question the listener wants answered, or a doubt created in his or her mind. This is often done with a simple structure: goal, conflict, disaster. Yes, you solved one problem. But then another problem bursts out. These are the things that neither you nor your listener expected. They carry the same punch as a joke and are often funny. Goal-conflict-disaster repeats until a moment of inspiration. The hero learns something that he or she can use to save themselves and the community.

You maintain the tension with transitional phrases and foreshadowing like:

*We thought we were in the clear, but boy were we wrong.*

Or,

*But that wasn't our worst problem.*

Or,

*It was as bad as going to the dentist. Actually it was worse.*

Or,

*But this time, something was different.*

Or maybe something that appeals to the rebellious side of the listener:

*I couldn't help myself. I just had to stir the pot.*



You can also use teasers.

*Today I'm going to tell you about one of the most remarkable people I've ever met.*

How about a mystery? The crime is the problem in the organization. You and the listener are the detectives. How do we find the clues for what happened, and what do those clues mean? What are the red herrings? You and the listener solve the puzzle together.

Maybe you reveal something personal to create suspense. Was your marriage in jeopardy or your health at stake because of what was going on in your organization? It takes courage to talk about that, but it can reach your listener more deeply than anything else.

Look at how productivity coach, Pierrette Abeel, created suspense:

“I’m embarrassed to say there was a 10-year period when I didn’t take a vacation. 10 years!

“Then one day things got worse.

“A friend called but I let voicemail pick up and kept working. Her message was simply, “Call me.” I planned to get around to it. A couple days later she called back. I hesitated but answered this time. She called to tell me her husband died.”

She uses an evocative first line to imply she was a workaholic, a personal flaw we all deal with. The suspense is what solution she found and will tell you about. Then a transitional phrase creates more tension. Then one day things got worse. You know a twist is coming. You’re waiting for it. And boy does it deliver. Every line creates suspense.

Here’s a story that could use all these elements. The New England Shelter for Homeless Veterans (NESHV) faced a crisis. Financial problems had caused the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to suspend state funding and the Board of Directors asked the CEO to resign. The Board then asked Chris Dame to step in and take charge. He and the organization had to re-organize, re-examine the mission, improve staffing and morale, and cancel programs while continuing to help the homeless. They succeeded and today they are finally sound and providing more services than before.

This story is filled with the potential suspense le-

vers that I just described. Goal, Conflict, Disaster, more goals. Personal sacrifice, potentially toxic relationships, emotional arguments, physical effects on employees, description of how the facilities reflected the crisis in the organization. There are great story elements here to keep listeners glued to every word. Think about how you could make this story more evocative by milking these elements.

Or how about Netflix? They used to sell and rent physical DVD movies, but everyone knew that streaming was coming. Rather than cutting back on what they did, Netflix entered new markets. The first change was to rent movies by mail. Then they started streaming. The final step so far was content. Can you imagine the arguments they had over leaving their bread-and-butter operation and investing in businesses they knew nothing about? There must have been more than token resistance from staff and management. Today they are a company worth more than \$200 billion. Who couldn’t create suspense around how they rose from near-death to be super-hero in a new market? But here’s another wrinkle. What are the challenges that threaten them now? They are competition, client retention, and cost and revenue diversification. Telling that part of the story creates ongoing suspense. You’ve gotten the listener to think about what the next story is. They might consider it as they drive home.



# What About Sidekicks?

“One finger cannot lift a pebble.”

*Stephen Spender*



Most people want to establish ownership over ideas. They have to brag just a little. But we all have friends who have helped us. In most stories or movies, that friend is the hero's sidekick. Sidekicks often come up with the wrong ideas. But they usually have one key insight. When they do, it really grabs the listener.

Maybe you're the sidekick and the inspiration came from you. One of your ideas transformed a client's thinking. Or someone grabbed on to your idea and changed their life. Sometimes sidekicks don't even know it. Here's a story my barber told me.

He had an older man with early dementia who came in for haircuts. One day a woman showed up at his shop while the older man was there. She wanted her head shaved because she was about to start cancer treatments. The woman was crying and my barber wanted to comfort her. His older client told

her that she could find a way to keep going. He was a survivor of the Korean War and had to dig deep to keep going after what he'd experienced. Later, the same woman returned to the shop and told my barber how inspirational the older man had been. A few days later the man came in for a haircut and my barber told him what a difference he'd made in this woman's life. The older man said, "What woman?"

Or maybe the sidekick isn't you. Maybe at your organization you learned something from someone lower on the hierarchy. That person has purple hair and piercings but also unparalleled insight into accounting. If you give that person credit, their understanding extends to the storyteller. It's a shared victory. Tell how that person saved the day.

How about Bill Gates and Steve Ballmer? Ballmer recognized Gates' vision and dropped out of Stanford Business School to be part of it. Initially he

even worked for a low salary. So why did Gates need him? Gates couldn't delegate and negotiate. Balmer taught him to hire very good people and create teams. He worked out a crucial agreement with IBM. Gates recognized his sidekick and made Balmer CEO. Balmer guided the company through the dot-com bubble and the anti-trust legal battle. He also helped launch the X-box, acquire Skype, and build the enterprise business segment. Then he exited the business and Gates changed his own role. He became a sidekick to the new chairman, John Thompson, and to the CEO, Satya Nadella. Nadella has since become chairman and undoubtedly has his own sidekicks who will elevate themselves in the business. Sidekick to leader is a great story.

Amplified Impact Partners is an international organization that helps other nonprofits. I'm part of the San Diego chapter of more than 70 volunteers who have deep business and nonprofit experience. We're the sidekicks who listen, suggest ideas, and stay in the background. We help nonprofit leaders build organizational strength and to plan where they want to go and how they will get there. Some of the nonprofit employees we advise become successful sidekicks and then leaders.

Here's another story about Flamin' Hot Cheetos?

In the mid-1980's, Frito-Lay was going through a difficult time, so CEO Roger Enrico announced a new initiative for all 300,000 employees: Act like an owner. Richard Montañez had dropped out of school in 4th grade after struggling with his English. At the time of CEO Enrico's announcement, Montañez was a company janitor and saw the directive as an opportunity. Montañez was picking up snacks at his local store when he noticed that there was no product catering to Hispanics. He grabbed some Cheetos, took them home, and covered them in a home-made spice mix. Then Montañez called up CEO Enrico's office and Enrico agreed to let him talk to the board. Enrico really walked his talk. Montañez packed up his invention and brought it with him. At the board meeting, CEO Enrico said to Montañez, "Put your mop down."

Flamin' Hot Cheetos is now one of Frito-Lay's most successful launches ever. And who is the hero? Not the CEO. He made sure it was Richard Montañez. Montañez later became a VP of MultiCultural Sales and Community Promotions at PepsiCo. He amassed a personal fortune of over \$20M! All because a CEO let a sidekick be the hero of a story.



# If You Only Have One Sentence...

“There is no one alive who is Youer than You.”

*Dr. Seusse*

We all have elevator pitches. But what is the single sentence that captures what you do, and how you are different? I’ve found this particularly hard for nonprofits. But if you can come up with that crystalized message, it immediately locks you into who you are talking with. Here are a few corporation messages:

- ✓ **Nike** says, “Just do it.”
- ✓ **Disneyland** says they are the happiest place on earth.
- ✓ **Old Spice** says their formula is original and “if your grandfather didn’t wear it you wouldn’t exist.”
- ✓ **Dove** says, “You are more beautiful than you think.”

There are also some great and meaningful slogans from nonprofits.

**United Negro College Fund.** “A mind is a terrible thing to waste.”

**Earthjustice:** “Because the earth needs a good lawyer.”

**FEED Projects:** “Feed the world you want to live in.”

**Bellevue Hospital Pulmonary Rehabilitation:** “Improving life, one breath at a time.”

**Homeboy Industries:** “Nothing stops a bullet like a job.”

**EndAge:** “The art of active aging.”

**#BuckleUpAmerica:** “You could learn a lot from a dummy, buckle up.”

How about messages from organizational leaders? Here are some famous lines that define a few well-known CEOs.

**Marissa Mayer, CEO of Yahoo:** “I always did some-

thing that I was a little not ready to do.

**Sam Walton, CEO of Walmart:** “High expectations are the key to absolutely everything.”

**Kevin Plank, CEO of Armour:** “There’s an entrepreneur right now, scared to death, making excuses, saying, ‘It’s not the right time just yet.’ There’s no such thing as a good time.”

**Warren Buffett, CEO of Berkshire Hathaway:** “Rule No. 1: Never lose money; Rule No. 2: Don’t forget Rule No. 1.”

**Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon:** “In business, what’s dangerous is not to evolve.”

**Larry Ellison, CEO of Oracle:** “When you innovate, you must prepare yourself for everybody to tell you that you’re nuts.”

If you defined yourself or you company with one line, what would it be? Here’s how I defined my first book. “A banker for the very wealthy has his life torn apart when he’s accused of being a serial killer...like his father.” The kicker was at the end.





# The Aha! Moment

**Andre Geim, Nobel Prize winner**, says that breakthroughs often occur when you wander off the road you started down, then pretend the side road is where you started.

**Milton Glaser, famous graphic designer**, got his idea for the “I ♥ New York” when he was sketching in a taxi.”

**Leonard Cohen:** “There is a crack, a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”

In every hero story, the hero awakens to some new insight that helps him or her grasp a previously unattainable victory. This is a life-changing lesson. It is what many think the original purpose of stories was. They teach the listener something important.

If you or your organization is the hero, every client wants to know what the turning point was, as well as the lesson you learned that saved you. Of course, it’s complicated and involves many factors. But you need to boil it down to a concept that will stick with the listener. Like, “We learned how to proactively disagree.” “What we learned is that there is something just as important as putting in the work. That is continually being open to new ideas.” Or, “The three things we’ve learned that kids need are...” The person you’re talking to hopes that the same principle works for them.

Here are a few examples from people that Start-upSavant described. They show how Aha ideas enabled them to build their businesses and nonprofits.

**Business Enterprise Institute. John Brown.** “When they (his parents) retired they sold the business to their key employee for a promissory note. Within a year the note was mostly unpaid and the store was shuttered, their total return for 25 years of unending toil. I went to law school. As an attorney, I saw the same pattern of owners working to the point of burnout. I wanted to help these owners so they didn’t end up like my parents.”

**Headbands for Hope. Jess Ekstrom.** “During the summer of 2011 when I was in col-

lege, I interned at a wish-granting organization for kids with life-threatening illnesses. I saw so many girls migrating towards headbands instead of wigs after hair-loss. Headbands gave them the opportunity to regain their confidence without hiding what they’re going through with a wig. I founded HeadbandsOfHope.com during my junior year of college. For every headband sold, one is given to a child with cancer.”

**Fensens. Andy Karuza.** “My partner Henry had the real worry about backing over his kid. I noticed that practically everybody struggled when trying to parallel park on a busy street. That’s what made us look further into why people didn’t have this great technology that’s a big selling point for many new vehicles today. Henry came to me with an idea to do a Bluetooth enabled parking sensor.”

**Let’s Vibe. Diamond Greer.** “Our ‘Aha’ moments came in waves, like most things do as an entrepreneur. The first ‘Aha’ moment occurred when we were able to bring 40 women together to simply test our idea and gained a space and drink sponsor in just under 2 weeks (yes, we knocked it out in 2 weeks). Our second ‘Aha’ moment occurred when we went from our original 40 to 218 women, 4 partnerships, and 1 client in just 7 months by word-of-mouth. We had a demand for designing experiences that were human-centered and inclusive.”

**Envoy America. Andy Beran.** As my parents aged, we struggled to find reliable and safe transportation options. They needed help getting around – and the typical solutions – like Taxi’s, or public transportation just didn’t work. They needed someone to do the driving, but also to help with shopping, carry heavy bags, wait for them at the doctor’s office, and more. We designed Envoy America to be the solution that my parents, and millions of other Seniors and their families, were looking for.

# The Satisfying Ending

*And then we gave up.*

No one wants something to end with something depressing or lackluster like this. Unless you're talking about a competitor. Then I'm reminded of what Napoleon said: "Never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake."

Most listeners want all that suffering you've told them about to bring something positive. Something that gives them hope and inspiration for their own organizations or for their lives. In business it could be improved employee morale, industry prizes, record sales and/or profits, or expansion. In a nonprofit it could be lives saved or an impact on the environment.

But here's something you don't find in most fairytales—what a company has to avoid in the future. After great success, what are all employees in your nonprofit on their guard for? What is the next challenge? It follows a suspense rule: Goal, conflict, disaster, repeat. This will give a hint of what your next story might be. Everyone wants to be invited back by a listener. It also is the kind of vulnerability and realism that give you credibility.

Here's a story that could have ended in disaster. Evan Williams was one of the initial investors in the Odeo podcasting platform. It was all so promising until the elephant, Apple iTunes, entered the market. So the story of Odeo ends there? Years of work stomped on? Bankruptcy, depression, broken families? Except that's not what happened. Williams turned his attention to a side project he and his partner had been working on. They called it Twitter.

Or how's this for a satisfying ending? My imaginary company had to change and the one who resisted most was Bill Smith. He disagreed and grouched about everything. Smith only reluctantly implemented new tactics. A year later he brought his daughter to work to show her his office and to meet the team.

We don't have to be told that the reason he brought her to work was that he was so proud of what they'd done. The action in the scene is more powerful than an explanation.



# The Nitty Gritty Inside a Story Description

“The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter. ’tis the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.”

**Mark Twain**

Every good story has description that puts a reader in the scene. When you listen to a story, the details help you imagine yourself there, so that you feel it like a movie. Thus the time-worn lesson that writers live by: Show, don’t tell. Show what happens and don’t summarize it.

But a business environment, isn’t a movie, right? I think it is. For instance you can say that your business was in a desperate place and your numbers were down each month. Or you can capture both the emotion and the story with a detail:

*At five o’clock the floor was as empty and echoey as a closed-up warehouse. Not a single phone rang.*

To illustrate success you could say that the company was winning awards. Or you could say:

*At five-thirty the pizza arrived and we laughed together for a half hour before getting back to work.*

These are just details I made up. They are all around you and can illustrate much better than abstraction what the story is of your organization. But you have to choose the right details, details that carry an underlying emotion or mystery. It’s not important that your office has dark maroon carpet unless it means something to you, or to the incident you are describing. Maybe the carpet is dark maroon so blood doesn’t show. (Sorry, I’m a crime writer.) Or the carpet is dark grey because the boss is color blind and he doesn’t like others to perceive what he can’t.

Details, but not too many. Have you ever read a book with two paragraphs describing all the mundane decorations in a room, or all the colors and shapes of the hillside and the sunset? Pick the best ones that fit with the way your story feels.

And what makes the details stand out even more? The senses. The sense that tends to be overused is sight. But what about touch, sound, taste, and smell? Some think smell is the most evocative sense. And it has hundreds of variations. Here are a few examples of sensual descriptions.

*Something smelled rotten in the refrigerator.*

*The building was always cold.*

*For the first time, my boss squeezed me into a hug.*

*Those nights the coffee was always hot and strong.*

*At night in our office the only sound is the buzz of the fluorescent lights.*

*At around seven o’clock the cleaning staff arrived. I couldn’t speak Spanish but the rancheras from their boom boxes sang to me.*

Here’s how Twyla Tharp describes her studio in her book, *The Creative Habit*.

*I walk into a large white room... The room is lined with eight-foot-high mirrors. There’s a boom box in the corner. The floor is clean, virtually spotless if you don’t count the thousands of skid marks and footprints left there by dancers rehearsing.*

Those last skid marks make it memorable. They justify the whole prior description because they imply the tireless work done there.

Then there are the verbs. The least emotional are versions of “to be” and “to do.” You could say, “I was sitting,” or you could pump up the tension with a stronger verb. “I struggled to stay in my seat.”

# The Nitty Gritty Inside a Story Voice

“Be yourself. Everyone else is taken.”

Oscar Wilde

Voice is something writers pay a huge amount of attention to and yet have a problem defining. The way I summarize it is that the voice of a storyteller is their unique way of saying things and of looking at the world. It's authentic because it's from the speaker's heart.

Are you funny? Are you a numbers person? Do you have a view on your industry? Is there a turn of phrase you favor? Make sure you include your particular way of talking to others when you tell a story. Most people, when they are wrapped up in the narrative, do that anyway. It's also when they're not reading phrases from the slides of a Powerpoint presentation. So when do you lose your voice in the story? Maybe when you're trying to remember all the pitch points that you have to get in.

The classic example is Huckleberry Finn. Literary folks think that Mark Twain may have invented the American voice with this character.

Can you guess who said this?

*“Only when the tide goes out do you discover who's been swimming naked.”*

Warren Buffett, of course. His style of speaking is instantly recognizable. He's folksy, humorous and self-deprecating. Yet he's incredibly knowledgeable about the big picture.

No matter what your voice, your tone has to eventually be uplifting. It's very hard to sell anyone anything by being consistently negative or cynical. In stories, if nothing good happens to the characters you usually end up with a disappointed audience. Even tragedies have moments of great happiness before the disaster. It's the love between Romeo and Juliet that makes their deaths so sad. Your voice can start with a negative tone, but a listener



wants to eventually feel a positive outlook, something that will lead to a good outcome in his or her future. How did your organization take the castle at the end of the fairytale?

Be careful about humor. I can't tell you how many times I've written things that I thought were hilarious but weren't funny. Or when I was unintentionally funny. Even comedians rehearse their material in different clubs to see what works. No one likes humor that is condescending or mocking. The humor with the least risk is situational, where you didn't foresee what happened. Self-deprecating humor can also work. It all depends on your audience. Some people don't want to hear anything funny. So pick the spots where you can take the risk and see how that funny story lands.

Here's something from Peyton Manning: “You hear about how many fourth-quarter comebacks that a guy has, and I think it means a guy screwed up in the first three quarters.”

# Know Your Audience

“Speech belongs half to the speaker, half to the listener.”

**Michel de Montaigne, philosopher**

“A professor is someone who talks in someone else’s sleep.”

**W.H. Auden**

“People are very secretive—secret even from themselves.”

**Jean le Carré**

Who is your audience? If an author’s readers are mystery fans, they aren’t usually looking to learn about an imagined future world that the author has constructed piece by piece. Someone reading a romance doesn’t want beheadings. An audience of the deaf doesn’t want to experience your perfect bird calls.

Yes, you’re the narrator, but you should be aware of what your listener’s point of view is. After all, they are the ones who have to feel themselves inside your story. So who is your audience? Are they people who need logical structure and supporting numbers, people who need new ideas, or people who love to have their hearts touched? Do they find self-trumpeting distasteful, or do they expect it? Many funders of nonprofits want a story about how your organization has changed someone’s life. If the donors don’t emotionally connect they won’t be passionate about supporting the organization.

A fundamental part of your listener’s point of view is how they will personally benefit from what you’re telling them. Is their job on the line? Are they looking for an opportunity to be a hero in their own organization? Is this person a team player or a renegade? Whatever that point of view is, it should be incorporated in some way into the story you tell. This is both what reaches them, and what they may not even know they expect.

Most organizations buying a product have someone who distrusts conclusions without proof. Usu-

ally the numbers guys. The story must also reach them. But numbers can also be part of the story.

*Our morale was at a level below the basement. The employee satisfaction score was 33, the lowest number ever.*

Or,

*We help children build confidence in themselves so they can dream about their futures and transform their communities. You can see what a difference it made for Juan. But he’s not the only one. X% of our graduates have gone onto college and we still communicate with Y% about community work. Z graduates continue to contribute to our program and communicate with our organization.*

Here’s some good news for all you engineering types. Most of the time you have to put in numbers. This helps your listener communicate your story to others. But the statistics have to support the emotion in the story.

What this boils down to is that every story is different in how you tell it, depending on your audience. Some of the structure of your story changes. What you emphasize also changes. You may use less or more numbers. You may emphasize one person or a team. And maybe the story you had in mind isn’t the right one for this group and you tell a different one that better aligns with their values.



# How a Story Leads to an Ask at the Meeting

Your story may touch the listener's heart, but it has to do more than that. It can also make them money and promote something they hold dear. They are not giving to a charity but making an investment in what you are offering.



# An Ask to a NonProfit Donor through A Hero's Journey

This iconic structure has reached people since man began telling stories. Someone has suffered and learned principles that taught them to rise above him or herself. They've achieved something that once seemed impossible. This story needs to be authentic, emotional, an example of courage, and include a takeaway. You want the listener to feel as if he or she is with the hero in your story. The takeaway is the lesson that saved the kingdom. If your listener is feeling your story they will emotionally take in that lesson and feel what the hero accomplished. They will imagine themselves as a hero in their own story. You then connect that lesson to what you are offering.

Here's a story that leads to a higher goal for a nonprofit.

Mykale Baker was an honors student. His family struggled, so he also helped out by working at Burger King. Mykale had the night off for his high school graduation. Afterward he popped by the Burger King where he worked and saw that it was completely backed up. He jumped behind the counter to help. Maria Mendoza had just seen her own daughter's graduation and was ordering a snack there. She saw him in his gown and wearing graduation medals and was impressed with, not only his willingness to help out, but how joyful and courteous he was. She wanted to honor him and clocked the moment with a video that went viral. She also started a GoFundMe campaign that raised more than \$180K in scholarship money for Mykale's college education. Even Burger King jumped in to contribute.

So what is the takeaway? We each have our own version of it. But to me it is: If you show how good a person is, people will want to help them. And if you enable many people to see that goodness, you can change a person's life.

This story has a hero's journey and also involves a sidekick. But how do you translate it to an ask for action from the listener? First of all, the listener identifies with both Mykale and Maria. Then you transform that listener into a facilitator. You and they can partner to help a lot more people.

This might go according to the following:

"Think what Mykale can do no with that scholarship money. He can change himself, help his family, and give back to his community. Our organization recognizes that every teenager can be a hero like him. They just need the right opportunities. That's why we're looking for people like you who understand and value this work. We want you to help us offer those opportunities to more kids over the next five years. Our aim is to invest in the infrastructure to do just that in the next five years. Let's show how good kids are. Would you consider partnering with us to set up a platform for doing that?"

I'm suggesting that you attract the donor's ideals before you start specifying money. They will ask how much and then you can do that.

Here are some elements you should consider in telling your story and linking it to asking something from the listener.



# An Ask to a Commercial Investor Using A Hero's Journey

We all know that to get an investment or a sale, the ask must relate to what all companies have to do—make money. But just think how much more powerful it is if the ask also nurtures a value in the investor.

Here's true story to show the point. Some MBA students at Wharton couldn't afford replacement eyeglasses. They realized that this was a problem throughout the eyewear industry. So they came up with a solution: prescription glasses sold online directly to consumers at a fraction of the cost. But here's the idea that transported them to the values the buyer would have beyond getting cheaper glasses. For every pair sold they'd donate a pair to someone in need. They were heroes because they bravely tackled a seemingly impossible problem, they had to compete against very strong foes, made great profits, and their solution helped the world. Already the listener is on their side.

What might their pitch be to investors? Certainly the normal return on investment metrics. But also this”

“By investing with us you can make a substantial return. But you will also help redefine access to vision. Millions of people will be able to afford glasses and see clearly for the first time in their lives.”

Who wouldn't want to partner with these heroes? When the students presented their pitch to investors, they raised more than \$120M.

What are the elements of this story and ask that will appeal to the listeners?

- ✓ A struggle against strong entrenched producers.
- ✓ A call to action on two levels. First, make glasses that are stylish and affordable that the consumer can buy directly. Second, meet a worldwide need for spectacles.
- ✓ A mission inside the ask. Partner with them to make it possible for millions of people to see clearly and change their lives.



# An Ask to an Investor Using the Before-After-Structure

This type of story ask paints a picture of what life was like before and after your organization started working. It also inspires the listener to think of the next level that could be accomplished. All they have to do is partner with you to amplify the idea your organization stands for.

TOMS Shoes has a story like that. Blake Mycoskie was a traveler and entrepreneur. He noticed that many children in developing countries had to go without socks and shoes. This led to cuts and infections and made it difficult for them to attend school. Blake wanted to help solve that problem. He started TOMS Shoes with a simple concept: For every pair of shoes sold, a new pair would be given to a child in need. His model was driven both by profitability and human value.

What would the pitch be to investors? Besides the metrics, the pitch could tell a story like this: “In 2006, Blake Mycoskie met a child in Argentina who couldn’t go to school because he didn’t have shoes. That moment changed him — and it sparked a company built on one idea: For every pair of shoes they sell, they give one to a child in

need. Footwear is a \$300+ billion global market. But customers — especially Millennials and Gen Z — increasingly demand more than product. They want brands with purpose. Doesn’t part of you as an investor feel the same way? You want your funds to provide more than a good ROI? How about if your investment helped end poverty?”

How well did their pitch perform? Over 100 million shoes have been donated worldwide. The shoe side of the company was so successful that TOMS expanded its mission to include clean water, safe birth services, and bullying prevention programs. And it inspired other companies to be both numbers and purpose driven in their business

What are the elements of this story and ask that make it work?

- ✓ A clear and human problem—children without shoes in underdeveloped countries. Who can’t sympathize with that?
- ✓ Customers are oriented to more than product. They can buy shoes and help kids to have healthier lives.
- ✓ A relatable and admirable protagonist. Blake’s inspiration is personal. He sees a moral problem and acts to solve it.
- ✓ A worthy goal for the investor. They can get a good return on their capital and help the world by getting shoes to kids.



# An Ask to a Donor Using the Before-After-Structure

How about an example for nonprofit that used the Before-After structure?

In 2015, two college students were bothered by homeless men and women sleeping in doorways. They pitied people having to carry their belongings in trash bags. No one seemed to notice or care, so they took it on themselves to help. The first step was to talk to people who slept in doorways. One man said a good day would be getting a backpack with some supplies inside. That single need inspired a purpose.

Today, The Backpack Project has provided over 10,000 backpacks filled with hygiene items to unhoused people across Georgia. Volunteers — many still college students — hand-deliver the packs and are given the opportunity to better understand the homeless. So how could this story segue into an ask from potential donors?

“When we first started The Backpack Project, we were two college students who kept passing the same people on the street. They were cold, tired, and carrying their lives in plastic bags. We realized we didn’t have to solve homelessness to improve these people’s lives. Just something small. So we packed 20 backpacks with food, hygiene items, socks, and water and handed them out ourselves. We didn’t expect much. But the impact was instant. People smiled. They talked. They felt seen.

“That was 2015. Today, The Backpack Project has distributed over 10,000 backpacks across Georgia — each one handed out personally, with respect and connection. Every backpack costs just \$30. That’s it. \$30 to offer comfort, restore dignity, and say, ‘You matter.’ Just think what we could do if we could deliver twenty thousand backpacks. It would improve the lives of so

many people who have to live on the streets. Will you become part of our team and help us do that?

Why does this pitch work?

- ✓ It has a personal element to it.
- ✓ It has some details and uses the senses.
- ✓ There is a takeaway idea that transformed the giver and is scalable: Even a small thing can transform into something big.
- ✓ It shows emotions in the people it helped.
- ✓ It uses metrics that illustrate the benefits of a larger scale.
- ✓ It invites the donor to join the team and be part of the solution.



# An Ask to an Adventure Using an Impact Story

This structure starts out a little differently. You show the end before the beginning. You illustrate the impact your organization has and then you flash back to the beginning to show how your organization got there.

Have you ever heard of Grameen Bank? They are a bank with more than \$1.3B of loans, 23K employees, and 2500 branches. How did they get to this size when the average size of a loan is \$3.7K? It is a story of one man who had a brilliant idea and great determination to help the poor.

In the 1970s an economics teacher named Muhammad Yunus met a woman who was very skilled at making bamboo stools. The only thing that held her back was capital—the capital to buy materials. Traditional banks wouldn't lend to her because she had no collateral. The economist learned that this was a problem for many of the villagers, so he did an experiment. He lent her and others a total of \$27 of his own money and waited to see if he would get his money back. He was repaid in full. These people were much better risks than his traditional economics background theorized. He built Grameen Bank based on small loans to poor people and was awarded the Nobel Prize.

What could a pitch to investors to Grameen Bank using the Impact Story model look like?

“Banks traditionally lend to people with money. Ours lends primarily to poor women. We have 9 million borrowers, a 97% repayment rate, and make a good profit. We got here because of one man's brilliant idea and his determination to help the poor.

“In 1976, while teaching economics in Bangladesh, Muhammad Yunus met a woman who made bamboo stools but earned almost nothing because she borrowed money from a loan shark to buy supplies. Her skill wasn't the problem — the system was. So he changed it by founding Grameen Bank. Our collateral is trust rather than an asset. We lend very small amounts— often less than \$100 — to women with no credit history, no property, and no access to traditional banks. Our borrowers form small groups

that self-govern and repay together. You might think that these people would be poor credit risks. But our repayment rate is 97%. Poor women are among the most reliable borrowers in the world. We are seeking capital to reach more of the world with three initiatives. (Describe them with a single phrase for each.)

“If you invest with us, it won't be charity. We use a proven financial model that generates measurable impact and stable returns. You're not just fueling banking — you're fueling economic independence, education, health, and generational mobility. Let's redefine what banking can do.

Why does this work?

- ✓ The organization was founded by a person the investor admires.
- ✓ There are good financial and social ROIs.
- ✓ The story is backed by data.
- ✓ The improvement is scalable.

How Do You Know if Your Story and Ask Work?

One way is to ask a question. “Does this apply in your business?” “How about the kids your nonprofit helps?” If the answer is “yes,” you can begin to spitball how. But “no” is not a wrong answer because it can lead to deeper discussion. Why wouldn't it work? Do I understand that your most important challenge now is x? Which leads to more questions. It could also lead to another story.

All these stories show a journey of people and organizations to a higher level. They take the listeners on the ride so they see themselves as part of the story. The ask then transports them to a bigger dream. In essence, here we are today, this is where we'll be tomorrow, and this is us in the future. And you are part of it .

# Mistakes

“If at first you don’t succeed... skydiving is not for you.”

**J. Daniel Roberts**

We all make them. Any story has revisions. I wrote a short story eighteen times. It was still rejected for publication. So what are the pitfalls you must avoid?

**Inauthenticity.** It shouldn’t sound like a laundry list of successes. Or like someone else talking. This is your opinion about something that is meaningful to you. It is from the heart.

**Making it about you rather than about your listener.** Always tie it back to them. Make it align with their journey.

“Learn from the mistakes of others. You can’t live long enough to make them all yourself.”

**Eleanor Roosevelt**

**No point to the story.** Yes, it’s entertaining, but how does it relate to the person whose time you’re sucking up? Leave your audience with something learned.

**Making it too complicated, or not easily understood.** Your audience shouldn’t need a science degree to understand it. Nor should they have to know every principle your organization stands for—just the principle that relates to the story. At one point in writing *Saving Myles*, I was using a lot of teenage slang. Carolyn Wheat, my writing coach, said, “Your readers shouldn’t need a dictionary to understand what you’re saying.”

**Making it too long.** Shorter is almost always better. One quotation credited to Mark Twain was actually said by someone else first. “I would have made it (his book) shorter, but I ran out of time.”

**Not uniting a major idea with an emotion.** You can’t just say that teamwork is important. You must unite it with a story about how your organization learned how teamwork solved a difficult problem.

**Giving up on a story when it doesn’t work.** All right, you told it at a networking event and the other person looked bored or didn’t laugh. Maybe you told it wrong. Maybe that person was mulling an emergency at work or at home. Maybe they didn’t have the capacity to appreciate genius! Change it a little and try again. When the eyes of two people light up, you have something.

**Not practicing.** You have to keep trying out your stories on people. It’s a performance. And if a story doesn’t work on two to three people, put that story back in the locker.



# Someone Who Did It Right

'I am' is reportedly the shortest sentence in the English language. Could it be that 'I do' is the longest sentence?"

**George Carlin**

"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

**Edmund Burke, statesman and philosopher**

The TED talk by David Miliband about the refugee crisis illustrates how to use facts, concepts, and emotional stories to make a crisis reach an audience. He is masterful in the way he mixes these into his narrative.

[https://www.ted.com/talks/david\\_miliband\\_the\\_refugee\\_crisis\\_is\\_a\\_test\\_of\\_our\\_character?referrer=playlist-how\\_can\\_we\\_improve\\_disaster\\_relief&autoplay=true](https://www.ted.com/talks/david_miliband_the_refugee_crisis_is_a_test_of_our_character?referrer=playlist-how_can_we_improve_disaster_relief&autoplay=true)

(The link is for "The refugee crisis is a test of our character.")

Here are some of the things Miliband does:

- ✓ He begins with the personal: how refugees relate to both him, his parents, and his grandparents.
- ✓ He shows pictures of the people involved. This not only activates the visual senses but the imaginary ones of smell, touch, etc.
- ✓ He tells the audience several times where he is going and what they will learn about.
- ✓ He expands the personal to the global with facts and concepts.
- ✓ He goes back and forth between individual, emotional stories, and facts and concepts. He both interweaves and relates them.
- ✓ He poses and answers the doubts we will have before we think of them ourselves. He even contradicts authority figures. This creates conflict and heightens our attention.
- ✓ He links his story back to the audience by using "us" and "we" and talking about values that everyone in the audience has. This personalizes the broad problem. We individually ask ourselves what we can do before he does.
- ✓ The hero returns to the world they came from for a final test that is a threat to their community. They succeed only because of the new knowledge they have gained.
- ✓ Miliband offers solutions. Because of the facts, concepts, and persons he's described, his solutions appeal to our emotional and analytical brains. He makes the solution part of our own self-respect.
- ✓ His last solution is the one that is most important and he relates it back to the audience. He even connects it to our history and self concepts as Americans. Now that he's captured our hearts and minds, he asks for a specific action step.
- ✓ He tells us the disaster these people will face if we don't help them. Because of what he's said before, we feel it in our guts.

# The End is Just the Beginning

We've explored the various ways you can share your organization with others via a connecting story and an ask, now it's time to craft your story, share the adversities you've overcome, highlight the impacts you've created and highlight how your audience can help propel you forward to new successes.



Carl is grateful to Gracie Alloway and Liam Sweeny for help in putting this booklet together

# Parting Words

“When I die, I want to die like my grandfather who died peacefully in his sleep. Not screaming like all the passengers in his car.”

**Will Rogers**

If you die in an elevator, be sure to push the Up button.”

**Sam Levinson**



**You can find out more about Carl on his website:**

[www.carlvonderau.com](http://www.carlvonderau.com)

You will also find information and how to sign up for his newsletter. And you can press a link to purchase one of his thrillers. Carl hopes you will buy one.

**You can also find him on Facebook:**

<https://www.facebook.com/carl.vonderau>

*If you buy a book please review it on Amazon and Goodreads. Then contact him to let him know if he lived up to his own rules about telling a story.*