



Landscape Stories

We know as advocates that stories can connect people to our work — they can show people who have achieved success and overcome obstacles. Stories can paint a picture of the wide range of positive effects of affordable housing.

We also know stories need to be carefully crafted to help elicit the right response. When we're trying to tell a complete story about the work we do, and drive people's thinking towards policy solutions, we need to tell stories that bring forward examples of ripple effects and benefits beyond the obvious. Telling stories that highlight the policies that are in place and the systems and structures that have been built over time to provide services or housing or improve outcomes can help do this. We can also tell stories that highlight the **lack** of systems and structures needed to improve people's lives, and show how we might change that reality.

Background

Research conducted by Stanford Professor of Political Science and Communications Shanto Iyengar shows that the way we tell stories can impact people's understanding of the story, and can also indicate to listeners who is responsible for the situation or for fixing the problem. His writing talks about "episodic" and "thematic" stories, which we will simplify and call "portrait" and "landscape" stories.

Episodic or portrait stories are stories about an individual. We've all written these types of stories, perhaps a client success story for a fundraising letter or legislative testimony. We've asked clients to tell their personal story to policy makers or the media. These personal, or portrait, stories focus on the individual — her circumstances and her success or challenges. They are compelling, and grab our attention. However, they do not give us the whole picture, and they lead us to question individuals' decisions or to make judgments about the person in the story. *Why is she deserving of help? Why didn't she make it on tshen own? What should she be doing differently? Why should I help her?* While these stories may also elicit a charitable response, and a desire to help the person in the story, they can backfire just as often, and lead listeners to turn away.

Thematic or landscape stories can feature an individual, but they work to bring in the other pieces of the puzzle — the case manager that provided support and resources; the housing that was built with private capital plus public funds; the school system nearby that helped the kids with an afterschool program; the resident services program that helped with clothes or food. These are all elements of the story, and they all helped the family stabilize in housing. When we tell these broader stories, we illuminate the systems that we've put in place to ensure family success. We can also tell a bigger story about all the elements it takes for working families to make ends meet in our communities. Landscape stories highlight the conditions and systems which have created the situation, and elicit a response directed towards fixing the condition rather than the person.

Questions to Ask Yourself

1. Look back over some of your recent stories about clients and people your organization has helped. Were they portrait stories, or landscape stories?
2. Have you ever had a client come to talk to elected officials? Or the media? How did it go? Did you ever experience a situation where the client was blamed or questioned for his circumstances? What did that feel like?

Examples:

Before: A serious disagreement with her parents led to Yvonne being homeless and on the streets at a young age. As a consequence she lost her job and had to drop out of college. A connection with the Home First Housing Program has brought a happy ending to what could have been called a tragic story. Yvonne, who does not abuse drugs or alcohol, recalled, "I was homeless due to family disagreements. I lost my job because I had no place to do my laundry or to take a shower. I ended up sleeping by the river. It was the summer so the weather was okay." Because of her financial situation Yvonne was able to qualify for a Home First housing voucher. After being housed she was placed with a housing stabilization team member. She now lives with her daughter and fiancée in an apartment.

For another example, read this story: http://www.gazettetimes.com/news/local/making-their-way/article_2272676c-18a6-11e1-a3e0-001cc4c002e0.html.

After: To change Yvonne's story into a landscape story, you could:

- › Interview her case manager;
- › Cite a surprising fact or statistic about the unaffordability of rents;
- › Interview the director of the program, and ask them about the funds that created the voucher program, or the need for the voucher program; or
- › Interview a legislator or city councilmember about the need for more emergency rent assistance or affordable housing or safety net services.

For an example, read this story: <http://news.streetroots.org/2011/10/12/tanf-programs-already-slashed-earlier-year-drop-again>.

More Resources

Read Frameworks Institute's research on thematic frames: <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/blogs/alumni/2012/02/the-myth-of-compassion-fatigue-why-thematic-frames-are-essential/>

Read Frameworks Institute's research on thematic stories: http://frameworksinstitute.org/toolkits/oralhealth/resources/pdf/Oral_Health_FrameByte_ThematicStories.pdf

Exercises

(Note: If you already started this ripple effects exercise in the Unexpected Messengers tool, pull it out!)

- › Think about someone your organization is currently helping. Put them at the center of a piece of paper, and think about all the systems that are in place that might help that family stabilize. Write down all the systems or kinds of assistance you can think of.
- › Next, write down all the good things that happen because this person is now stable in housing – i.e., their kids do better in school, they are able to work, etc.
- › Now, think about who can help you tell this story – is it a case manager? One of the children's teachers? A doctor or a nurse? An employer?

Next Steps

- › When you are planning the next piece of legislative testimony or working with a reporter on your story, pull out your piece of paper with all the other systems and structures and positive impacts. How can you incorporate these into your testimony or the media story?
- › If you work with the media, when they ask to talk to clients, ask them to also consider interviewing others who can help tell the story – the teacher or the affordable housing builder or the policy maker.

NOTE! Portrait stories often elicit a charitable response, so if your goal is to write a year-end fundraising letter, you may want to focus more on the individual and how your organization helped them succeed. Landscape stories work to elicit a response about fixing the problems and conditions that create circumstances.