# Story Builder

STORY BUILDER

## How to use this story builder

The first section helps you gather the raw information you'll need. The second section pulls it together in the format you'll use for oral storytelling.

### **Who is your audience** for this story?

Careful not to skip over this step: too often stories get written to accommodate internal audiences, the CEO, Board Members, and Program Officers, rather than your external audiences. Ask yourself if this is why your stories don't resonate. Your audience could be donors, volunteers, sponsors, or "all of the above." What really matters is who they are. What do they care about? What are their values? What are their fears? Highest aspirations? Are they 60 year old female donors that care about children? Are they young professionals looking to enhance their resume? Are they athletes looking to hit their personal best time? Are they teachers that want a 100% graduation rate?

### What is **the journey** of your story?

What is Point A to Point B, e.g. stray dog found on street, goes to shelter for care, gets trained as a therapy dog, becomes a companion to a veteran giving the veteran freedom and self-reliance. Village suffers years of drought, plants drought resistant crops, the risk of starvation avoided and village becomes prosperous.

### What **sensory details** describe your journey?

Sensory details are words that help your readers see, hear, feel, taste, and smell the object of your description, such as:  hot, dry desert; 80 year old with crepe skin that could light a city with her smile; whimpers were haunting; cheers as you cross the finish line, drinking water smelled of licorice—which meant only one thing: chemicals had seeped in the fresh water supply; the hair on the back of my neck stood up.

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## How does this story **connect to your reader**? How does it make your reader feel?

Is the reader a donor that could be a hero? Could your reader just as easily be in the story? If the reader is a donor, what happens if the donor isn't there?

## What **creates suspense** in your story?

Is there a looming deadline? Is it a life or death situation? Is a heart going to be broken? What happens if your reader doesn't act on your call-to-action.

## **What changed?**

Be very clear about the catalyst for change and what changed. Often you think it's obvious—because you're immersed in your mission. Often it's not obvious to a reader. Examples: a young man drops out of the gang, stays in school, and graduates with honors. A village learns crop management and ends a cycle of poverty; a microloan pays for a loom for a family business so the family can send their children to school for the first time, ever.

## How do you **land your meaning?**

Reinforce the transformation or change brought about in your story. Make it hit home. Example: Evan's mom wept as he accepted his diploma.

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# Now You Try It

This is a suggested order only. It's not set in stone. For example, we find it very powerful to start your story with the end to pique your reader's interest to get the backstory.

## Start with a knockout line.

No one will read your story if you don't grab them with your opening line. Author Stephen King says he spends months, even years writing his opening line. Use rich sensory details when possible. It creates a picture or image that your reader will find irresistible.

> Mom starting wetting her pants and didn't even realize she was doing it.

## Next, give your readers some context or backstory

For example: This is the first time Mary ever had to rely on a food bank. She was laid off when her company outsourced her highly specialized job to an offshore company.

> Her doctor suspected Parkinson's and ordered a CT scan to confirm. I'll never forget him pointing out a brain tumor the size of a lemon on her CT scan. The look on mom's face, in that lab at that moment, broke my heart.
>
> We were in shock. Except for smoking, mom had always been healthy as a horse and taken care of Dad, my brother, my sister, and me.

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## Now connect to your reader.

What does your audience care about? How does your audience fit into the story? How does your reader feel?

> Moms are invincible, right? I wasn't ready to let go of the myth that mom was the strongest person in our family. She was still so young. I was still so young.

## Add in the suspense or gripping image.

Often this is what would happen if your reader doesn't get involved, for example: The food bank will close if we don't hit our fundraising goal. Our neighbors count on this food bank. This means Rose will have to take two additional buses to get to the next closest food bank—all while carrying bags of groceries and herding her toddler.

> Mom was put on steroids to reduce the brain swelling enough to operate—which bought us a few days to get our affairs in order.

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## What changed?

Be very clear about the catalyst for change and what changed.

> We didn't know where to start. We just knew we were overwhelmed, scared, and lost. Then we found the Livestrong website at midnight one night. Livestrong gave us advice, moral support, the right language to talk to mom's doctors, life expectancy, tips on managing our emotions, care options, and most important—a huge community of survivors and their families sharing tips, support, and pulling for mom. I texted the link to my brother right away—he says it was a lifeline in the dark.

## Finish with a knockout line.

Land your meaning.

> Remember this: if you get cancer, Livestrong makes sure you won't ever have to go it alone.

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