

Find a Better Story

A practical worksheet for nonprofit teams

This worksheet is designed to help you think about the stories you're already sitting on that could be developed into compelling content assets for your organization.

It uses three simple screenwriting techniques:

Change the angle

Look for the version of the story people aren't expecting.

Sharpen the focus

Find the human detail that makes the story feel real.

Change the scale

Don't try to cover everything in every piece of content - find one small thing that can carry the meaning.

As you work through the exercises, resist the temptation to polish your answers. The more raw material you have, the more likely it is you'll spot a story that feels fresh and engaging.

Choose your subject

Start with one area of your work.

It could be:

A campaign

A program

A fundraising appeal

An issue you talk about regularly

A service you struggle to explain

A story you feel you've already told

What do you want to work on?

In relation to this campaign, what do you want somebody to care about?

Try to get underneath the information. Not just: "We provide housing support."

But perhaps: "I want people to understand how exhausting it is to have nowhere that is truly yours."

What do people expect to see when they think about this subject?

Images, situations, language, characters, outcomes.

(These themes aren't 'wrong'; it's just useful to see what's expected when looking for a fresh treatment of a familiar subject).

1. Change the angle

Find the Unseen Scene

Think about the people affected by your work. Walk through an ordinary day with them.

What happens that outsiders rarely see?

What tiny frustrations, routines, conversations or moments are normally left out?

List five possible Unseen Scenes

Out of the above notes – is there a story or a focus that you haven't covered in your content before?

Combine familiar ideas in an unexpected way

Originality doesn't always mean inventing something completely new.

Sometimes it comes from putting two familiar ideas together and finding the tension between them.

Write down words and ideas associated with your subject

Try to include emotions, expectations, places, objects and values.

Now look for combinations or contradictions

For example: What should feel safe — but doesn't? What should feel comforting — but isn't? What looks positive from the outside but feels different inside?

What two ideas become more interesting when they are combined?

Combination 1

_____ + _____

What tension does this create?

Combination 2

_____ + _____

What tension does this create?

In the [Refuge example](#), the familiar idea of **home as safety, comfort and aspiration** is combined with the reality of domestic abuse, creating a powerful contradiction.

2. Sharpen the focus

Find the human stuff

Great stories begin with raw material. Think about the passion you have for the work you do. Free write, or talk to a friend and record the answers to the following questions:

What part of this work...

- Makes you emotional?
- Frightens you?
- Is misunderstood?
- Makes you laugh?
- Shocks you?
- Makes you angry or frustrated?

If possible, do the same exercise with staff, volunteers, donors, beneficiaries, trustees.

Record and transcribe their answers. What specific, real, emotional language do they use?

Show, don't tell

Talking about the impact of your work is valuable, but without showing what that impact looks like in practice, it can be easy to ignore.

What are the common impact phrases you might use, for example:

- Empowering people
- Transforming lives
- Giving people hope
- Helping people move forward

How can you prove it?

- Is there a case study you haven't shared yet?
- Can you make a situation more descriptive by adding sensory detail to a story?
For example, think about what you can:
 - See
 - Hear
 - Touch
 - Smell
 - Taste

In the Santa Shoebox project, the impact of “joy” could be described through a child pressing a soft jumper against her cheek, hearing cardboard rip around her, then squealing when she finds a toothbrush.

3. Change the scale

Find the small story

Instead of starting with: “**What do we do?**” look for entrances into your story. Use the prompts below to generate as many possibilities as you can.

- **Object** - Is there an ordinary object that carries unusual meaning?
- **Person** - Who could take us into this story?
- **Decision** - What small choice matters?
- **Conversation** - What was said — or couldn't be said?
- **Obstacle** - What ordinary thing becomes unexpectedly difficult?
- **Routine** - What happens every day that outsiders don't see?
- **First** - What did somebody do for the first time?
- **Last** - What did somebody stop doing?
- **Place** - Is there a location that carries meaning?
- **Moment** - What happened in 30 seconds that represents something much bigger?
- **Before / After** - What is one visible change?

Your Story Entrances

Shrink the story. Then blow it up.

Choose one Story Entrance that feels promising.

Your chosen Story Entrance

Now treat it like a scene

- Who is this about?
- What do they want?
- What could go wrong? What is at stake?
- Where is the tension?
- What detail makes it feel real?
- What is surprising?

How could you show this story?

Where could this story live?

- Email
- Social
- Fundraising appeal
- Film
- Advert
- PR
- Event
- Website

What next?

You've now looked at your subject from a few different directions: changing the angle, sharpening the human detail and finding smaller entrances into the bigger story.

Go back through your notes and look for the ideas that feel fresh, specific or emotionally charged. Which ones surprised you? Which ones made you think, "We've never talked about it like that before"? Which small moments seem to carry something bigger?

You don't need to develop everything. Pick the strongest ideas and take those forward.

The goal of this worksheet isn't to leave with finished content. It's to leave with better raw material, clearer creative possibilities and new stories worth exploring.

You don't need to tell every story. You just need to notice the ones worth telling.

Want help finding the stories?

Story Lab for Nonprofit Teams

A focused 90-minute working session designed to uncover fresh, specific story ideas from the work your organisation is already doing.

Bring one campaign, program, cause or communications challenge.

Together, we'll:

- **Change the angle** - Find fresher ways into a familiar subject.
- **Sharpen the focus** - Uncover the human detail and emotional heat.
- **Change the scale** - Generate smaller Story Entrances and develop the strongest ones.

You'll leave with a working bank of story ideas and creative directions your team can take forward.

For more details, visit: harrisonamy.com/storylab