

The ACS Guide to Telling a Compelling Story

Everyone has a story worth telling—and the right story, told at the right moment, can shift a conversation, build a coalition, or move a decision-maker to act. Personal stories are among the most powerful tools available to advocates and organizational leaders because they do what data alone cannot: they create connection. They put a human face on complex issues, make abstract challenges feel tangible, and invite others to care about what you care about.

This guide is designed for professionals like you—people who represent organizations and lead efforts on issues that matter deeply to their communities. Whether you're preparing to testify before a legislative committee, speaking at a funder briefing, presenting to a board, or connecting with new partners, this tool will help you develop and deliver a story that is strategic, authentic, and persuasive.

Telling stories may sound like a straightforward project—after all, you likely have dozens of stories about the issues on which you work. There are, however, important up-front considerations that will save time and energy and ensure that the stories you tell reinforce your strategic goals. Work through the four steps in this guide in sequence: first, get clear on your purpose; then, build out the story itself; and finally, practice delivering it with confidence.

Step 1: Figure Out Why Your Story Matters

Before you begin crafting or sharing any story, it's worth stepping back to ask a fundamental question: What are you trying to accomplish? The most effective stories are not told for their own sake—they serve a clear strategic purpose. Understanding your goal up front helps you decide what details to emphasize, what you don't need to include, what emotions to draw out, and what call to action to use. Reference the example, related to lead poisoning prevention, throughout this tool to help illustrate the ideal level of detail for your responses to each question.

What makes a compelling story?

- ▶ Authenticity
- ▶ Context
- ▶ Visuals
- ▶ Practice

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What is the goal of telling this story? In other words, what are you hoping to achieve by telling your story? Are you trying to educate people? Change someone's mind? Persuade them to take a specific action?

Example: The goal of telling this story is to persuade city council members to invest in lead-safe child care and housing programs. The story is intended to help policymakers understand that lead exposure is not just a public health issue—it directly affects families' ability to work, children's ability to learn, and the long-term well-being of the community. The hope is that hearing this story will encourage support for stronger prevention funding and enforcement policies.

Step 2: Decide Who Needs to Hear the Story

A compelling story is always shaped by its audience. The same experience can be told very differently depending on who is in the room. For example, a policymaker may need to hear something different than a community partner or a funder. Knowing your audience allows you to frame your story in a way that speaks to their values and motivations, not just your own. The questions below will help you tailor your story, so it lands with the people who need to hear it most.

Who is the target audience for the story? This could range from a policymaker to a funder, a member of the media, a potential coalition member, your coworkers, or someone from a partnering organization.

Example: City council members

What does this person care about? If you aren't sure, do some research and talk to other trusted individuals who know them or who may have insights.

Example: The health and safety of children, economic stability for families, neighborhood conditions, workforce participation, and how public dollars are spent.

What underlying value(s) drive their work? For example, are they are strong advocate for children? Do they prioritize job creation over anything else? Do they believe government has a role in your issue? Are parent voices the only authentic voices to them?

Example: They believe local government should help create safe, healthy communities and prevent problems before they become more costly crises.

Why do they need to hear this story? Think about the role(s) they play in your community and their potential influence on the solutions to problems you seek.

Example: City council members can influence funding decisions, housing enforcement policies, and investments in child care safety programs that could prevent other families from experiencing similar challenges.

How or why do you think this story impact them? Why THIS story?

Example: This story helps connect a policy issue to a real family's experience. It shows how one unsafe environment created ripple effects across employment, child development, family finances, and community systems. It also highlights that the harm was preventable.

What channel and format will work best? Consider if this individual prefers written or verbal communication and how they prefer to receive information.

Example: A short verbal story shared during public testimony at a city council meeting, supported by one photo of the child care classroom and a simple data point about childhood lead exposure in the community.



Step 3: Write the Story

Now it's time to build your story. Every strong story has the same fundamental architecture: It introduces who you are and why you care, it walks the audience through a specific moment of challenge or change, and it ends with an explicit or implicit takeaway or ask. The prompts in this section are designed to help you find those elements within your own experience. Start with "The Basics" to establish your voice and perspective, then use "The Story" to develop the account itself. Be specific, be honest, and don't be afraid to go deep—the details are what make stories memorable.

"A picture is worth 1,000 words."

A well-chosen visual can do in seconds what words take minutes to accomplish. Consider photos, short video clips, data charts, or even a single powerful image that puts a human face on your story. The best visuals don't decorate your story, they deepen it.

The Basics

1. Who is the person at the center of this story—who is the subject? (It could be you, or someone else)

Example: A single mother named Jasmine and her four-year-old son, Malik.

2. What does the subject of the story care about?

Example: Jasmine cares deeply about keeping her son safe, maintaining stable employment, and making sure he has the opportunity to succeed in school.

3. Why does what the subject cares about matter to the audience?

Example: Her experience reflects challenges many working families face when unsafe housing or child care environments disrupt their ability to work and support their children's healthy development.



The Story

1. Where did the events in the story take place?

Example: In an older neighborhood, including Malik's child care center and the family's rental apartment.

2. When did these events take place?

Example: Over several months during Malik's preschool year.

3. Who else was involved?

Example: Malik's child care teachers, Jasmine's employer, a pediatrician, and a local health department inspector.

4. What was the conflict or issue?

Example: Malik tested positive for elevated lead levels after exposure to peeling paint in both his child care center and apartment building.



The Role of Conflict

Whether the source of this conflict is external, like an unyielding antagonist, or internal, like a moral struggle for your main character, it'll be one of the most important elements of your story. Conflict creates tension by giving your protagonist some sense of purpose. It gets readers invested in the story, encouraging them to keep listening.

5. What triggered the conflict or issue?

Example: A routine screening during Malik's pediatric appointment revealed concerning lead levels, leading to inspections of the places where he spent most of his time.

6. How did the trigger affect the people in the story?

Example: Jasmine had to miss work for medical appointments, inspections, and emergency child care arrangements after the child care center temporarily closed. She became overwhelmed trying to balance work, parenting, and fear about her son's health and future.

7. What was the outcome of the conflict or issue? What changed and why?

Example: The child care center completed lead remediation after pressure from parents and support from emergency community funding. The landlord was eventually required to address hazards in the apartment.



8. What happened to the people in the story?

Example: Malik began receiving developmental support services, and Jasmine eventually found a safer child care arrangement, though the disruption caused financial strain and emotional stress.

9. How did the outcome affect people outside of the story?

Example: Other families at the child care center learned their children had also been exposed, leading to broader community concern about aging buildings and weak enforcement systems.

10. What are the lasting impacts?

Example: Jasmine still worries about the long-term effects on Malik's learning and behavior. The experience also changed how local advocates and officials talked about the connection between housing quality, child safety, and economic stability.

11. What is the story's takeaway?

Example: Lead exposure is preventable, but families cannot solve these problems alone. Communities need stronger systems, earlier intervention, and sustained investment in safe housing and child care environments.



12. What action do you want to take place as a result of your audience hearing this story?

Example: Increase local funding for lead prevention programs, strengthen inspection and enforcement systems, and expand grants that help child care providers address hazards before children are harmed.

Step 4: Practice Telling the Story

Writing your story is only half the work—delivering it well is what makes it stick. Practicing out loud, with a real listener (or you can record yourself), helps you find your rhythm, tighten your language, and notice which parts resonate and which fall flat. Use the sentence starters below as a loose script the first time you tell it, then work toward telling it in your own natural voice. Aim for one to three minutes. If it's running longer, look for places to trim; if it feels rushed, you may be glossing over the details that matter most.

Great Storytellers...

- ▶ Listen, engage and interact with their audience
- ▶ Empower others
- ▶ Are generous in spirit
- ▶ Are human, vulnerable, truthful and trustworthy
- ▶ Make sure there is a point to the story they're telling

Practice telling your one-to-three-minute story using the following outline:

I want to tell you a story about (the issue or experience)

(If this is YOUR story, take a moment to share what you care about as it relates to the events in the story you're sharing. If this is someone else's story, mention who they are, what's important to them, and what it matters for your audience). It started when (set the scene—when, where, who was there)

One day/At that moment, (the conflict, challenge, or turning point)

Because of that, (what changed—for the people in the story, for the community)

This matters because (the takeaway or ask

Storytelling Dos and Don'ts

Keep this checklist handy as you draft and refine your story. These are the habits that separate stories that move people from those that miss the mark.

Do	Don't
✓ Use visuals to show your ideas ✓ Know your audience ✓ Outline your plot/core message ✓ Go deep ✓ Make it useful ✓ Leave room for imagination ✓ Be honest	✗ Use jargon ✗ Focus too much on yourself ✗ Leave plot holes ✗ Make characters perfect ✗ Skim over details ✗ Overcomplicate the story

Need additional help crafting and sharing your story? Contact us: info@advocacyandcommunication.org and check out our website for more strategic communication tools at advocacyandcommunication.org.