



StoryBrand for Nonprofits Workbook

This workbook is designed to help nonprofit teams apply the StoryBrand framework in a way that honors the dignity, complexity, and lived experiences of the communities they serve. Through clear prompts and a focus on systemic context, this guide supports organizations in telling stories that are both compelling and responsible.

Use it to:

- Clarify your message
- Center your audience's perspective
- Show transformation through a systems-aware lens
- Craft stories that lead to trust, not pity

Each section includes reflection prompts and tools to build powerful narratives that align with your mission.



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I. STORYBRAND FRAMEWORK FOR NONPROFITS

1. Identify your character

Start by understanding your hero and what they need from you.

Who are you talking to?

What is their transformational identity shift?

What do they need to succeed?

Prompt: Who is your audience, and what histories, identities, or lived experiences shape how they engage with your mission?

Note: Different audiences care about different things. For example, the public may prefer emotional stories, while funders look for evidence of impact.

2. Define the problem

Look at the challenge through three lenses:

External: What's the immediate obstacle?

Internal: How does it make them feel?

Systemic | Philosophical: What structures or histories shape the challenge?

Prompt: What problem is your audience facing, and how do systemic barriers such as policy, history, or discrimination make it worse?

3. Position yourself as the guide

You're not the hero. You're the guide.

Empathy: What do you understand about their experience?

Authority: How have you helped others in a similar situation?

Story: What examples build trust?

Prompt: What shared understanding or lived experience can you offer, and how do you build trust without centering yourself?

4. Present the plan

People need a clear path forward.

What are the three steps they'll take? How do you make it easy, welcoming, and doable?

Examples:

- Attend an orientation
 - Complete an intake form
 - Get connected to services
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Prompt: What clear steps help your audience move forward while honoring their time, strengths, and capacity?

5. Create a call to action

Once your audience understands the journey, give them a clear next step.

What do you want your audience to do next?

Is your call to action clear and visible?

Is it repeated consistently across platforms?

Prompt: What action invites participation—not pity—and aligns with your values?

6. Show what's at stake

Not every story needs high drama, but your audience should understand what's at risk.

What might be lost if no one acts?

What continues or worsens?

Who is most affected?

Prompt: What consequences continue if no action is taken, and who is most affected?

7. Paint a picture of success

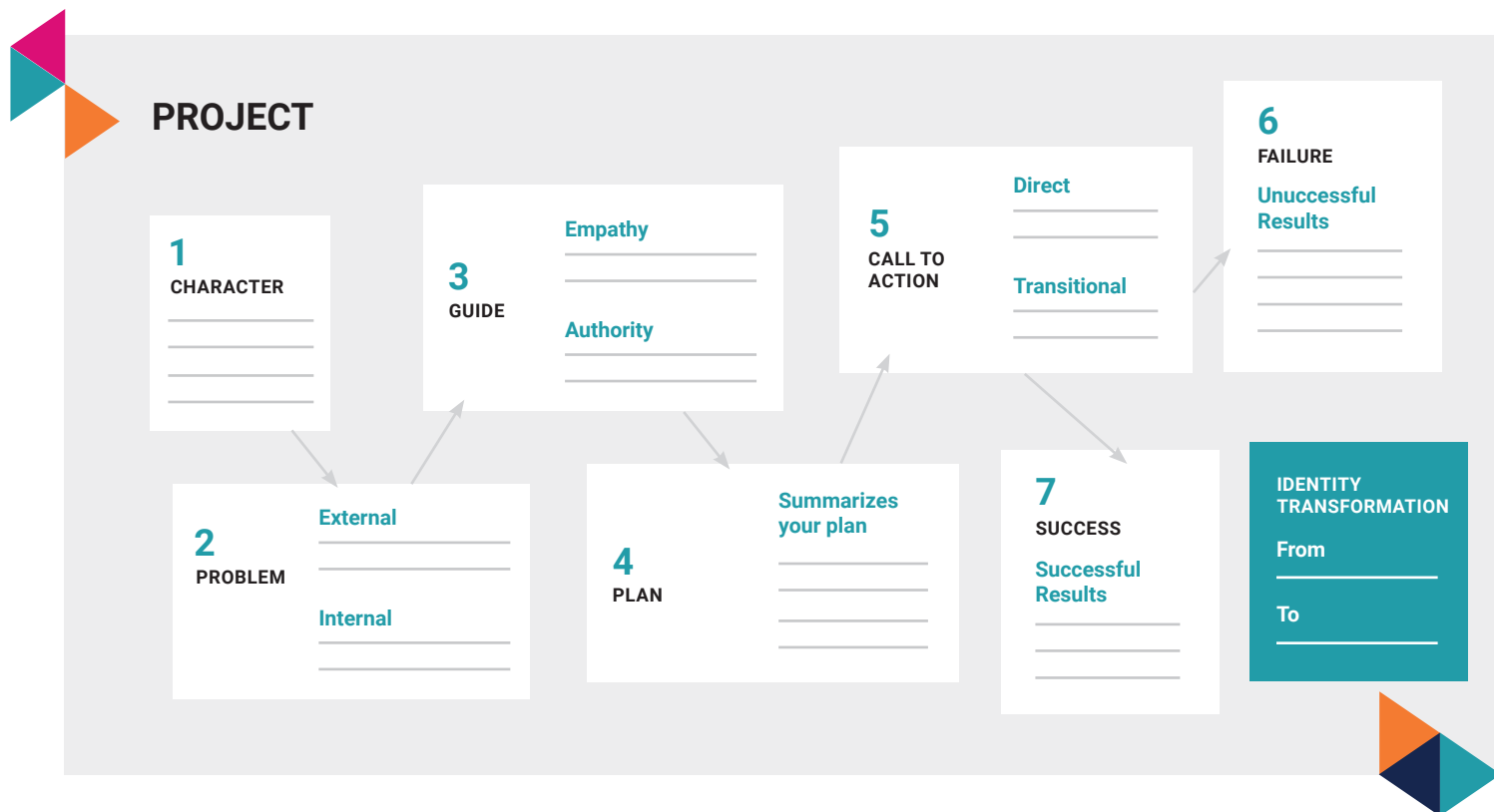
Help your audience see what's possible when things go right.

What changes for the person you serve?

How will their life look after they engage?

What values or dreams are affirmed?

Prompt: What changes in someone's life or community, and what values are realized when things go right?



II. ONE STORY, TWO PERSPECTIVES

A typical version

Character: Meet Lisa, a single mother of three who was struggling to feed her children.

Problem: After her hours were cut at work, Lisa couldn't afford groceries and felt hopeless.

Guide: That's when she found New Beginnings Food Pantry.

Plan: We welcomed Lisa, provided food, and helped connect her to services.

Call to action: You can help families like Lisa's. Just \$25 provides a week's worth of meals.

Stakes: Without your support, more families may go hungry tonight.

Success: Thanks to the pantry and generous donors, Lisa's kids are well fed and smiling again.

A more responsible version

Character: Lisa is a hardworking mom of three who has lived in our community for years. When her hours were reduced at work, a common challenge for hourly workers, her grocery budget disappeared overnight.

Problem: Like many in our area, Lisa faced rising food prices and unpredictable schedules. The stress of feeding her kids without a steady income weighed heavily on her.

Guide: She turned to New Beginnings Food Pantry not just for food, but for support, and to have a place that sees the whole person.

Plan: We listened, offered her family nourishing food, and connected her with a childcare program and work training.

Call to action: When you support New Beginnings, you're investing in community resilience.

Stakes: Without stable access to food and support, many families face impossible choices every week.

Success: Today, Lisa's kids are thriving, and she's mentoring others in the pantry's job program.

III. STORYTELLING TIPS

1. Strengthen your message

Clarity builds trust. Too often, nonprofit language hides behind complexity or self-promotion. Your message should reflect who you serve and what they care about.

Watch for:

- Jargon that confuses more than it explains.
- Stories that center your organization, not your audience.
- A focus on services instead of transformation.

Rewrite challenge: Take one paragraph from your website, brochure, or grant proposal and:

- Remove jargon.
- Begin with your audience's need.
- End with the transformation they'll experience.

Prompt: Where are you putting your organization at the center—and how can you shift the spotlight?

2. Build a shared voice

A voice guide helps your team communicate with clarity, consistency, and care across emails, social media, reports, and more.

Prompt: Draft a one-page voice guide your team can use. Include:

- Five principles that reflect your tone and approach (e.g., warm, practical, people-first, bold, curious).
- Phrases to avoid and what to say instead.
- Tips for using plain language that respects your audience.
- Language guidelines for describing people and communities with dignity.
- A brief “what we’re not” section to keep your tone grounded.

Examples:

- Our tone is respectful, people-first, clear, hopeful, and practical.
- We avoid “at-risk,” “underserved,” “empower,” and jargon.
- We say “people-facing barriers,” “excluded from resources,” and “support leadership,” and use plain language so our message is easy to understand.
- We prioritize writing that is straightforward and accessible to everyone.
- Our voice is not overly polished, corporate, dramatic, or filled with buzzwords.

3. Understand your audience

Strong stories begin with close observation. Use empathy mapping to move beyond demographics and understand your audience’s real-world context, feelings, and perspective.

What do they:

See around them each day?

Hear from their community?

Think and feel about the problem you address?

Say or do when faced with challenges?

Hope for?

Struggle with?

Prompt: What’s something you’ve assumed about your audience, and what’s a more grounded truth?

4. Use automation responsibly

Use technology to sharpen your writing, not replace your thinking. It can help generate ideas, but it can’t understand people.

Try this:

- Draft three versions of a headline or email subject line using AI.
- Choose the clearest one and revise it to sound natural and specific.
- Replace any generic phrasing with language grounded in your audience’s reality.
- Learn to identify robotic language—repetitive, vague, or overly polished—and replace it with plain, human speech.

Prompt: Find one sentence in your last message that sounds robotic. How would someone in your community actually say it?

5. Explore narrative shifts

Every sector has a dominant story. Sometimes it lifts people up. Often it leaves them out.

Questions to ask:

- What's the standard story in your field?
- Who benefits from it—and who's missing?
- What new narrative affirms dignity, agency, and truth?

Prompt: What old story are you challenging and what new story are you helping tell?

6. Practice narrative responsibility

Narratives have consequences. They influence how policies are written, how resources are distributed, and how people are treated.

Ask yourself:

- Are we reinforcing a deficit or dependency frame?
- Are we naming systemic causes, not assigning individual blame?
- Are we offering stories of resilience, leadership, and vision?

Prompt: How can your storytelling reflect the complexity and potential of the communities you serve?

IV. RESPONSIBLE STORYTELLING CHECKLIST

Stories connect us and spark change. But when shared thoughtlessly, they can cause harm. Use this checklist to share stories with dignity and care.

My commitments:

- ☐ I will seek full consent from storytellers and respect their choices.
- ☐ I will honor the complexity and humanity of each storyteller.
- ☐ I will ensure that storytelling drives positive, real-world impact.
- ☐ I will be transparent about the purpose of the story and how it will be used.
- ☐ I will avoid exploiting stories for gain without creating benefits for the storyteller.
- ☐ I will continue learning to improve my storytelling practices.

Before asking for a story:

- ☐ Have you clearly communicated the story's purpose and use?
- ☐ Are you prepared to obtain both written and verbal consent?
- ☐ Have you followed up with the storyteller to explain how their story was used?
- ☐ Have you shared its impact and any actions taken?
- ☐ Are you ready to compensate appropriately?

When sharing the story

- ☐ Does the story honor the storyteller's perspective?
- ☐ Is the tone respectful and true to the storyteller's experience?
- ☐ Do you acknowledge the systemic barriers behind their story?
- ☐ Is the story focused on action and outcomes, not just the narrative?

After sharing the story

- ☐ Have you followed up with the storyteller to explain how their story was used?
- ☐ Have you shared its impact and any actions taken?
- ☐ Are you prepared to adjust based on the storyteller's feedback?
- ☐ Are you committed to maintaining a long-term relationship with the storyteller?

Red flags to avoid

- ☐ Reducing someone's life to a neat success story
- ☐ Centering the organization over the community
- ☐ Using pain to raise money without addressing root causes
- ☐ Leaving out systemic context
- ☐ Exploiting vulnerability for emotional impact
- ☐ Generalizing experience or ignoring diversity
- ☐ Framing words in ways that distort the storyteller's message

Let's tell better stories, together.

If this guide sparked ideas, we can help bring them to life.

Whether you're leading a team, launching a campaign, or rethinking your message, we offer training and support that reflects your mission and community.

Start with a conversation:
hookpr.com/schedule

