



Crafting impactful stories with the StoryBrand framework

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ACLU

"I am determined that I won't go down without a fight. I am organizing in my community, lobbying my lawmakers, and using my story to advocate for immigration reform."



**Objective: Support the hero's journey
with respectful storytelling.**



Overview

Part 1: Define ethical principles and responsibilities in storytelling

Part 2: Build a foundation for responsible storytelling

Part 3: Apply the 7-part StoryBrand framework

Part 4: Part 4: Bring responsible storytelling to life



**Storytelling calls for cultural humility,
not mastery.**



Part 1: Define ethical principles and responsibilities in storytelling

Ethical Storytelling

- Centers on honesty, dignity, and consent
- Avoids harm, prevents exploitation
- Highlights power imbalances
- Emphasizes what not to do





Responsible Storytelling

- Focuses on accountability and impact
- Ensures agency and involvement
- Encourages ongoing relationships
- Emphasizes participatory storytelling

Key Difference

Ethical storytelling often focuses on avoiding harm, while responsible storytelling ensures that stories are told in a way that is collaborative, sustainable, and empowering.

Alice Mills Mai
of Columbus, Ohio

She spoke up about executive orders that ended DEI positions and shared her concern of how this will negatively affect children, particularly those from historically excluded communities.



What Makes This Responsible Storytelling?

- Centers lived experience
- Shows real-world impact
- Avoids exaggeration
- Promotes empathy and solutions
- Includes crisis support



Part 2: Build a foundation for responsible storytelling

Stories as Part of a Greater Ecosystem

How do we move beyond storytelling toward real change?

- **Messages** are the words and phrases we choose to shape first impressions and lasting beliefs.
- **Stories** show that something is happening to someone, in a specific place or time.
- **Values** are the beliefs that guide how we see the world and how we want it to be.
- **Worldview** is the deep set of assumptions and beliefs that shape what people see as true, right, and possible.
- **Narratives** are the patterns of meaning we create over time. They're built from repeated stories and messages, and they influence culture, policy, and power.



Source: Narrative Initiative, Waves Model

The Waves Model Example

This example shows how a single message can reinforce or challenge deeper narratives, depending on how it's framed.

Message: Support immigrant-owned businesses.

Story: Rosa owns a grocery store in a vibrant immigrant neighborhood. Her shop offers familiar foods, buys from local farms, and serves as a trusted place for neighbors to share news and support.

Even with her store's significance, Rosa was left out of a new city grant program for "underserved entrepreneurs." The application was only in English. It asked for tax documents she didn't have and used a credit score system she had never seen. No city officials ever visited her area.

Narrative: Immigrants boost local economies and community health, but they often face barriers.

Worldview: Our systems are not neutral. They favor the established and often push out those seen as outsiders.



The Narrative Change

Narrative change is a values-based communications strategy that involves intentionally centering core values and telling stories that explain the way we believe the world can and should work.

Old Story → Reframe Problem → Introduce New Story → Repeat Across Channels

The Narrative Change

Before reframing, you need to understand:

- What dominant narratives are already in play
- What your audience believes about the issue
- What voices have been missing or misrepresented

Then can you shape a strategy that tells stories that reflect **community truths, shared values, and clear intention.**



Don't just tell stories. Shape the ecosystem they live in.

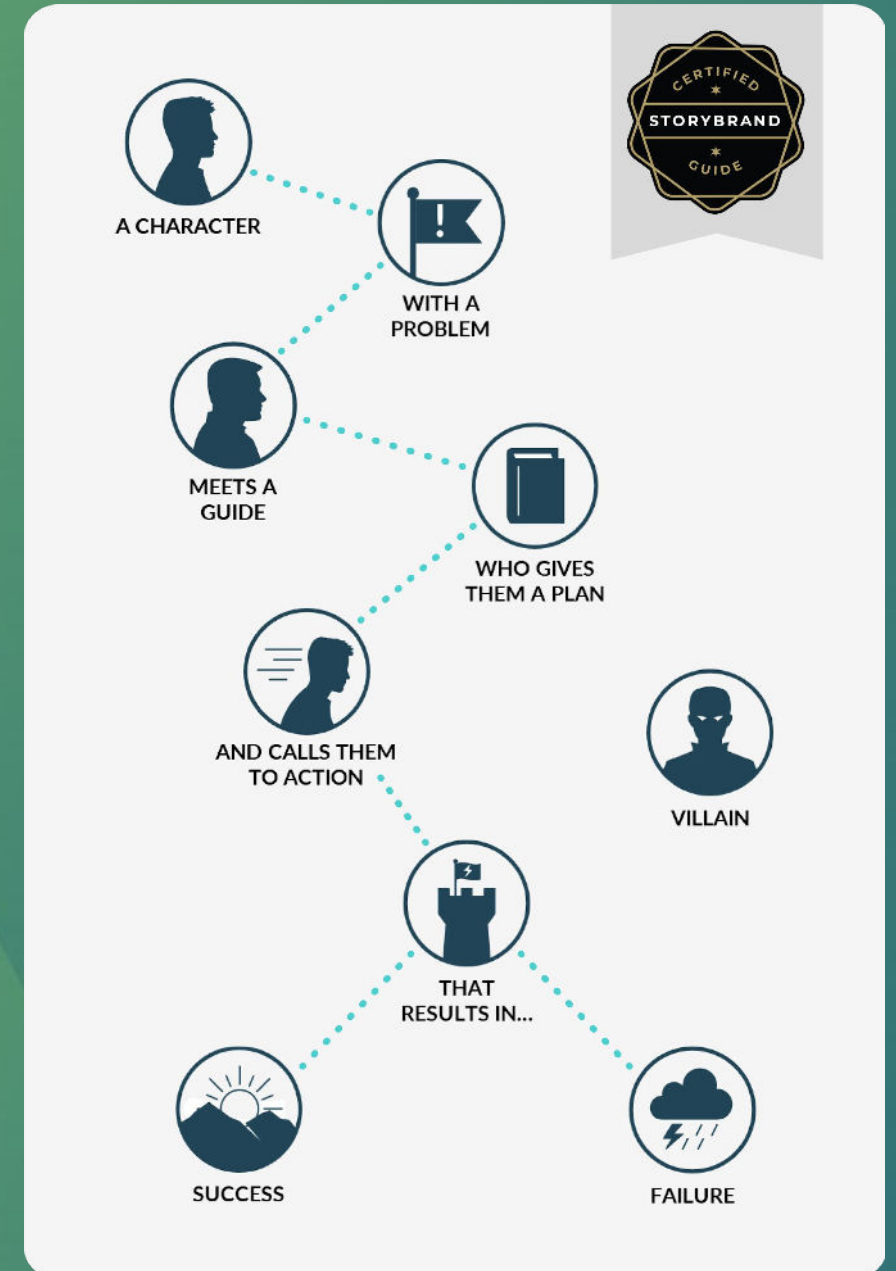


Part 3: Apply the 7-part StoryBrand framework

StoryBrand 101

StoryBrand is a framework created by Donald Miller that helps organizations clarify their message by using the elements of storytelling.

1. A character (the client, donor or other stakeholder)
2. With a problem (internal, external, philosophical)
3. Meets a guide (your organization)
4. Who gives them a plan
5. And calls them to action
6. That helps them avoid failure
7. And ends in success



The Story We No Longer Tell

- 1. Character:** Meet *Lisa*, a single mother of three who was struggling to feed her children.
- 2. Problem:** After her hours were cut at work, Lisa couldn't afford groceries and felt hopeless.
- 3. Guide:** That's when she found *New Beginnings Food Pantry*.
- 4. Plan:** We welcomed Lisa, provided food for her family, and helped connect her to other services.
- 5. Call to Action:** You can help families like Lisa's. Just \$25 provides a week's worth of meals.
- 6. Avoiding Failure:** Without your support, more families may go hungry tonight.
- 7. Success:** Thanks to the pantry, and generous donors, Lisa's kids are well-fed and smiling again.



Framing Food Insecurity



1. CHARACTER

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

After: Lisa is a working mom of three with a sharp eye for budgets, a deep love for her kids, and years of experience juggling schedules and systems that weren't built with her in mind.

Framing Food Insecurity



2. PROBLEM

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

After: When her hours were cut, the groceries ran out faster than usual. It wasn't just a bad week. It was the latest reminder of how unstable things are when rent rises, wages stay flat, and one missed shift can affect dinner. Lisa did what millions of people do quietly every day. She made it work. But the burden was never hers alone.

Framing Food Insecurity



3. GUIDE

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

After: Lisa came to New Beginnings Food Pantry for help with groceries. What she found was a space that felt familiar and respectful. She met other parents, shared what was working for her, and picked up ideas from others. Beyond a focus on food, she became part of something greater.

Framing Food Insecurity



4. PLAN

Before: *We welcomed Lisa, provided food for her family, and helped connect her to other services.*

After: She didn't stop there. Lisa got involved. She joined a parent advisory council that helps shape the pantry's policies, from hours of operation to how food is displayed with dignity. She's one of the voices pushing for a local grocery co-op and fairer access across the neighborhood.

Framing Food Insecurity



5. CALL TO ACTION

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

After: Lisa is hard at work. She is raising her kids, sharing what she knows, and helping shape what support looks like in her neighborhood. When you back this kind of leadership, you help build something real and lasting. You can donate, show up, or share this work with someone who needs to see it.

Framing Food Insecurity



6. AVOIDING FAILURE

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

After: If we don't act, the burden stays on families like Lisa's. Families who are already doing more than their share. We risk keeping systems in place that leave people out and wear them down. But it doesn't have to be that way.

Framing Food Insecurity



7. SUCCESS

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

After: Lisa's family is doing better ...and she's helping others find their way, too. She's part of a group that's shaping how support shows up in her neighborhood. Real change starts when the people most affected have a seat at the table.

Stories that Build Power

The original story aimed to raise money through emotion. The improved story builds dignity, context, and collective power.

By reframing:

- People as experts, not victim
- Problems as systemic, not personal
- Support as partnership, not rescue
- Action as shared responsibility, not just giving

...we go beyond telling stories to building stronger movements.





Part 4: Bring responsible storytelling to life

Mistakes to Avoid

1. Consent & Agency

- Don't assume consent. Ethical storytelling needs permission. Responsible storytelling involves people in shaping the narrative.
- *Example: An organization collected refugee stories with consent. Later, they found interviewees didn't know their trauma would be used for fundraising.*



*Informed consent
keeps the story's integrity.*

2. Dignity-First Storytelling

- Don't misrepresent the reality. Responsible storytelling centers human dignity and complexity.
- *Example: Shifting from trauma-focused narratives. A domestic violence shelter stopped using survivor stories that emphasized suffering. Instead, they highlight resilience, strength, and the systemic solutions that empower individuals.*

3. Beyond the Myth of “Giving Voice”

- Don't think you're giving people a voice. Responsible storytelling is about removing barriers, not “giving” them a voice.
- *Example: A documentary about Indigenous land rights originally framed activists as victims. With community collaboration, the narrative shifted to one of power.*

Other Common Storytelling Mistakes

1. **Trauma mining disguised as empowerment:** Using personal trauma to stir emotions while neglecting the storyteller's well-being and choice.
2. **Over-sanitization vs. over-dramatization:** Removing a story's depth or exaggerating it for effect.
3. **Anonymous storytelling and the erasure of agency:** Hiding names can protect individuals but may reduce their voice and control over their narrative.

The Responsible Storytelling Framework

Before sharing a story, ask:

1. **Transparency:** Does the person know how their story will be used?
2. **Collaboration:** Was the storyteller part of shaping their own narrative?
3. **Impact & Follow-Up:** What happens after the story is shared?
4. **Audience Responsibility:** What actions do we want the audience to take?



Who controls the story?

1. Shift the Power

- Ask yourself: Who has the authority to shape, edit, and approve the final version?
- *Example: A nonprofit co-created a video series where youth activists shared their stories, and directed and edited the content, ensuring authentic representation.*

2. Provide Context

Lack of context leads to misleading themes that distort reality:

- Helpless victim: Strips people of their agency
- Savior complex: Centers outsiders as the primary force for change
- Single-story: Generalizes one experience as representative of all

Ensure responsible context in storytelling:

- Engage with the community to shape own narrative
- Include systemic factors, such as policies, histories, and power structures
- Show resilience and solutions to highlight both struggles and agency-driven change



3. Foster Relationships

- **Engage communities as co-creators, not subjects.** Allow those with lived experience to shape, edit, and approve their stories.
- **Prioritize long-term impact over short-term engagement.** Keep storytellers involved and ensure they benefit from the use of their stories.
- **Respect agency and autonomy.** Give communities control over their narratives and avoid using their stories for outside agendas.



*How will you protect stories, challenge suppression,
and empower those who need to be heard?*

Cultural & Political Changes

Shifts in government policies, corporate influence, and digital censorship have the power to reshape narratives — sometimes erasing or distorting them entirely. As storytellers and advocates, we must actively protect stories from suppression, manipulation, and erasure.

Cultural & Political Changes

- **Erasure of LGBTQ+ terminology:** Restricted use of inclusive language makes it harder to tell authentic LGBTQ+ stories.
- **Changes to DEI initiatives:** Funding, representation, and support for underrepresented communities are under attack.
- **Control over cultural institutions:** Historical context changing, influencing which stories are prioritized or erased.



*As you shift how you tell stories,
ask yourself:*

- Are we centering people with lived experience and letting them lead their narratives?
- Are we telling the whole story, including the systems behind the struggle?
- Do our stories reflect dignity, connection, and shared power?
- Are we moving people toward long term change, not short-term charity?

THANK YOU!

For resources, visit
hookpr.com/responsible-storytelling



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