

# Crafting Narratives

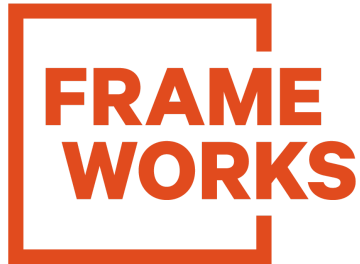
## *A Story Telling Resource*



**Prevent Child Abuse  
America®**  
Centering families through every turn.



**essentials  
for childhood**

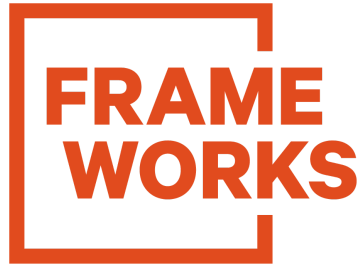


## Acknowledgments

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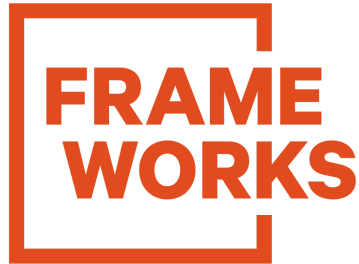
## About Prevent Child Abuse America

Prevent Child Abuse America is the nation's oldest and largest organization committed to preventing child abuse and neglect before it happens. We promote programs and resources informed by science to ensure all children and families are living a purposeful and happy life with hope for the future. To learn more about PCA America's work, visit our website at [www.preventchildabuse.org](http://www.preventchildabuse.org).



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# The Power of Stories

This resource is designed to help distinguish between more and less effective ways of establishing a narrative which sets up policy thinking. It will share ideas for telling stories that help issues like trauma, healing, and resilience be seen and understood as public concerns and not as private issues.

Across issues at FrameWorks, we have found that public awareness and understanding of how social issues really work is lacking. Thus, the first communications goal is often that of raising salience. Stories are a powerful way of doing so, for as the social science research tells us, we humans are hardwired for narrative. Stories are a powerful tool for shaping thought to recalibrate thinking. Stories have the power to DO things like catalyze community change. However, in order to achieve these particular outcomes with our storytelling, we need to use stories that situate social problems in their full context.

Too often, stories that “tug at the heartstrings” cast those who we might wish to help with our work as victims, reinforcing assumptions about vulnerability and helplessness. And while these assumptions might generate concern in the short-term, they simultaneously fuel fatalistic attitudes about overwhelming and pervasive problems that are simply too big to fix on a broad scale. Rather than leaving our public with a sense that there is nothing which can be done, we want to invite longer-term thinking and instill a sense of efficacy.

We are aiming for a style of storytelling designed to awaken the public problem-solver that resides within all of us. Rather than telling stories that situate things like poverty or health as private problems that can only be addressed through grit, willpower, and determination, we want to tell stories that widen the lens to bring structures and solutions into view.

**“Widening the lens”** is the key to telling stories that are both compelling and which shape thinking about the broad social contexts and structural realities that shape outcomes. Think of these wide lens stories as “Contextualized Actor Stories.” These kinds of stories foster thinking about broad-scale and longer-term change. They remind us that things like access to good schools, stable housing, reliable public transportation, flexible work policies, access to health insurance, and healthy food don't just happen. These conditions are created and maintained through policies, laws, and collective decisions. Contextualized actor stories remind us that when we work together to support laws and policies that support individual and collective well-being, we're fostering a healthier and more productive society.

Here's a comparative chart to evaluate whether your story "zooms in" or "widens the lens" on an issue.

<b>Isolated Actor Stories</b>	<b>Contextualized Actor Stories</b>
Individuals (unsung heroes, someone who "beat the odds")	Issues contextualized within a policy, funding situation, or an intervention
Attributing the cause of a problem to an individual action or individual example	Explaining the systematic causes of the problem and focusing on a situational context that affects many
Showing "those affected" as disempowered, beleaguered, and in need of help	Showing "those affected" as empowered and ready to act
A crisis tone to grab attention	An inviting tone that encourages curiosity, and solutions-thinking
Inspiring audience to feel sympathy for an individual or setting up a charity response	Inspiring your audience to act and change a set of conditions
Focus on fixing the person or group	Conditions or situations need to be changed
Suggesting that "caring more" or "educating yourself is a sufficient response to the problem	Offering community and regional-level solutions that serve as models for what people can do collectively
Appeal to Consumers	Appeal to Civic / Social Responsibility

## Storytelling Best Practices: 1, 2, 3

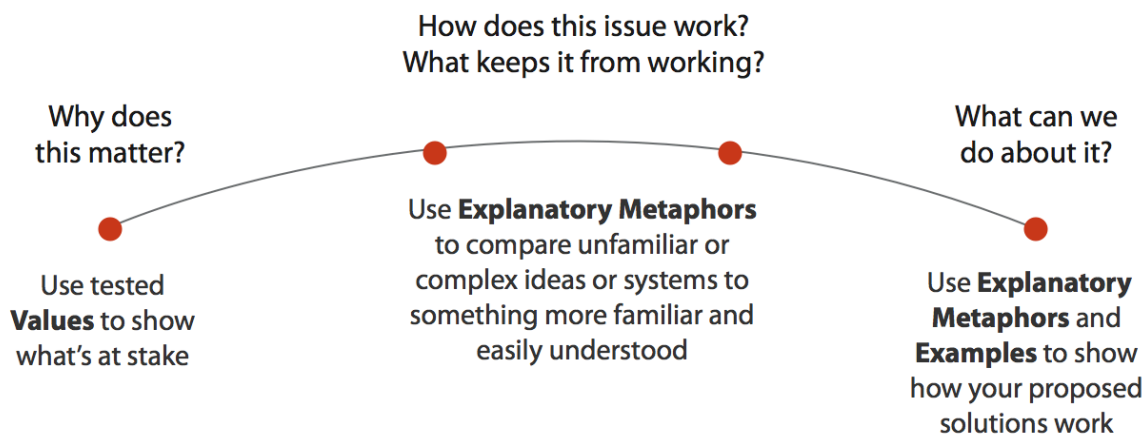
### 1. *Avoid a spotlight on individuals*

The public's dominant model of many issues is reinforced by the kinds of stories that tend to get told, a style of storytelling that takes a highly personal, individualized view, often focusing almost exclusively on the character or personality traits of the person experiencing an issue. While these stories may be highly compelling, telling them through this tightly focused lens leaves a lot of important aspects out of the picture: the factors and conditions responsible for the problem; the opportunities for public engagement; the impact on the larger society; and the need to change the systems, laws, policies and programs that have been shown to promote better outcomes.

2. *Anticipate the questions brought by the public*

FrameWorks' research supports a different narrative arc than the common bootstraps story—a more expansive construct than a triumphant individual or case of the “exception proves the rule.” We advocate for a style of storytelling that anticipates the questions that the public is likely to bring to your communication: why does this matter? how does it work? and what can be done?

## A Well-Framed Story Arc: Answering the public's big questions about social issues



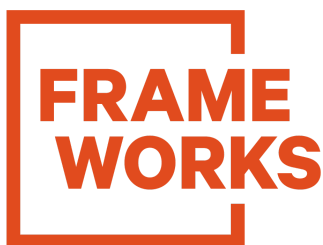
3. *Instill a sense of efficacy (can-do)*

Choose to share stories about successes and solutions.

Experts point us to policy solutions that can transform the systems that shape actions and interactions in our communities. If we were to approach our task as communicators and change agents as that of better understanding and systematically calling attention to the places where our systems fall short, we could not only prevent many of the social problems that we see, but also foster increased engagement and more full participation for all community members.

Bottom line: we can construct stories in ways that help our story listeners see decision-making contexts (not decisions) and specifically, see how they ultimately need to be adjusted and supplemented. In so doing, we can bring about the systems and structures which better support healthier interactions within and across our communities.

# Planning for Story: A Resource Guide



How can you set yourself up to be better able to tell stories that focus on structures and systems? The following are a few ideas to address some of the challenges you might have when it comes to dedicating time and resources to communicating about your work. Think of these ideas as your framing support system - three simple lessons that can be applied to community and state-based work across the country.

Importantly, the ideas described below won't cost anything. All they require is some planning for the future and an investment of time.

## ***Idea One: Build a Thematic Story Bank***

While the concept of gathering stories is not new, being intentional about not collecting stories of individual challenge, crisis, and triumph is. By gathering stories of community action and systemic and structural change you can have stories at the ready and will have something ready to go when facing the deadlines of a reporter.

These might include:

- Details of an initiative to engage middle and high-school children with older adults in their communities;
- A neighborhood walking group that did more than exercise their bodies together—they exercised their collective power to “make-over” their local park, expanding safe access to outdoor fitness and recreation for everyone in the community;
- A community center who joined together with local officials to establish and raise awareness about a hotline to report instances of abuse and neglect; and
- Government or non-profit initiatives or programs designed to get older Americans involved in volunteering and mentoring, such as SCORE.

Each of these stories is a powerful example of community members coming together to build supports that make their communities stronger and their neighborhoods safer. Having good examples of thematic stories on hand makes all the difference when your issue gets the public attention that it deserves. Create a central place to store these stories, along with a clear system for verifying consent to share the story, updating details, and deciding how/where to share them.

Here's a resource from Storytelling for Good [about setting up a story bank](#)

### ***Idea 2: Create Your Own Images***

Make a dedicated effort to create images and visuals that can be made available to partners and the media that reinforce frames used by picturing a variety of community members working together to create more vibrant and engaged communities. Show contexts like community centers or arts centers or libraries. Tell your photographers to avoid the temptation to ask folks to pose and “say cheese” and instead look for ways to show participation and engagement: images that highlight activity, systems, and communities.

Here’s a resource about [framing with visuals](#) from FrameWorks’ Aging Research

### ***Idea 3: Share the Tools***

Many hands make light work. When a variety of different voices from different parts of the community use the same methods for communicating about an issue, the impact of the message becomes stronger. To better tell your stories and to help your partners share positive messages about community, you can do things like create and share templates and examples designed to communicate information about programs in a way that also influences understanding of causes and solutions to issues.

“[Storytelling Strategies](#)” from our Talking about Elder Abuse toolkit - (see pages 3 & 4 ) is a great example showing how the powerful details of an individual story are embedded in a broader narrative that works to contextualize her story and boost understanding about the prevalence and scope of elder abuse.

Finally, use social media to find partners who are already communicating in these ways and share their messages. Ask them to share yours.

Frame On!

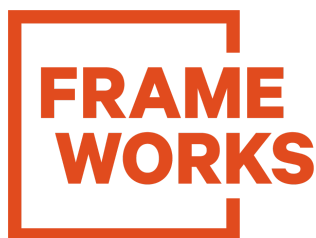
### **More Resources:**

Check out this set of resources on the FrameWorks website: [Changing Narratives and Moving Mindsets](#).

A video resource about storytelling from our “Fast Frames” series [How to Tell More Effective Stories about the Impact of Your Work](#)

New research from FrameWorks as part of a partnership with Leading for Kids, framing strategy: *Collective Care* [Building a New Narrative for Kids](#)

# The Ethics of Storytelling



An advocacy story is a real, personal story that shows how a policy, system, or institution has directly impacted a person's life — for better or for worse. Effective advocacy stories build the public will for change, influence decision-makers, and mobilize communities toward action. But not every story is effective in this way. This resource is designed to help you be thoughtful about how you elicit, shape, and

share stories.

The big idea: be intentional about collecting stories that demonstrate how community engagement and systemic and structural change are critical to improving outcomes.

## Planning for More Effective Storytelling

- Create diverse ways to capture stories. For example: story circles, individual interviews, online forms, submitted videos.
- Look for ways to reach different audiences.
- Share stories in multiple formats: social media, reports, newsletters, and speaker series
- Plan your prompts/questions in advance (see Example Prompts below), but be prepared to think of new ones on the fly.

## Example Prompts

The way a story gets elicited will shape what gets told, and how. Here are some prompts that are likelier to yield contextualized actor stories

- Tell me about a time when someone told you a story that moved you to act. What made it powerful? What stuck with you?
- Describe a society that works the way you believe it should. What does it look like when it comes to supporting collective well-being? What values shape your vision?
- Has your experience matched that vision? If so, what helped? If not, where did things fall short?

- What specific challenges or roadblocks have you run into when trying to get the resources you need? Think about costs, access, respect, or anything else that made it harder.
- What changes would you bring to our programs and systems that would bring them more in line with your values and vision? What would make things work better — not just for you, but for others too?

**Keep in mind the ultimate purpose of your storytelling**

And you may need to remind your tellers too - so often, we are asked to tell stories that “tug at the heartstrings” we can forget that there are different ways to package our experiences, and the insight and wisdom that they have given us. Consider for example the different versions of the story below. The version on the left is told to elicit sympathy, while the one on the right highlights experience and expertise:

From: Eliciting Sympathy	To: Highlighting Experience and Expertise
<p>Like many single-parent families, Adelita has encountered discrimination in encounters with the systems that support families. When she was offered home visiting services at the hospital after giving birth to her second child, she was worried. She had had too many bad experiences where her concerns were dismissed or brushed aside, or where a provider who claimed to speak her language was not truly fluent. She was certain that this would be another unpleasant experience, that she would be judged for her parenting style since in the past, too often, the services she had received didn’t reflect her goals—they reflected the system’s assumptions about what parents tend to struggle with.</p>	<p>Like many single parents, Adelita is an expert in the realities of navigating systems of support for families. Her experience had shown her again and again how too often, unfortunately, cultural assumptions shape the services people receive. Through <b>navigating dismissive attitudes and pushing for the supports her family has truly needed</b>, she has gained deep insight into how programs can be better designed and how the system needs to change. With Healthy Families Pima County she found a partner who <b>understands that better support starts with listening</b>—and who recognizes that families are the best source of knowledge about their own needs and goals. She advocated for a home visitor fluent in Spanish, and they work with her to build the skills that she wants to build, <b>drawing from her experience</b> as a parent.</p>

When we tell stories more like the reframe on the right, we build trust with community stakeholders. As a story form, contextualized actor stories (see “The Power of Stories” resource) make it easy for community stakeholders to share their lived experience in ways that honor

their agency and expertise. And, when we share stories like these we're not just amplifying voices, we're shifting power.

### **Supporting Community-Based Storytellers**

There are multiple ways to amplify community voices. These strategies range from storytelling for use in public campaigns to storytelling for leadership development. In any case, it's important to avoid extractive and harmful practices that are disempowering, and to interact with community members as equal stakeholders.

- Offer storytelling training and support.
- Promote a culture of treating personal stories as belonging to someone who may or may not choose to share that story in any given setting.
- Treat community stakeholders as equal partners who are no more obligated to share personal information than are network members.
- Provide ways for community stakeholders to contribute meaningfully to story shaping.
- Provide numerous ways for community stakeholders to serve as equal and critical partners in the work — other than sharing their stories.

# Unexpected Stories



When it comes to telling stories about our work, we can easily get into a habit of thinking that the only kinds of stories worth telling are those which represent wholesale victory. However, the work itself tends to be slow, incremental, and setbacks are often part of the process.

## **Stories need not only be about “victories”**

Sure, we need stories about “wins,” but we can also talk about small changes, slow and steady progress. Such stories can be constructed to convey a sense of momentum, inviting people into the work, asking for their engagement.

And there is also room for stories about “losses,” especially for multifaceted and complex situations where maybe not everything went exactly as we would have wanted it to, but a great deal was gained. For example, in recent work with Community Action Agencies, we worked to pull forward the incremental gains in an instance of legislative testimony that seemed “unsuccessful.” The Active Day Center did not get funded for one agency, but they heard from the legislator that he was going to be socializing their topic and had high hopes that it would pass next time. Another example was about a homeless shelter that closed (but whose closure invited a broad-scale community conversation and got the ear of powerful community leaders, who are now engaged to find new solutions). In such cases, stories may be the very best thing to do to give the work the boost it needs to make it over the finish line.

## **Remember “what if”**

Stories about a failure can be crafted to be told in such a way that shares what could have happened, or what should have. Look for ways to story the wisdom gained from “failures” to show the way to a solution to in turn inspire solutions-thinking.

## **Unexpected Messengers**

At FrameWorks, the choice of messenger for a communication is a frame element that can be as important as the message itself. The message is reinforced or undermined by the choice of messenger, and so too with stories. A story from an unlikely ally can prompt public reconsideration of an issue or recommendation.

For example, in our vaccination work, studies show that school nurses are effective messengers for moving families toward accepting vaccines for their children. On children's oral health, dentists were deemed less objective than pediatricians.

We know that we want to look to people with lived experience, but we also don't want to place additional stress or burden on those who are experiencing problems (see the companion guide about Ethics of Storytelling). Perhaps you might choose to seek out stories from staff - what draws them and keeps them engaged in the work?

### **Main characters need not be a person**

Data can be the main character in a story. Or a town. Or even a meeting.

Documentary film producer Christine Herbes-Sommers of [Vital Pictures](#) regularly demonstrates this principle in her work. In [Coming of Age in Aging America](#), one of the main characters is a town, and all of the urban planning and design activities that make it a great place to age in place. Or in [Raising of America](#), many of the segments feature data as a main character, meaning that it is situated, contextualized, deeply explored and understood - it is given life, not simply asserted.

Consider this image featuring the Whole Person Care & Coordinated Entry team engaged in the work of collaborating and communicating regularly to redesign systems in their community



(image taken from Marin County Whole Person Care Initiative video)

## Calibrate for Hope

Finally, because we know that stories about trauma and adversity are overrepresented, we can choose to overselect for stories of healing and hope. Bring focus to solutions. Paint a picture of the world we are working to create.

An example from the FrameWorks report [Framing Adversity Trauma and Resilience](#)

“In studies investigating effective ways to talk about the effects of serious adversity, FrameWorks researchers found that the value of *Community Strength* built agreement that addressing toxic stress was a priority and built support for evidenced-based programs to address stress in communities. Importantly, this value cued productive discussion about communities as active partners, not just a site of intervention. Participants imagined ways that ordinary residents could work together with policymakers and service providers to develop strategies and make decisions that worked in their communities.”