

Fundraising Story Basics

How to Craft Stories That
Raise More Money



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Why I Created This Guide

As the founder of the Nonprofit Storytelling Conference, I've seen many nonprofit professionals struggle to tell fundraising stories effectively. Most don't even know the basics—so I created this mini-course to help them get started!

Stories are powerful tools for fundraising. A well-crafted fundraising story connects, inspires, and compels donors to act.

Whether you're writing appeals, emails, or sharing stories in face-to-face meetings, this guide will help you tell stories that inspire donors to give.

What You'll Learn in This Mini-Course:

- **Module 1: The Fundraising Story Formula**
Learn the three key elements of a compelling fundraising story
- **Module 2: Complete vs. Incomplete Stories**
Understand how leaving a story unfinished can engage donors and drive action.
- **Module 3: The Three Laws of Fundraising Stories**
Discover the principles that make stories emotionally engaging and donor-focused.
- **Module 4: Tactics for Effective Fundraising Stories**
Use proven techniques to craft powerful stories that raise money.
- **Module 5: Common Pitfalls to Avoid**
Recognize and eliminate common mistakes that weaken your storytelling.
- **Module 6: "What If My Organization Doesn't Have a Clear Beneficiary?"**
Learn how to apply storytelling techniques even if your nonprofit focuses on the nonhuman beneficiaries, such as the environment, the arts, or advocacy.
- **Module 7: Writing Your Own Fundraising Story**
Follow step-by-step prompts to create your own fundraising story.

Let's get started!

Module 1: The Fundraising Story Formula

A strong fundraising story follows a simple yet impactful structure.

Here's the formula:

Intention + Obstacle + Consequences

Let's breakdown the 3 elements:

1. Intention: What does the beneficiary want or need?

This is the core desire or challenge faced by the person, community, or cause your nonprofit serves.

Examples:

- A child in need of school supplies.
- A homeless individual seeking safe shelter.
- A dog in a rescue shelter waiting for a forever home.

2. Obstacle: What stands in the way of fulfilling that need?

This is the challenge preventing the beneficiary from achieving their goal.

Examples:

- Lack of funds for educational resources.
- Housing shortages and long waitlists.
- Overcrowding at the animal shelter.

3. Consequences: What happens if the obstacle is or isn't removed?

Consequences bring urgency and stakes to your story. There are two types:

1. **Negative Consequences** (if help doesn't come): The child falls behind in school, the individual remains on the street, the shelter has to turn animals away.
2. **Positive Consequences** (if help is given): The child thrives in school, the individual finds safe housing, the animal gets adopted.

By using this formula and its three key elements, your fundraising story will become more compelling and drive more donations.

Module 2: Complete vs. Incomplete Stories

One of the most important aspects of a successful fundraising story is leaving it incomplete.

Many nonprofits instinctively tell “complete stories”—where the problem has already been solved. While these stories can be inspiring, they do not create urgency or invite the donor to take action. Instead, an “incomplete story” presents a compelling situation with an uncertain outcome—one that the donor has the power to influence. When the donor sees themselves as the missing piece in the story, they are far more likely to give.

Here's the simple difference between a “complete story” and an “incomplete story”:

A **complete story** has a clear beginning, middle, and end, leaving no role for the donor to play. While it may be inspiring, it does not create a sense of urgency or necessity for immediate action.

An **incomplete story**, on the other hand, presents a compelling situation with an uncertain outcome—one that the donor has the power to influence. This invites them into the narrative, making them an active participant rather than a passive observer.

Here's an example:

Complete Story:

"Thanks to generous donations, Maria and her children now have the food they need. She no longer has to worry about putting meals on the table. For \$25, you can help provide a week's worth of food for Maria and her family."

Incomplete Story:

"Right now, Maria is struggling to put food on the table for her children. She skips meals so her kids can eat, but it's not enough. For \$25, you can help provide a week's worth of food for Maria and her family."

In the complete story example above, there is no need for the donor to give because Maria already has food and no longer needs help. The problem has already been solved, leaving no urgency or role for the donor to play.

In contrast, the incomplete story example presents a real and immediate need, making the donor an active participant. Maria is still struggling, and her future remains uncertain—unless the donor steps in to change her story. This approach invites urgency and action, increasing the likelihood of engagement and donations.

By using an incomplete story, you create an emotional connection and a clear, immediate way for donors to step in and make a difference.

Module 3: The Three Laws of Fundraising Stories

Great fundraising stories aren't just about telling a compelling narrative—they're about guiding the donor toward action. To do that, your story needs to do three critical things: align with the donor's inner story, create real emotional stakes, and provide a pivotal moment where the donor's choice determines the outcome.

Each of the following three laws will help you craft stories that connect deeply with donors and inspire them to give.

Let's explore how they work:

Law 1: Align Your Story with the Donor's Inner Story

Fundraising stories operate on two levels: the "outer story" and the "inner story".

Outer Story: This is the story your nonprofit tells about a beneficiary, an issue, or a need. It includes the events, characters, and details that make up the narrative.

Inner Story: This is the story the donor tells themselves when they engage with your outer story. It's shaped by their values, experiences, and personal motivations.

A successful fundraising story aligns the outer story with the donor's inner story, making them feel personally connected and compelled to take action.

Donors bring their own experiences, values, and emotions to your story. If your story aligns with their inner beliefs and passions, they are more likely to give.

Example:

Outer Story (Your Story): "A little boy and a veterinarian huddle together to save a sick dog."

Inner Story (The Donor's Interpretation): "I love animals. I remember saving my childhood pet. I want to help others do the same."

Law 2: Make the Stakes Real

Emotional stakes create urgency and connection. Your story must go beyond facts and figures—it must tap into real human emotions.

To uncover the emotional stakes in your story, ask yourself these three key questions:

1. What does the beneficiary hope for, or what are they afraid of losing?

2. How has this situation made them feel?
3. What impact does this have on their day-to-day life?

Before & After Examples:

Example #1:

Before (Lack of Emotional Stakes):

"We provide meals to seniors in our community, ensuring they have food to eat."

After (With Emotional Stakes):

"For Mary, the meal she receives isn't just food—it's the only time during the day she feels seen and cared for. Without it, she spends long, lonely days wondering if anyone remembers she exists. For \$25, you can provide a meal and a moment of human connection for Mary."

Example #2:

Before (Lack of Emotional Stakes):

"Our organization helps kids get school supplies."

After (With Emotional Stakes):

"Seven-year-old Jake starts school tomorrow, but his backpack is empty. He dreads being the only student without pencils and notebooks. For \$25, you can give Jake the tools he needs to walk into class with confidence."

Law 3: Create a Plot Pivot Point

A Plot Pivot Point is the moment in your story where the outcome hangs in the balance, and the donor has the power to decide what happens next.

This pivot point is typically a key phrase or sentence—one that splits the story into two possible endings. It turns the story into an incomplete story, creating a sense of urgency and engagement.

In Module 2, we explored how incomplete stories draw people in. A Plot Pivot Point is that critical turning point where the donor first sees two possible futures—one with negative consequences and one with positive ones. Instead of presenting a fully resolved story, you leave the ending open, making it clear that the donor's support is the deciding factor in creating a positive outcome.

Why This Works

The use of a Plot Pivot Point makes the donor feel like an essential part of the story. They aren't just hearing about a situation—they're being invited to change it. The tension keeps them engaged and motivates them to donate.

Before & After Example

To illustrate, here's how a Plot Pivot Point transforms a complete story into an incomplete story (the pivot point is highlighted in the "After" version):

Before (Complete Story)

"Last year, our shelter rescued and placed 50 dogs in loving homes. We're proud of our impact and look forward to helping even more animals this year. Will you support our work?"

After (Incomplete Story with a Plot Pivot Point)

"A scared, hungry puppy named Max was just rescued and is waiting for a warm home. *But right now, our shelter is at capacity, and we don't have the resources to care for every abandoned pet.* For \$25, you can help provide food and shelter for Max until he finds a loving home."

By including a Plot Pivot Point in your fundraising story, you invite donors into the story, making them the ones who determine its ending. This deepens engagement and increases the likelihood of them donating.

Module 4: Tactics for Effective Fundraising Stories

To create compelling fundraising stories, use these proven storytelling tactics:

1. Use Incomplete Stories

A complete story (where the problem is already solved) signals that the nonprofit doesn't need urgent help. Instead, tell a story where the ending is yet to be determined, and the donor's role is to complete it.

2. Narrow Your Focus

Instead of asking donors to fund a broad mission, focus on a single, identifiable, and time-sensitive aspect of your work.

Example: Instead of "Help us end illiteracy," say, "This summer, we are running three reading classes for struggling junior high students. Will you help them learn to read before school starts?"

3. Create Urgency with a Current Need

The need should be happening right now. Avoid generic appeals for future work.

Example: Instead of "We help kids in need," say, "Right now, a child is waiting for a warm meal—will you provide one today?"

4. Use Donor-Centric Language

Frame the donor as the hero. Instead of "Our organization provides meals to children," say, "Your support ensures that hungry children have meals."

5. Use 'You' Instead of 'We'

Donors are more engaged when the language speaks directly to them. Instead of saying, "We help children stay in school," say, "You can help a child stay in school." This shift makes the donor feel personally involved and responsible for making a difference.

6. Focus on ONE Beneficiary

Focus on a single, identifiable beneficiary to make the story personal and relatable.

Example: Instead of "Help us end world hunger," say, "For just \$25, you can provide a warm meal for Emma, who hasn't eaten all day."

Module 5: Common Pitfalls to Avoid

Avoid these common mistakes that weaken fundraising stories:

1. Overloading with Statistics

Data supports a story but shouldn't overshadow the emotional core. Use one key statistic to reinforce the message rather than overwhelming the reader.

2. Using Jargon

Speak in clear, accessible language. Avoid technical terms that donors may not understand.

3. Making the Nonprofit the Hero

Your donors should feel like they are making the difference. Position them as the ones driving change.

Before & After Example:

Before (Nonprofit-Centric):

"Our organization has provided thousands of meals to children in need. Thanks to our dedicated team, we've ensured that no child goes hungry. Will you support our work?"

After (Donor-Centric):

"Right now, a child is waiting for their next meal. Your generosity ensures they won't go to bed hungry tonight. For \$25, you can provide a week's worth of nutritious meals."

4. Failing to Include a Call to Action

Always give the donor a clear next step to take. Whether it's donating, sharing the story, or attending an event, make the ask explicit.

A compelling Call to Action follows this structure:

1. State the Urgency – Why does the donor need to act now?
2. Specify the Action – What exactly should they do?
3. Highlight the Impact – What will their action accomplish?

Example: "Right now, a hungry child is waiting for their next meal. Your gift of \$25 will provide a week's worth of nutritious food. Give today to feed a child."

5. Telling a Complete Story

If the story resolves without donor intervention, there's no urgency to give. Keep the story open-ended with a clear need.

Module 6: What If My Organization Doesn't Have a Clear Beneficiary?

You may be wondering how this storytelling approach applies to your nonprofit if your organization doesn't work directly with people in need. If you focus on the environment, the arts, advocacy, or another cause where the beneficiaries aren't individuals, the same storytelling principles still apply.

The key is to identify the central character in your story. This could be:

- A piece of land that's being protected from destruction.
- A threatened species struggling to survive.
- A piece of art that brings joy and inspiration to a community.
- A movement fighting for justice and equality.

The character in your story doesn't always have to be a person—it can be an idea, a place, or a cause. The important thing is to present it in a way that helps donors see the stakes, understand the urgency, and recognize their role in making a difference.

For example:

Before (No Clear Character, No Urgency):

"Our organization works to protect forests from deforestation. Your support helps ensure our efforts continue."

After (With a Clear Character and Urgency):

"Right now, an ancient forest home to thousands of species is at risk of being cleared. Without protection, it could be lost forever. Will you help safeguard this vital ecosystem before it's too late?"

By giving your cause a central character and an uncertain outcome, you create the same emotional connection and urgency that drives donations in any type of nonprofit fundraising.

Module 7: Writing Your Own Fundraising Story

Now it's your turn! Use these bite-sized prompts to build your fundraising story step by step:

Step 1: Define the Intention

- Who is your beneficiary?
- What do they want or need?

Step 2: Identify the Obstacle

- What is standing in their way?
- What challenges make it difficult for them to achieve their goal?

Step 3: Establish the Consequences

- What happens if they don't get help?
- What changes if they do receive support?

Step 4: Make the Stakes Real

- How does this situation make them feel?
- What personal hopes or fears do they have?

Step 5: Create a Plot Pivot Point

- Leave the story unfinished.
- Present two possible endings: one with help, one without.
- Clearly show how the donor can change the outcome.
- Make sure the need is urgent.

By following these steps, you'll create a compelling, donor-centric story that moves people to act. To see an example story written out, go to the next page (pg 11).

Take Your Storytelling to the Next Level

This mini-course is just the beginning.

If you want to master nonprofit storytelling and create even more compelling donor communications, join us at the Nonprofit Storytelling Conference. At the conference, you'll learn from the best in the field, gain hands-on training, and walk away with storytelling strategies that will take your fundraising to new heights.

Learn More & Register Here:

<https://nonprofitstorytellingconference.com>

A Simple Example of a Fundraising Story - Broken Up Into the 5 Steps

Step 1: Define the Intention

Eight-year-old Lucas sat in the back of his classroom, staring at his empty desk. His classmates pulled out their books, flipping pages eagerly. But Lucas had no book to open—he didn't have one at home, either.

(Lucas's need: A book of his own to practice reading and keep up with his peers.)

Step 2: Identify the Obstacle

His teacher, Ms. Ramirez, had noticed Lucas struggling with reading, often losing focus or pretending he didn't care. But she knew the truth—his family couldn't afford books, and the library was too far away to visit regularly.

(The challenge preventing Lucas from reading: No access to books at home, leading to him falling behind in school.)

Step 3: Establish the Consequences

Lucas was starting to feel different from his classmates. He stayed quiet during reading time, dreading the moment when he'd be called on to read aloud. The words on the page blurred together, and his confidence slipped further every day.

(The consequences: Without books, Lucas will continue to struggle in school, feeling discouraged and left behind.)

Step 4: Make the Stakes Real

Ms. Ramirez knew that something as simple as a book could change everything for Lucas. A book of his own could help him practice at home, build confidence, and keep up with his classmates. But right now, that book doesn't exist for him.

(The emotional stakes: Lucas's struggle isn't just about reading—it's about self-confidence, opportunity, and his future.)

Step 5: Create a Plot Pivot Point

But tonight could be different. **For \$25, you can put a book in Lucas's hands and give him the chance to fall in love with reading. Will you help?**

(The plot pivot point: Lucas's future is at a crossroads—will he continue struggling, or will he get the book that helps him thrive? The donor has the power to change his story.)