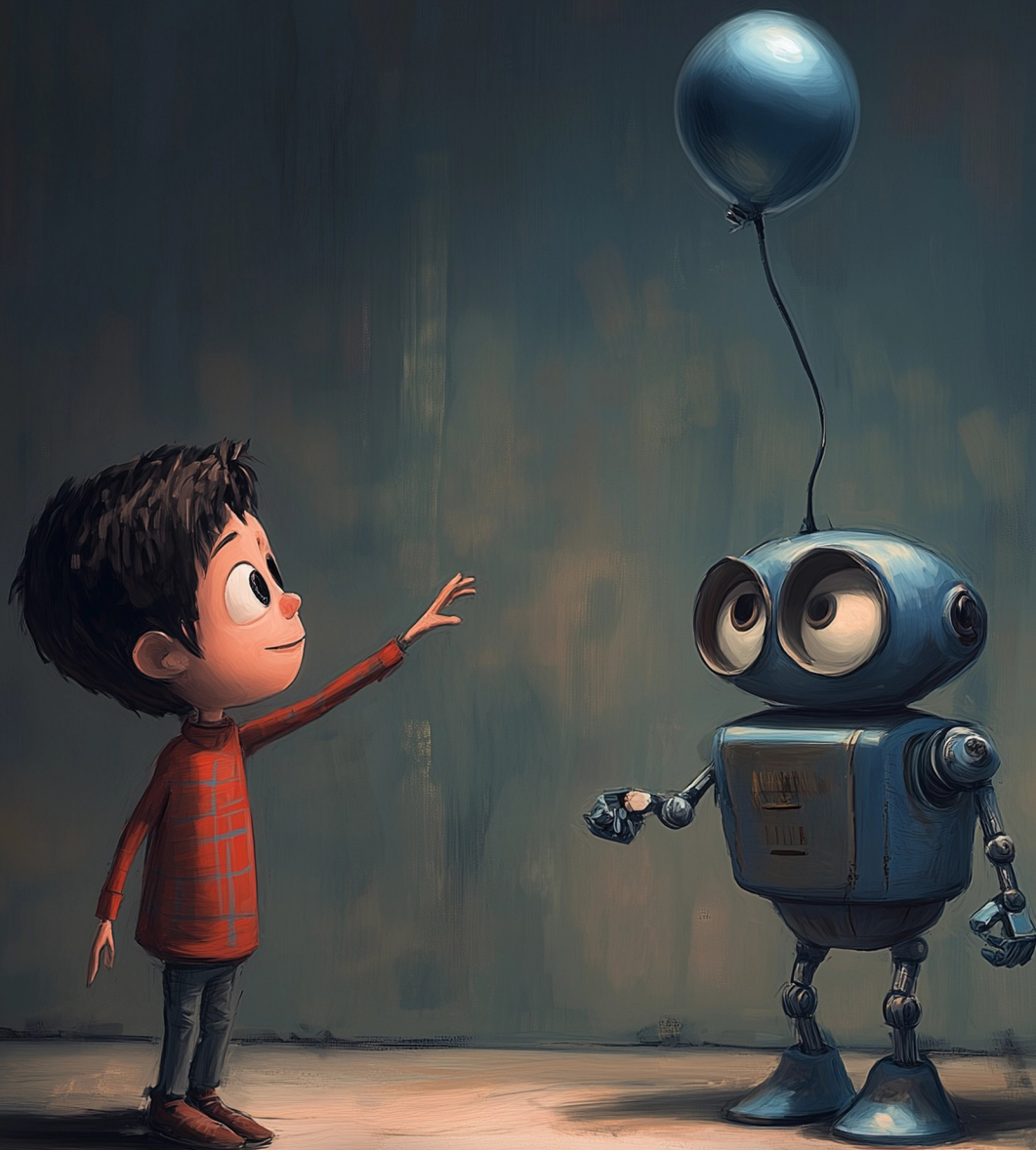


"It All Started When..."

Storytelling Toolkit

A Simple Phrase That Captures
Donors' Attention and Drives Giving



a Nonprofit Storytelling Conference Publication

The "It All Started When..." Storytelling Toolkit

A Simple Phrase That Captures Attention and Drives Giving

Starting a story can be one of the hardest parts of writing.

"It all started when..." is a simple, tried-and-true way to begin. It's a natural and effective way to pull people in because it immediately signals a story is unfolding.

This phrase helps storytellers avoid overthinking their openings and gets them straight to the action. Plus, it works across multiple mediums - emails, speeches, social media, and more - making it a valuable tool in your fundraising and storytelling toolkit.

Why "It All Started When..." Works

- **Creates Immediate Curiosity** – The reader wants to know what happens next.
- **Feels Conversational & Natural** – Like hearing a friend tell a gripping story.
- **Signals a Pivotal Moment** – Introduces a turning point that makes donors lean in.
- **Easy to Adapt** – Works in appeals, emails, speeches, and social media posts.

How to Use "It All Started When..." Effectively

- **Make It Personal** – Focus on a single person or moment.
- **Keep It Short & Intriguing** – The sentence that follows should leave the reader wanting more.
- **Build to Emotion & Tension** – Let the donor feel the urgency.
- **Lead Toward the Ask** – Ensure the story connects to the donor's role in the resolution.

Swipe File: 30+ "It All Started When..." Openers for Nonprofits

Use this swipe file to jumpstart your nonprofit storytelling.

Whether you're writing an appeal, crafting a social media post, or preparing for a live event, these "It All Started When..." openers are designed to instantly engage your audience. Find the category that fits your mission, choose a compelling opener, and build a story that draws donors in and inspires them to give.

Human Services

- It all started when Maria's landlord raised the rent overnight, leaving her and her three kids with nowhere to go.
- It all started when a single missed paycheck forced Jason to make an impossible choice - rent or food?
- It all started when Emily realized she hadn't eaten in two days.

Health and Medical Organizations

- It all started when James felt a sharp pain in his chest but had no insurance to get it checked out.
- It all started when a promising cancer treatment lost funding just before clinical trials could begin.
- It all started when a veteran struggling with PTSD finally found a place that understood his pain.

Education & Youth Programs

- It all started when Jordan, a bright 7-year-old, showed up to school hungry for the third day in a row.
- It all started when a single scholarship changed the course of Lisa's future.
- It all started when a literacy volunteer realized that 1 in 5 adults in her town couldn't read.

Environmental and Conservation Organizations

- It all started when a massive oil spill threatened an entire coastline.
- It all started when the last breeding pair of a rare bird species vanished from the wetlands.
- It all started when a group of high school students decided to clean up their local river - and found hundreds of pounds of trash.

Arts and Cultural Organizations

- It all started when a child picked up a paintbrush for the first time and saw their world in color.
- It all started when an old violin was placed in Jamie's hands, and magic happened.
- It all started when a historic theater faced demolition until the community rallied to save it.

Advocacy and Human Rights Organizations

- It all started when Maria was denied housing because of her disability - and decided to fight back.
- It all started when a young activist stood in front of city hall with a sign demanding change.
- It all started when a single phone call stopped an unjust deportation.

Religious and Faith-Based Organizations

- It all started when a small congregation opened its doors to families without homes.
- It all started when faith leaders came together to rebuild a community after a disaster.
- It all started when a prison ministry helped an inmate find hope and a fresh start.

Professional and Trade Associations

- It all started when a group of nurses fought for better patient care conditions.
- It all started when a small business owner found unexpected mentorship through a professional association.
- It all started when laborers demanded fair wages and changed industry standards forever.

Social and Community Service Organizations

- It all started when a vacant lot was turned into a thriving community garden.
- It all started when a single mom found the support she needed to start a new life.
- It all started when an aging veteran faced eviction - until a local nonprofit stepped in.

Philanthropic Foundations

- It all started when a donor-advised fund helped launch a groundbreaking medical research initiative.
- It all started when a foundation made it possible for a struggling nonprofit to expand its impact.
- It all started when a group of philanthropists pooled resources to address childhood hunger.

Animal Organizations

- It all started when someone left a cardboard box on our doorstep - and it started moving.
- It all started when Daisy, a trembling dog, cowered in the corner of the shelter, too scared to make eye contact.

- It all started when an abandoned kitten cried out from beneath a car in a grocery store parking lot.

Building Your Story After the Opener

A great opening grabs attention, but what comes next is what keeps the donor engaged and moves them toward action.

Here's a simple formula to help you structure your story:

It all started when [pivotal moment or struggle] **but then** [intervention or discovery] **led to** [transformation or call to action].

This formula ensures that each part of your narrative keeps the donor engaged and moves them toward making a difference.

Let's break it down into clear steps you can follow:

1. **Set Up the Problem Clearly** – After your opening, describe the challenge or struggle in a way that makes it real and relatable. Use vivid details to paint a picture of what's at stake.
2. **Introduce the Turning Point** – Show how the nonprofit's work (and by extension, the donor's role) creates an opportunity for change. What help arrived? What intervention made a difference?
3. **Show the Impact** – Highlight the transformation that happened because of support. This could be a life saved, an opportunity unlocked, or a second chance given.
4. **Make the Donor the Key Player** – Reinforce that this change was only possible because of generosity from people like them. Frame the donor as the hero who can create more of these transformations.
5. **End with a Clear Call to Action** – A compelling story naturally leads to an invitation for the donor to be part of the next success story. Use a direct, emotional, and action-driven ask.

Example: *It all started when Carlos collapsed at work. But then, thanks to emergency medical aid, he got the life-saving care he needed. Now, he's back on his feet - but other people like him need help today. Will you provide life-saving care to someone in need? Your \$50 donation ensures immediate medical attention for a person who can't afford it.*

By following this structure, you can turn a simple phrase into a powerful, donor-centered story that drives engagement and giving.

Ready to use this in your next fundraising appeal?

Choose an opener, build your story, and invite your donors to be part of the resolution!

Want to go even deeper into nonprofit storytelling?

Join us at the **Nonprofit Storytelling Conference**, where fundraising professionals gather to master the art of emotionally compelling stories that drive action.

You'll learn from top experts, network with like-minded peers, and walk away with strategies to make your donor communications more powerful than ever.

To learn about the conference, go to: <https://nonprofitstorytellingconference.com>