HOW TO CRAFT A
FELT TRUTH

The building block of a meaningful moment.

A Storymaking Workbook from
Nonprofit Storytelling Pro

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The building block of a meaningful moment.

Donors remember the stories that make them *feel.*

That feeling — the moment when their heart catches and they suddenly care — is a **meaningful moment.**

You can't make someone have a meaningful moment. But you can create the kind of story that opens the door for one.

That's where a **Felt Truth** comes in.

A Felt Truth is the moment in your story when an emotional truth shows itself in a way people can't ignore.

Maybe it's someone staring at their last piece of bread before handing it to someone hungrier.
Or a dog shrinking from kindness because kindness once hurt.
Or a forest growing quiet after years of chainsaws.

Whether your story centers on a person, an animal, or a place, these are the moments that pull a donor close — the ones that help them feel why their help matters.

When you craft a Felt Truth, you're not just telling a story. You're giving the donor a moment they can experience for themselves — the kind that makes them stop and realize they're part of something bigger.

I've boiled the process down to **five steps** that will show you how to find those moments, build them into short scenes, and use them in your appeals, thank-yous, and reports — so donors don't just read your stories. They feel them.

This is a new way of thinking about storytelling — one that takes a little practice.

The first few times you try it, it might feel unfamiliar or even a little clumsy. That's okay. Every storyteller starts there. With each try, it gets easier to spot these moments and capture them on the page.

Let's get started.

Step 1 — Feel It

Read this scene slowly. Don't analyze it yet. Just notice what you feel.

Subject line:
She didn't say anything. She just buckled him back in the car.

Opening line:
He thought they were just going to look at the apartment.

Liam was six. He didn't understand how housing applications worked.
All he knew was: the place had carpet. And a window shaped like a rainbow.

His mom, Mary, told him they'd just go look. But when she buckled him back into the car without saying a word, he asked:
"Did I do something wrong?"

She didn't answer. Because if she said one word, she'd cry.
And she couldn't afford to cry in front of him again.

Mary works two jobs. She does everything right.
But when the landlord raised the rent by $400, she couldn't keep up.
Every apartment she applies for either requires months of pay stubs or disappears before she can even get there.

So for now, the car is home.
Night after night, she tells Liam it's just for now — that someday they'll have a place with carpet and a window shaped like a rainbow.

Pause for a moment.

What did you feel?

Tightness in your chest? Sadness? The urge to help? That feeling right there — that's a meaningful moment starting to happen.

Now let's see how that feeling was *crafted.*

Step 2 — See How It Works

The emotion in that scene didn't happen by accident. It's built from three invisible parts — the three pieces of a **Felt Truth**.

1. A Small, Specific Moment

Something *real* happens.

- She buckled him back in the car.
- The rainbow-shaped window.
- She couldn't afford to cry again.

Tiny details that **pull the reader into the moment.**

2. An Unspoken Human Feeling

We sense what's going on underneath.

- Her silence isn't cold — it's protective.
- His question isn't confusion — it's fear.
- No feeling words are named, yet we feel them anyway.

3. A Recognition or Revelation

Something becomes clear — to the reader or the character.

- This isn't just about getting an apartment. It's about trying to be a good parent.
- The donor realizes, *"No parent should have to make their child sleep in a car and pretend it's okay."*

That's the truth that hits hardest. That's the **Felt Truth.**

A Felt Truth connects because of recognition**.** When a donor sees their own love, fear, or pride inside someone else's story, they stop analyzing and start *feeling.* That's when a story becomes a **meaningful moment.**

For causes that don't center on people

Emotion doesn't come from the animal, the forest, or the river itself — it comes from the *human quality* we recognize in it.

- A dog cowers from a hand reaching to pet it — it doesn't know who to trust.
- A sapling droops in dry, cracked soil — it's running out of chances.
- A whale thrashes in a net — it's running out of air.

When you tie your scene to something human — safety, trust, fear, hope, courage — people don't just understand it. They *feel* it. And that's how even a non-human story can spark a meaningful moment.

Step 3 — Gather What You Need

Now it's your turn — and don't worry, I'll walk you through it.

Together, we'll start spotting the pieces that make a Felt Truth work:

- the small moment,
- the hidden feeling,
- the truth underneath.

First: Find a Small, Specific Moment

Every Felt Truth starts inside a *real situation*.

Think of a moment from your organization that made you feel something — maybe an interaction you witnessed, a story you heard, or a scene you can't forget. Something that made you think, *"This is why our work matters."*

That's your starting place.

Now, instead of telling the whole story, zoom in on one instant inside it — a second when something *shifted.* Maybe it was a sound, a look, or a movement that said more than words could.

Ask yourself:

- What did I actually *see, hear, or notice* in that instant?
- If a camera froze the frame, what would it capture?
- What one action or detail tells the story without words?

You might notice:

- A mom buckling her son back into the car.
- A volunteer whispering to a turtle as someone cuts the netting free.
- A student staring at a blank page and closing their notebook.

That's your first piece — the small, specific moment that lets the reader *stand there* with you.

Second: Listen for the Unspoken Human Feeling

Once you've found your moment, look underneath it.

Something is happening that no one is saying aloud — a feeling trying to stay hidden.
It's often what drives the action you just noticed.

Ask yourself:

- What's this person trying to protect, hide, or hold together?
- What emotion can we sense by their actions in the scene?

You might find:

- "She keeps her voice calm so he won't worry." – *Protection*
- "He waits until everyone leaves before he eats." – *Shame*
- "She checks her phone one last time." – *Hope*
- "He sits down before taking off his coat." – *Exhaustion*

That's your second piece — the unspoken human feeling that gives your moment meaning.

Third: Name the Recognition or Revelation

Finally, ask what becomes clear to the person in the story, or to the donor reading it.

This is the *truth beneath the moment*, the line that makes people quietly think, *I get that.*

Ask yourself:

- What does this moment reveal about being human?
- What truth would my donor instantly recognize?

You might find truths like:

- "No parent should have to make their child sleep in a car."

- “Everyone deserves to be seen.”
- “It’s hard to ask for help when you’re supposed to be strong.”

That’s the heartbeat of your story — the recognition that turns understanding into empathy.

You now have these three pieces — the *moment*, the *feeling*, and the *truth*.

In the next step, you’ll learn how to put them together to create a short scene that makes your reader *care* — the kind that moves a donor to give.

Step 4 — Build Your Own Scene

Now that you’ve gathered your three pieces — the *moment*, the *feeling*, and the *recognition or revelation* — it’s time to put them together.

Here’s a simple structure you can follow:

When _____
(small, specific moment)

(someone) _____
shows or reveals (the unspoken feeling)

That’s when _____
(recognition or revelation — the truth your donor will feel)

Example:

When: *When the parking lot went quiet, Mary buckled her son in.*

(someone): *Liam thought it meant they were safe.*

That’s when: *She knew it meant she wasn’t being the parent he deserved.*

That’s a complete Felt Truth — a moment, a feeling, and a recognition that helps a donor *feel what’s at stake.*

Now it's your turn.

Use the space below to write your own Felt Truth. Start small, stay honest, and trust that a single moment can say everything.

When _____
(small, specific moment)

(someone) _____
shows or reveals (the unspoken feeling)

That's when _____
(recognition or revelation — the truth your donor will feel)

That's it — your Felt Truth in three lines.

Taking It Past the Three Lines

What you just wrote isn't the whole story — it's the *heart* of it. Those three lines are your emotional foundation.

When you turn this into a longer story — for an appeal, thank-you, or report — you're simply building *around* that heartbeat. Everything else should exist to serve it.

You can expand your three lines by:

- **Adding clarity, not history.** Give just enough context so the donor understands *why this moment matters right now.* Skip the long backstory that doesn't connect to what the donor can do.
- **Showing what happens next.** What's the choice, risk, or need that comes after this moment — the part the donor can help change?
- **Inviting the donor in.** What could their gift make possible from here?

But don't bury the moment.

The Felt Truth should still sit at the center — the part readers *feel* before they even think.

Step 5 — Put Your Felt Truth to Work

You just built the emotional center of a story.

Now it's time to put it to work.

The same moment can do different jobs depending on where it appears. What changes is **how you frame it**, not the feeling itself.

Let's go back to Mary and Liam in the car. That single moment could appear in three very different ways:

1) **In an appeal:**
   You'd invite the donor to *step into* that scene — to be the one who changes what happens next.

   "Right now, families like Mary's are waiting for a safe place to live. Will you give a gift of $83 to help a mother and her son move out of their car and into a safe home?"

2) **In a thank-you:**
   You'd keep the emotion but shift the tense — the donor *is* already changing the story.

   "Your gift **is** helping a mother and her son move out of their car and into a safe home."

3) **In a donor report:**
   You'd show the completed change and what the donor's generosity *did.*

   "Your gift moved a mother and her son move out of their car and into a safe home."

The scene stays the same. Only the role of the donor changes — sometimes they're about to step in, sometimes they already have. Either way, the moment still moves them. And that's what great fundraising is made of.

A Note on When ***Not*** to Use a Felt Truth

You don't need one in everything you write.
If it makes your message less clear or too long, skip it.

Use Felt Truths where emotion matters most — in stories, appeals, thank-yous, and reports. Because when you use one well — whether it's a mother, a river, or a rescued dog — you're creating the space for a meaningful moment to happen.

Next Step — Keep Going with Us

Inside **Nonprofit Storytelling Pro**, you'll learn how to take what you just wrote, refine it and turn it into full donor communications — appeals, thank-yous, and reports that keep the emotion alive *and* raise more money.

You'll get practical help, real feedback, and new ideas every week — so you're never stuck wondering what to say or how to say it.

Learn more at **npstorypro.com**

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