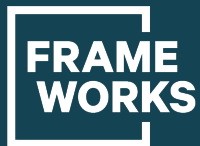


# Framing Your Impact

The “VIP Approach” to Crafting Success Stories

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# We need to tell (better) success stories

For nonprofits, sharing the positive outcomes of our work isn't vanity; it's a necessity.

Knowing that the work is making a difference helps to keep staff and members motivated. Hearing about a project's momentum can inspire more people to join the effort. And when nonprofits are known for catalyzing and driving positive change, they have more credibility with the decision-makers who they need to influence – and the supporters they need to attract.

This resource is designed to help nonprofits identify and share more effective success stories – and to avoid ways of talking about impact that are underpowered or unproductive.

## The shape of a success story matters

While every nonprofit needs to talk about its contributions, some ways of talking about success can fall flat or undermine other goals.

For example, if evidence of impact is shared only through numbers – without narrative – the communication is likely to have little effect. Numbers need narrative. Many communicators dress up their data with slick fonts, attractive colors, and other graphic design elements – only to find that it doesn't make a splash. People tend to tune out or misinterpret standalone statistics.

Storytelling helps. Yet not any story will do.

- Stories that reinforce negative stereotypes about marginalized communities and populations slow the journey toward justice.
- Stories that position a coalition or initiative as a superhero leaping long-standing social obstacles in a single bound usually come off as too self-congratulatory.
- Feel-good stories that revolve around “rescuing” people may spark sympathy but do little to help people think about systems that need to change.

The shape of our stories shape what people believe is possible for our communities. When we carefully frame our success stories, we help to change the conversation about social issues. We can bring structures and systems into view – while highlighting our role in changing them.

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## What makes a story a story

Compared to other ways of organizing ideas, stories are more compelling. People are up to twenty times more likely to remember information shared as a story<sup>1</sup>.

Yet it's surprisingly easy to *call* something is a story when it's really just a description or example. For something to count as a story, it must involve a change in state over time.

The basic elements of a true story are already familiar to you: setting, characters, and plot<sup>2</sup>. To assemble these ingredients into an impact story, here's a reliable recipe:

**Setting:** There was an important problem to be solved.

**Characters:** The right group came together.

**Action:** The group put in effort, using its mix of skills and know-how.

**Outcome:** Things changed for the better!

**Moral:** We can learn from this.

The sections that follow show how this outline can be used to create success stories on three winning themes: Victory, Ingenuity, and Progress.

# Meet the VIPs: 3 winning themes for success stories

It can be challenging to surface a single compelling story from complex social change work. A complicated set of metrics doesn't always point to a clear plot. Sometimes it's hard to see the forest for the trees. Storytellers who are cautious of overstating the case may shy away from asserting a positive outcome. Projects that are behind-the-scenes or in the weeds can seem too technical to talk about to wider audiences.

Relying on three go-to themes can help: Victory, Ingenuity, or Progress.

**Victory:** Together, we stopped a problem from causing harm.

**Ingenuity:** Together, we solved a puzzle that unlocked new possibilities.

**Progress:** Together, we moved forward toward an important goal.

Over the years, we've found that virtually any social change contributions can be narrated using one of these themes.

The **Victory** theme is helpful for showing off successes that involve a clear positive outcome – a definitive change with compelling evidence behind it. By shaping the story to focus on the triumph of an initiative over a social problem or condition, the story arc leads people to understand the underlying factors at play.

The **Ingenuity** theme works well when the win is highly technical, or when you worry that the fix might seem inconsequential to people who don't know the issue well. By focusing on the puzzle or dilemma your initiative was solving, you draw audiences into the plot and help the success make sense in context.

The **Progress** theme is helpful for highlighting incremental progress toward a longer-term goal. By lifting up both what has been accomplished and what is left to be done, you remind people that major change takes sustained effort and support.

If you aren't sure which theme works best for a particular story, don't overthink it; just get started. You can always revise. The next section, which explains how to

integrate traditional story elements with these themes, might provide the inspiration you need!

## VIP story arcs

Once you've decided on a theme, it's time to translate your knowledge of what happened into a story.

Use the outlines below, which are organized according to a familiar and accessible sequence of events. Each point suggests the types of content that should be put into your own words, with details from the situation you're talking about. Start by sketching out these points mentally or on paper. Begin with brief phrases and keywords, rather than diving right into generating extended prose.

These outlines offer prompts, not prose. (We don't recommend repeating the outline headers word-for-word.)

### Victory

- **Setting:** There was a situation that wasn't in line with our shared values.
- **Characters:** A group of us came together.
- **Action:** We each contributed different skills and expertise to tackle the problem.
- **Outcome:** The problem was solved!
- **Moral:** We can learn from this! With teamwork and solidarity, we can make a real difference.

### Ingenuity

- **Setting:** There was a tricky situation that was hard to figure out.
- **Characters:** A group of us came together. We took a fresh look at the situation. We came up with new ideas, and we borrowed some good ideas from elsewhere.
- **Action:** We gave the new approach a try. It didn't work right away, so we made adjustments.
- **Outcome:** It worked!

- **Moral:** We can learn from this! With ingenuity, we can make a difference, even on problems that seem unsolvable.

## Progress

- **Setting:** Conditions were changing – but the way things were handled hadn't caught up.
- **Characters:** A group of us came together.
- **Action:** We updated things. We got rid of what wasn't serving us anymore. We embraced more modern, forward-thinking ideas.
- **Outcome:** It worked better!
- **Moral:** We can learn from this! By making changes together today, we create a better tomorrow.

## Refining your point with a “story seed”

If you've drafted a story using these outlines, you likely have plenty of content. Now, it's time to pare it down so your message stays clear and engaging for your readers.

To focus your narrative, try articulating your story in a single sentence. This “story seed” acts as a filter: if an idea doesn't grow naturally from this seed, it should probably be left out.

If you're unsure which theme fits best, draft a story seed for a few different ones to see which feels strongest. Whichever sentence is easier to write – and more interesting to read – is the narrative arc you should follow!

The following callout box offers examples of single sentence story seeds.

## **Examples of Story Seeds**

### **Victory Story Seeds**

“Together, we protected neighborhood kids by banning tobacco ads near schools.”

“Together, we effectively eliminated dangerous pre-term births in a community that once experienced dozens each year.”

“Together, we ensured that schools in every community are funded more fairly.”

### **Ingenuity Story Seeds**

“Together, we found a safe way to share data so emergency teams can get life-saving help where it's needed fast.”

“Together, we brought researchers and neighbors together to build health programs that work in real life.”

“Together, we figured out a new way to know how well early childhood centers are serving infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.”

### **Progress Story Seeds**

“Together, we upgraded our health systems to get safety tools and data to local groups faster.”

“Together, we improved local neighborhoods so families can easily walk to school, shops, parks, and other everyday destinations.”

“Together, we fixed our college system so community college credits count directly toward good jobs in healthcare and tech.”

# Characters: Showing who does the work - and how

With a one-sentence story seed on paper, it's time to move on to describing your characters.

In a story designed to entertain, descriptions often share details about a character's appearance or personality. In a VIP success story, which is designed to inform, character descriptions should shed light on the partners who came together to make change.

For a success story to come alive, it's important to do more than list the organizations involved. A good story shows people doing things. Highlight the specific skills, expertise, or perspectives that different partners contributed. Explain *what* each character brings to the plot in concrete, easy-to-visualize ways. When we communicate in abstractions, we can make the stakes seem lower than they actually are.

The callout box “Characterizing Specific Skills” gives examples.

## Characterizing Specific Skills

*In a story about inclusive education professional development:*

“To ensure that early learning professionals could better serve students with disabilities, our department assembled a team to make sure continuing education was the best it could be. TeachMore, a local instructional design firm, made sure the courses were clear and effective. Course content was reviewed and improved by experts and attorneys who work with the Inclusive Education Coalition. These advocates made sure that courses aligned with federal law...”

*In a story about a community safety coalition:*

“The Healthy Northside Coalition brought together a diverse group of neighbors, including local parent-teacher associations who wanted safer streets, pediatricians from the county clinic who saw the health impacts firsthand, and city zoning inspectors who understood how to navigate local business codes.”

*In a story about creating an overdose prevention data dashboard: “Our public health team partnered with university data analysts, emergency medical technicians (EMTs) working on the front lines, and local advocates who have deep trust and relationships within the neighborhood.”*

## Plot: Connecting action and outcome

Once you have your story seed and your characters, you need to connect them through a clear, purposeful plot. In a good story, the plot isn't just a timeline of events or a list of tasks your team checked off. It is a play-by-play narration that shows *how* your work moved a circumstance from a difficult baseline to a better reality.

For a piece of communication to work as a story, it must show a clear change in state over time. If your plot skips from a big problem straight to a perfect ending, your audience misses the most important part: the strategy and skill that made the change possible.

To keep your plot moving forward, engaging, and focused on systemic change, avoid falling into narrative traps that make a plot fall flat:

- **The Magic Wand Trap:** This happens when a story introduces a major problem (*Setting*), names the partners (*Characters*), and then immediately jumps to a beautiful result (*Outcome*). When you hide the middle of the story, the success looks like an accident or magic. Audiences won't see why your initiative needs continued funding or support if the solution seemed effortless.
- **The Laundry List Trap:** This is the opposite problem. It happens when a communicator lists every single meeting, memo, focus group, and administrative milestone in chronological order. This reads like a project report rather than a narrative, and it quickly bores your reader.

## How to structure a plot

To build a compelling plot that avoids these traps, focus on the logical relationship between your **Action** and your **Outcome**. Every strong plot should answer three questions for the reader:

1. **What was the turning point?** What did your characters see, learn, or decide that triggered the intervention? (e.g., “A statewide survey showed us that home-based providers couldn’t access training because of language barriers...”)
2. **What did the work actually look like?** Select one or two vivid, concrete actions that highlight your team's specific skills or fresh perspective. You don't need to list every step—just the ones that directly unlocked the solution.
3. **How did the action cause the reaction?** Make sure the link between your effort and the final result is obvious. The outcome should feel earned by the specific actions your characters took.

### A Quick Checklist for Plotting Action & Outcomes

Before you write your final draft, check your plot outline against these quick questions:

**Does time actually pass?** Is the situation at the end of the story noticeably different from the situation at the beginning?

**Did you include the friction?** Did you mention a moment where you had to adapt or take a fresh look at a stubborn puzzle? Showing even a small struggle makes the final win much more satisfying and believable.

**Are the verbs active?** Ensure your characters are the ones driving the action. Use strong, plain-language verbs like built, launched, redesigned, protected, or updated, rather than passive phrases like “it was decided that” or “an initiative was implemented.”

**Could someone remember this?** Use vivid imagery or surprising details to bring the narrative to life.

# Moral: Framing a big-picture point

The moral is the final piece of your story outline, but it is often the very reason you decided to share your success in the first place. It answers the reader’s unstated question: *“That’s a nice success story, but so what?”*

Without a clear moral, your narrative stops at the finish line of your specific project. A well-crafted moral lifts the reader’s eyes away from the local details and points them toward a larger, shared value. It transforms your specific win into living proof that a bigger public strategy, system, or investment actually works.

The goal of the moral is to remind people that your success didn't happen in a vacuum. It shouldn't sound like a lucky fluke, a one-time charity project, or a self-congratulatory pat on the back. Instead, frame the moral of the story around public responsibility and systemic capacity.

Instead of focusing on your organization	Focus on the broader lesson
“This proves that our organization is doing great work and we need continued support to keep this vital program running.”	“This story shows that when we design public systems around the actual needs of working families, our entire community thrives.”

## Tailor the moral to your VIP theme

The takeaway of your story should naturally match the narrative arc you chose at the beginning. Depending on your theme, your moral will emphasize a different core truth:

- **For a Victory Story:** Focus on collective power and protection. The moral should show that when communities organize, work together, and stand up for their values, they can successfully protect people from harm.
- **For an Ingenuity Story:** Focus on fresh thinking and resourcefulness. The moral should show that even the most stubborn, complicated puzzles can be solved when we take a fresh look at old rules and listen to the folks on the front lines.

- **For a Progress Story:** Focus on steady growth and long-term vision. The moral should show that major social changes take time, and that steady, forward-thinking updates today build a stronger, fairer system for tomorrow.

### A Quick Checklist for Stating Your Moral

Before you wrap up your draft, read your final sentences and ask yourself:

**Is it grounded in a shared value?** Does it speak to common goals like equity, fairness, health, community care, or opportunity?

**Does it avoid the "Savior Trap"?** Does the moral celebrate the entire coalition and the systemic change, rather than positioning your organization as a lone hero?

**Does it point toward the future?** Does it leave the reader feeling hopeful and motivated to support the next step of the journey?

## Putting your stories to work

Learning to reshape your impact stories isn't about changing *what* you do; it's about changing how people *see* what you do. It takes practice to look past the dense spreadsheets or the tempting pull of a simple, one-person feel-good story. But when you take the time to find the true narrative shape of your wins, you build a powerful tool for long-term change.

Don't let a great success story sit on a shelf or hide in a grant report. Writing a strong, thematic story takes time. Make the most of that hard work by breaking a single narrative into multiple formats—a presentation slide, a short website feature, a handful of social media hooks, and an annual report highlight.

By wrapping your data in a clear story architecture—whether it's a definitive **Victory**, a creative bit of **Ingenuity**, or a steady piece of **Progress**—you do more than just report a milestone. You give your partners a shared language, show your funders that their investments are in capable hands, and shift the public conversation away from individual blame and toward systemic solutions.

# Appendix: Sample Success Stories

**Victory Story Seed:** *“Together, we protected neighborhood kids by banning tobacco ads near schools.”*

**[Setting]** For years, families in the Northside neighborhood noticed a troubling trend: the walking routes to the local elementary school were flooded with bright, colorful advertisements for commercial tobacco products. Convenience stores and corner markets directly across from school bus stops were plastered with window posters positioned right at an eye-level for children. Public health data has long shown that regular exposure to this kind of targeted marketing significantly increases the chances that young people will try tobacco. While parents were frustrated and worried, trying to convince individual store owners to voluntarily take down their signs one by one wasn't working. The problem wasn't a lack of parenting; it was a layout that allowed harmful marketing to target children on their way to learn.

**[Characters]** To tackle the root of the issue, the Healthy Northside Coalition stepped in to build a team that could change the environment. The coalition brought together a unique mix of neighbors who each held a piece of the puzzle. This included local parent-teacher associations who wanted safer, healthier streets for their kids; pediatricians from the county clinic who saw the respiratory and health impacts of tobacco firsthand; and city zoning inspectors who understood how to navigate local business codes, land-use laws, and regulatory frameworks.

**[Action]** Instead of launching a temporary public awareness campaign or wagging fingers at retailers, the coalition put its collective skills to work on a permanent policy solution. They drafted a model zoning regulation that treated outdoor tobacco advertisements as a public health land-use issue. Over the course of six months, the team organized community walking audits with city council members to point out the ads, hosted neighborhood town halls to share the data, and worked directly with a local business association to ensure the new rules were clear and fair.

**[Outcome]** The hard work paid off when the city council voted unanimously to adopt the model zoning regulation. The new law completely eliminated commercial tobacco advertisements within 1,000 feet of any elementary school or playground in the district. Within less than a year of the vote, more than 40 youth-targeted tobacco signs were permanently removed from storefronts along school walking routes, instantly creating a healthier, cleaner protective buffer for more than 1,200 local students.

**[Moral]** This victory shows that keeping our children healthy is about more than just telling them to make good choices. When parents, doctors, and city officials join forces, we can change local rules to protect our neighborhoods from harm. Passing this regulation is a major win that proves we have the power to shape a safer, healthier environment for our kids to grow up in.

***Ingenuity Story Seed:** “Together, we figured out how to make sure more early childhood educators were trained to support children with disabilities, delays, or special needs.”*

**[Setting]** In our state, about 1 in 6 infants, toddlers, or preschoolers have a developmental delay, or disability. The earlier children get specialized support, the better. But because our youngest children learn in so many different settings, from home-based to employer-based childcare centers, it can be hard to ensure that all early educators are trained to support children with special needs.

**[Characters]** With funding from a federal grant that helps states to improve the systems that serve young children and their families, our state set out to expand access to this essential training. A survey designed by the state’s data collection team revealed different reasons that educators weren’t getting trained. Some lived far from the community colleges or universities that offered the courses. Others noted that the courses were too expensive or offered at times they had to work. Some providers shared that because Spanish was their preferred language, they found it difficult to follow courses offered only in English. These findings pointed toward solutions: offer courses online, offer them in Spanish as well as English, and make them free for teachers. From here, the department assembled a team to make the program the best it could be. TeachMore, a local instructional design firm, made sure the courses were engaging and effective. Course content was reviewed by attorneys at the Inclusive Education Coalition, making sure that courses aligned with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the federal law that protects disabled children’s right to learn.

**[Action]** Working together, the team developed two free, on-demand video-based courses, which were made available through the state’s online course system. Courses feature videos of outstanding special educators demonstrating techniques that accommodate a child’s disability so they can learn alongside other children their age.

**[Outcome]** In the 18 months since the free online courses launched, thousands of early childhood educators have taken them. Nearly 31,000 educators have finished the introductory course in English, and 4,000 have moved on to the second course. By offering the content in Spanish, this essential information has reached nearly 500 more educators. Participants rated the courses highly, with 92% saying they learned skills that will enhance their teaching and benefit the children and families they work with.

**[Moral]** This story shows how, when state agencies and community organizations work together - and tap into the strengths and skills each bring - we can figure out effective solutions to hidden problems. The courses are an important step in our state’s journey toward a more accessible, equitable, and responsive early childhood system for our state’s families.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Boris, Vanessa. 2017. "What makes storytelling so effective for learning." *Harvard Business Learning*.
- 2 FrameWorks Institute. (2021). *The Features of Narratives: A Model of Narrative Form for Social Change Efforts*. FrameWorks Institute.

# About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a non-profit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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