Storyteller's Checklist

Stories are powerful. Through the art of storytelling, we can show who we are and what we value. When we share stories, we have the potential to inspire, build, unify and amplify voices, and present our communities through the lens in which we see them.

Storytelling can—and often does—enact social change. For this to happen, advocates, organizers, and activists must make sure their stories include a clear vision of what is possible. This resource is designed to help communicators make better use of story as an advocacy tool. The following list is designed to move storytellers for social change away from the idea that "any story will do" and toward a strategic focus on "what does this story do?"

Before you share any story, ask yourself:

Have I taken the earliest opportunity to say WHY this matters?

How we begin our communications is tremendously important. Whether in a press release, through talking points, or social media, look at your titles, first sentences or opening lines. Before knowing what the problem is, your audience needs to know why their attention is being called. When you begin with a broad perspective about why this issue matters to society (think about that affirmative vision), you shape the way that everything, including the problem or challenge that follows, gets heard and interpreted.

Need help getting your communications started and establishing the "why?" Use a tested value like Human Potential or Future Preparation. Check out the Core Story of Education MessageMemo for more recommended values.
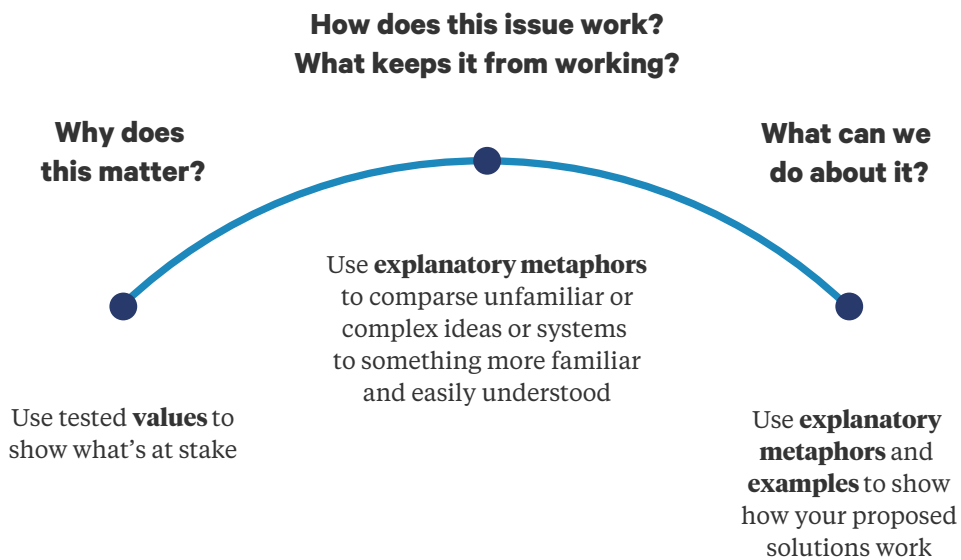
Have I answered all of the public's questions?

Now that you have started with why, make sure to continue the story with How this works and Who's responsible? Your audiences may already be telling themselves a story about education equity, community schools, or public education that needs to be filled in, updated, or from which they need to be redirected entirely. The story arc below is a useful reminder of which framing tools help you answer which question.

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

How does this issue work?
What keeps it from working?

Why does
this matter?

What can we
do about it?

Use **explanatory metaphors**
to comparse unfamiliar or
complex ideas or systems
to something more familiar
and easily understood

Use tested **values** to
show what's at stake

Use **explanatory**
metaphors and
examples to show
how your proposed
solutions work

Have I brought systems and structures into view?

Stories about personal struggle or individual triumph can be moving, and they may even garner short-term success. However, such stories rarely show the necessary policy changes that must take place to resolve what are ultimately structural or systemic issues. Individual stories unsurprisingly reinforce individualism, or the deeply American notion that hard work can solve all problems. Make sure your story, even ones about individuals, is also telling a story about history, structures, and systems. Kings and Queens is a great example of this kind of storytelling. If you are using interviews to help tell a story, think about including questions that help your interviewee explain different moments they had to or needed to engage with a particular system, whether it was city officials, a school district or administrators, an old policy, community members, etc.

To further build your skills in portrait (the "individual") versus landscape (the "system") storytelling, take the Wide Angle Lens FrameWorks Academy course. It gives more tips on how to use storytelling to move the public away from thinking in terms of events, incidents, and individual actions and towards conditions and contexts.

Are my chosen images, visuals, and sounds telling the same story that my words are?

Remember, framing is a set of choices we as communicators make all the time. Those choices can range from the values and metaphors we use to the tone we take. Images, visuals, lighting and the music we select to support our storytelling are also choices; and they can tell their own story. That is why it's important to make sure all of these choices are telling the same story. Are you talking about community schools, but your images are of only one child and a teacher? Is your story meant to be a narrative shift about Black and Brown communities, but it centers white actors and voices? Is the music somber, though you're talking about something positive and uplifting? Though often subtle, these elements can make the difference in how your story is heard and received.

Tip: To learn more, take a look at Communications Tasks of Frame Elements.

Have I made sure to leave out language that cues up unhelpful ways of thinking?

Keep the "swamp" (or "mind model") handy to remember what to avoid in your stories. Avoid individualism, othering of people and communities by "us-ing vs. them-ing." Don't talk about schools or individuals as "failing," or systems as being "broken." Focus the conversation on solutions that involve collective and structural change and policies that offer the right supports. Move away from ideas that suggest the answer to an education equity problem is about willpower or making teachers care more.

Have I advanced the affirmative case?

Every communications opportunity is a chance to advance a positive vision for learning and an education future that centers racial justice. Repetition is key. Take every chance you are afforded to lift up solutions, to show the changes you are working for. Paint a picture of the future you wish to see (Need help? think about how you would answer, "why do I do this work? Why is this necessary and important?") and don't spend any breath repeating the arguments of those opposed to your mission or things you don't believe—even if you are invoking them to refute.

Have I explained enough?

Chances are, the answer to this question is "no" because you are steeped in this work, and may take it for granted that all of the interrelated complexities and all of the "what-leads-to-whats" of educational equity are widely understood by everyone. They absolutely are not. You must explain, especially when you are talking about systemic and structural inequities along the lines of race. Think about this: many narratives around race and education come from popular culture, local news stories, and mainstream news punditry. Such narratives lack nuance, historical context, or explanation. As audiences tend to justify disparate outcomes by race as a product of "culture" rather than policies, disinvestment, and systems of oppression, we as storytellers must course correct through explanation. You can't take for granted that your assertion will lead them to the appropriate conclusion.

To learn more about the power of explanation, read FrameWorks 20th Anniversary Explanation Declaration.

Have I given examples?

Examples are especially important for advancing solutions-thinking. With specific concrete examples that illustrate the positive effects of investing in public education, you will get your readers and listeners generating more ideas and solutions. And, like solutions, examples help your audiences see where they can fit in and help solve the problem.

Do the solutions fit the problems?

Pay attention to matching the size, scale, and scope of solutions that you offer to the size scale, and scope of the problems owing to systemic and structural inequity and racism. Solutions-oriented stories can help us avoid fatalism (the belief that problems are too big and intractable to solve) and boost efficacy (the belief that we, as a society, can tackle tough problems together). Also be sure to present solutions early and often.

Finally, have I primed a "we" mindset?

The work ahead will require many agents of change. To see that affirmative vision realized, we need widespread support from all people. Invite potential allies in by repeating "we," "us," and "our" rather than "them" and "theirs." Particularly when talking about public education within the context of race, guide your audience toward collective action. Educational equity is not a "private concern" of only the people most affected. We are all responsible for solving the problems that our educational system has inherited, and we will all benefit from doing so.

We have an opportunity to ensure our stories sustain and promote a compelling vision of public education that is just, equitable, engaging, and available to all students. We also have a responsibility to ensure our stories do not reproduce harm by reinforcing assumptions and ideas that further deny agency and autonomy of the communities we are a part of and the communities we also strive to affirm. Together we can create learning environments that draw in greater community support and sustained engagement. Doing so will depend on maintaining a deep commitment to the future of public education, promoting policies to strengthen this system, and calling attention to schools that are making a difference.