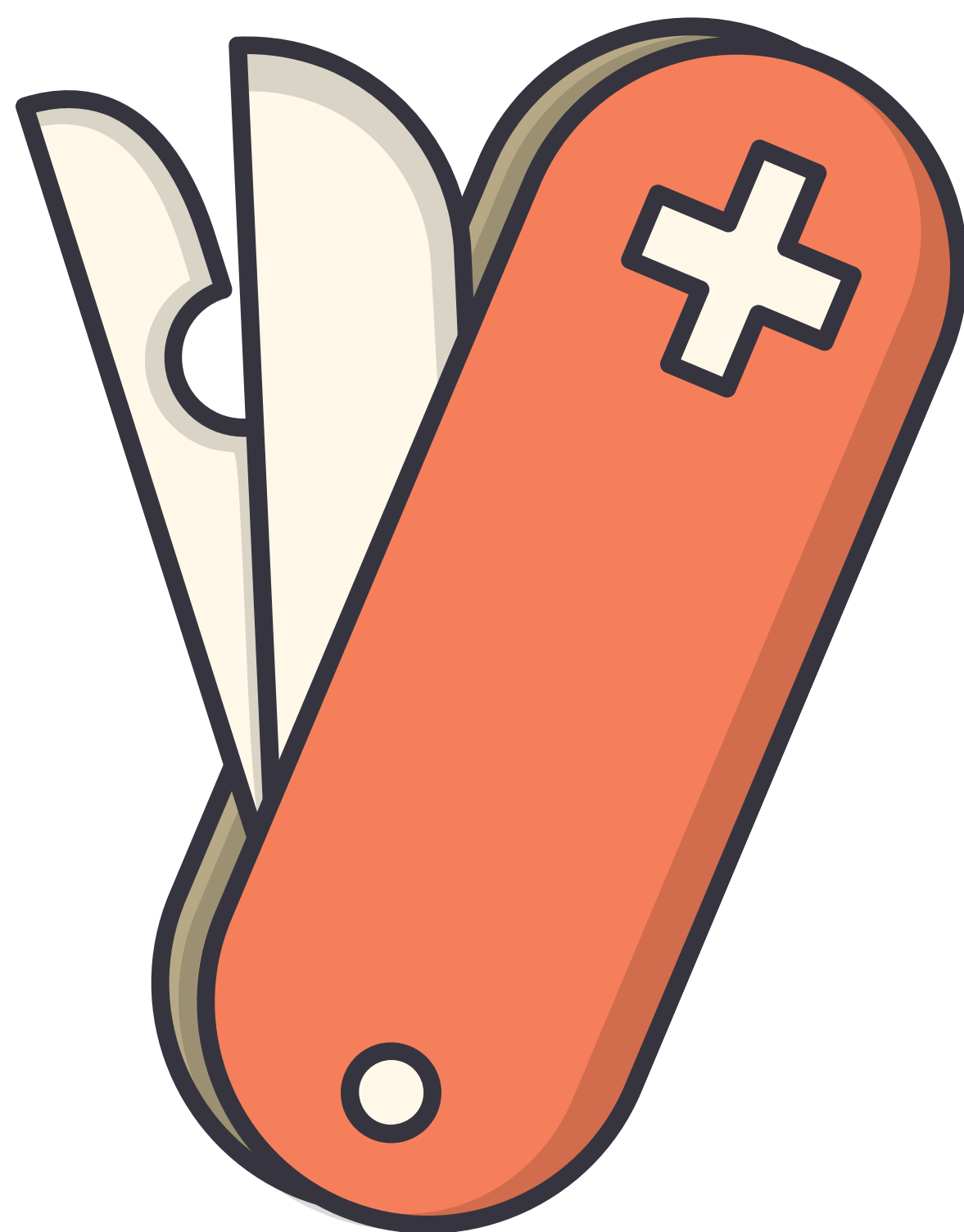


WRITING AND STORYTELLING FOR NONPROFITS



A FIELD GUIDE
JEFF DERNLAN

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INTRODUCTION

Nonprofits embody the best spirit and values of our nation. They help millions of individuals and families daily.

They protect, feed, heal, shelter, educate, and nurture our bodies and spirits. Nonprofits also give shape to our boldest dreams, highest ideals, and noblest causes.

They turn our beliefs into action - as promoters of democracy, champions of the common good, incubators of innovation, laboratories of leadership, protectors of taxpayers, responders in times of trouble, stimulators of the economy, and weavers of community fabric.

- The National Council of Nonprofits

You write for a nonprofit.

You're passionate about the mission of your organization and it's your job to tell stories that inform, engage, and inspire the community you serve.

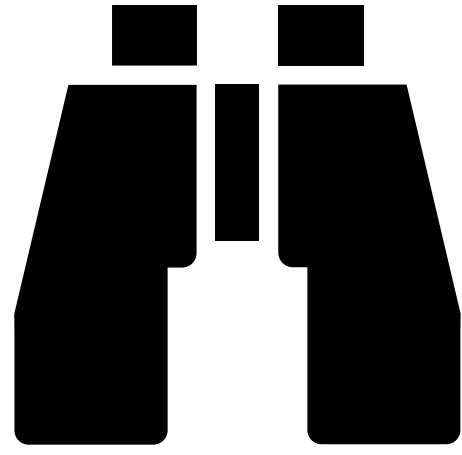
You need to get your content created and delivered as quickly as possible because you have a lot of other responsibilities.

You want to make sure that what you write is effective, supports the mission of your organization, and calls the reader to action.

This guide is for you. It will help you clarify your purpose, give you useful planning tools, and teach you powerful storytelling techniques.

At the end of the guide there is a printable, one-page worksheet. Fill it out before you start any project. It will save you time, focus your message, and help you tell targeted stories.

Let's begin with the three things you must know before writing any story.



CHAPTER 1

LAY OF THE LAND

PURPOSE, AUDIENCE, AND ACTION

Why are you writing?

When you know exactly why you are writing and what you want to accomplish, you'll be able to craft your content accordingly. So, before starting any project, make sure to clearly identify your purpose.

The more specific you can be the better. This will take a few extra minutes but it will be worth it. In the long run, a well thought out purpose statement will save you time and strengthen your story.

Keep working on your purpose statement until you can write it down in a single sentence. Then you'll be ready to move on to the next step which is audience identification.

Who is your audience?

A useful strategy in identifying your audience is to develop a persona.

A persona is a fictional identity created to represent a target audience. It's a detailed summary of the characteristics, interests, and motivators of the type of person you're trying to reach.

This is a best practice in marketing and sales and can also be very useful for nonprofit storytelling.

If you haven't gone through the Hubspot Inbound Marketing Certification, check it out. It has essential information on building audience profiles. It only takes a few days to complete, it's free, and is full of useful information.

But, if you just want to get a persona created quickly, you can start by answering these questions about your audience.

- What is their age?
- What is their profession?
- What does their day look like?
- What challenges do they face?
- What decisions are they making?
- What are their core values?
- How do they decide what nonprofits to support?
- What inspires them to support your organization?
- Have they been personally affected by the mission of your organization?
- What reason would they give for not supporting your organization?

Once you've created a persona, find a photo to represent them, give them a name, and list their characteristics. Put the picture and list by your keyboard and write directly to this person.

Write to only one persona at a time and address them in the most relevant way possible.

A well developed audience persona will help you create a targeted and effective call to action.

What is your call to action?

You know why you're writing and who you're writing to. Now you need to decide on your call to action.

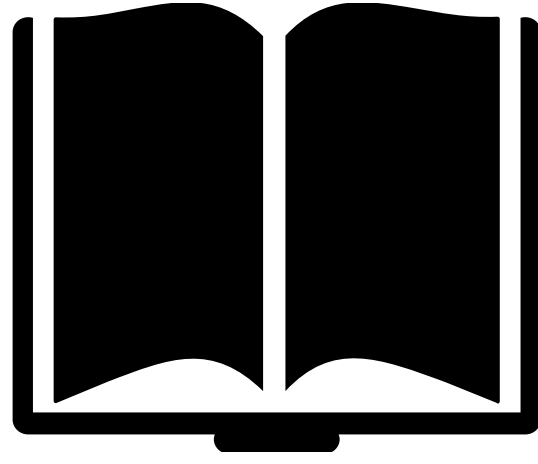
By the time your audience is done reading your story they should know exactly what you want them to do.

Every call to action should have a request, instruction, and incentive.

- Ask your audience to take action.
- Provide clear instructions.
- Explain to your audience how their action will effect change in the community your nonprofit supports.

Only ask your audience to do one thing at a time. If you want your audience to take more than one action, write another piece. Your audience is much less likely to respond if you have more than one call to action.

When you're clear on your purpose, audience, and call to action, you can move on and write a great story.



CHAPTER 2

THE FIVE C'S OF STORY STRUCTURE AND FOUR IMPORTANT INCLUSIONS

Storytelling

The following are the Five C's that should be included in any story you tell.

Catalyst

Complications

Crisis

Climax

Conclusion

If you include these five elements you will have told a complete story.

Definition of the Five C's

The Catalyst is the inciting incident that disrupts the life of the main character. It forces them out of the comfort zone of their regular life and routine.

Complications are the escalating series of difficulties and challenges leading up to the Crisis.

The Crisis is the point in the story where the main character makes a life changing decision.

At the Climax, the main character takes action on the decision they made during the Crisis. After the Climax, the narrative moves quickly to a resolution.

Conclusion - this is the resolution of the story and shows how the main character's normal life is different because of their journey.

Here's an example of what a simple story looks like using the Five C's.

Catalyst - Last spring, when he was out on a walk, Jeff became short of breath.

Complications - Over the next few weeks he noticed tightness in his chest and some unusual coughing.

Crisis - Jeff became concerned that these breathing issues might begin affecting his life. He decided he needed to take action and find out more information.

Climax - He attended an American Asthma Association workshop and discovered he might have symptoms of adult onset asthma.

Conclusion - After consulting with a physician, Jeff was able to mitigate these symptoms through lifestyle and behavior modifications.

This is a straightforward example of how the Five C's work.

The next step is to add the following Four Important Inclusions that will engage the reader.

Anchor Image - Before the Catalyst, present a strong visual image which represents the everyday life of your main character. (This image will be used again in the conclusion.)

Make it Personal - Show a personal consequence that your character will face if they don't take action to solve their problem. Use this during the Complications section to raise the stakes of the Crisis.

Imbed your Message - The reason you're telling a story is to create an engaging context for your program message. Make sure you imbed your story with the information you want your audience to remember.

New Normal - As the story concludes, show the new normal life of your main character. Include another look at the Anchor Image you used at the beginning. But this time give it a twist or different perspective that reflects the change in the character's life.

Here's what our story looks like using the Five C's and the Four Important Inclusions.

Anchor Image - Jeff has always enjoyed walking the big hill at Mill Creek Park, especially in the springtime. From the top of the hill he could look out over the neighborhood, see the trees budding, and smell the change of season.

Catalyst - But this spring something unexpected happened. When he was walking the hill he became short of breath and was unable to continue.

Complications - A few weeks later he noticed a tightness in his chest and some coughing. Jeff was concerned that his breathing difficulties were becoming worse.

Personal Details - He was worried that these breathing difficulties might begin affecting his quality of life, especially time outdoors with his family. He knew he had to do something about it.

Crisis - After hearing about the American Asthma Association through a community outreach event, Jeff decided he would attend a workshop to get more information.

Program Message - Jeff attended a monthly workshop held at the American Asthma Association office in Doylestown, PA. At the workshop, he learned that the symptoms he was experiencing might be indicators of adult onset asthma.

Climax - Jeff consulted with a physician and was given an action plan which allowed him to mitigate the symptoms by reducing outdoor activity on high pollen days and making changes around his house to reduce triggers.

Conclusion - This fall Jeff's been able to return to normal activities. His breathing is much better and he's enjoying time outdoors with his family.

New Normal - If you happen to pass by Mill Creek Park, you may see him out for a walk. He'll be the one at the top of the hill.



CHAPTER 3

WHAT ARE THE BEST STRATEGIES FOR THE PLATFORM YOU'RE USING?

Blog

Provide your reader with useful information about your nonprofit and try to answer any questions they might have. Give them content they can't find anywhere else and tell them a story that they will want to share with others.

Familiarize yourself with basic SEO strategies. You don't have to be an expert but you should at least have a general understanding of keywords, meta data, and search engine optimization.

It's important is that you create content that is valuable to your audience. This means that you help readers solve problems, keep them abreast of changes in the community, and reliably post content on a regular schedule.

Email

There are several writing strategies for email that will increase your open rate, drive action, and help you spread awareness about the mission of your nonprofit.

- Create a specific subject line that will give your audience a reason to read. In other words, don't use general words like "newsletter," or "email." The ideal length of a subject line is 60-70 characters.
- Use bullet points. This will make it easy for your audience to scan through the content of your email quickly. Your audience will appreciate this and it will increase your open rate.
- Add a P.S. Did you know that your audience will usually read the postscript before they read the body of the email? Use a P.S. to create urgency, reinforce your call to action, or punch up an important piece of information.
- Almost half of your audience reads email on their phones. Make sure the emails you send look good on mobile devices.

Social

Each social media platform has its own unique culture and community. Remember, it's not necessary to be a social media expert but you should have some awareness of the nuances of each platform.

There's a great explanation about writing for social media on Jay Baer's website, convinceandconvert.com. The title of the article is, "The Proven Mechanics of Social Media Writing."

This article includes useful templates, best practice techniques, optimal word count, and ideal posting times for the major social media sites. It also presents some old school copywriting strategies that have worked for decades.

Take a look at some of these ideas and try to incorporate them into your social media writing.

Conclusion

Nonprofit writers wear a lot of hats. Not only are we the storytellers of our community, most of us also help out with event planning, team building, administration, and outreach. Our development and fundraising campaigns regularly require all-hands-on-deck, often at the expense of clear, consistent, and strategic communication.

So, when we write, we need to make sure the stories we tell support the mission of our organization and inspire our community to take action. This means we need to clarify our purpose, leverage proven storytelling techniques, and consistently deliver valuable content. I hope this book helps you do that.

If I can help you with your writing and storytelling, please contact me at:

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215.487.1413

And, don't forget the downloadable worksheet below, it's a simple but effective tool you'll want to use on every project.

STORY WORKSHEET

PURPOSE

AUDIENCE

CALL TO ACTION

CATALYST

COMPLICATIONS

CRISIS

CLIMAX

CONCLUSION