

Storytelling Guidelines

Why use stories?

- **Storytelling is one of the most effective forms of communication. Research has shown that people are more likely to absorb and retain information in the form of stories.**
- **At a time when decision-makers are demanding evidence of how nonprofits serve the public good, orchestras can show how they are meeting public needs by sharing stories that illustrate the Public Value Message Framework.** The Framework lists four major ways that orchestras meet community needs:
 - By expanding access to music;
 - Contributing to civic life;
 - Supporting education and lifelong learning, and
 - Offering musical experiences that are relevant to our time, place, or cultural background.
- Orchestra program books, websites, season brochures, fundraising appeals, newsletters, social media and events can all be strengthened through the use of persuasive stories.
- Board members, musicians, and volunteers can share these stories with friends and colleagues.
- If you get these stories into the hands of your mayor, or the president of your chamber of commerce or rotary club, they can be powerful advocates for your orchestra.

Bringing in different voices

- **Orchestras commonly tell stories about composers, guest artists, or musicians. Only rarely do they talk about the people who are experiencing their music:** the fans who show up early to snag rush seats; senior citizens who attend on a budget; children from disadvantaged areas who don't have access to music at home; students and clients of partner agencies who hear the ensemble perform at their library or high school or church; members of ethnic communities responding to special programming.
- Sources for stories: parents and teachers of children; caretakers of patients or seniors; corporate sponsors whose employees don't normally attend; leaders of social service agencies who partner

with your orchestra to distribute seats—ask them to talk about how a musical experience with your orchestra has affected someone they know.

- These stories can show:
 - How your orchestra is making your community a better place to live for **all**, not just those who can afford to pay regular ticket prices;
 - How you are partnering with other groups to strengthen civic life;
 - How you are supporting lifelong learning;
 - How you are helping citizens learn about and be tolerant of things that are unfamiliar.

What makes a good story?

- A story – the kind a storyteller tells -- puts you in someone’s shoes and makes you feel what they feel. It has a protagonist and a plot; you hear how one person’s world is clouded by a difficulty or problem, then is enhanced when the obstacle is overcome. A story can be told in several minutes or as little as 60 seconds; on video, in sound, or on paper. But unlike news reporting, which is meant to be impersonal, a narrative story reaches out and pulls you in.
- **Testimonials or endorsements are easier to capture, but a good old-fashioned story will transmit the value of your orchestra’s work better than any testimonial. And people will remember it.**

Says one orchestra fundraiser, “Learning about storytelling technique has really changed our thinking. When I used to tell people about a volunteer named Keira, I would begin by saying, ‘We have this young woman volunteer who was introduced to us as a young child at our petting zoo. She discovered the trumpet and has played for many years, and wanted to give back so she is working at the petting zoo now.’ I was giving away the ending before it started.

Now I let the story unfold: ‘Let me tell you about this little girl named Keira who came to our petting zoo. She wanted to play an instrument like her big sister. Each instrument she tried, no sound came out. But she would not give up, and finally she came to the trumpet. She put it to her lips and blew, and out came this strong, powerful note. It was so impressive that people started to applaud. In that moment Keira knew she would play the trumpet, and she has been doing it for twenty years—not as a professional musician,

but because it makes her feel more strong and alive. And now she is helping other children find their musical expression by working as a volunteer in our same petting zoo.’

When I tell it this way I can feel how powerful it is from the attention people are giving, and the silence. It grabs people so much more. Now I am thinking about other ways we can use it, maybe on our website.”

Use good interview techniques

- A good story needs more details than people naturally give. Questions to ask your subjects: “Tell me what happened first.” Get vivid details: “What did that look like/sound like?” Try to uncover moments of vulnerability: “How did you feel?” Ask them to take it one step at a time: “Then what happened? How did you feel then?” Get direct quotes: “It felt like a whirlwind” or “I never saw her so absorbed in something.”

Recording and transmitting

- Video recording and editing these stories doesn’t have to be expensive. Today’s smartphones can work well. For a formal interview you can pair one with a small tripod.
- Be sure to ask subjects to sign a release form.
- Written accounts accompanied by still photos also work well. Just be sure to capture direct quotes so the story is told in the speaker’s own voice.