

Adding Nuance to the Narrative

A simple tool for nonprofits needing to tell
more dimensional stories and build trust.

About the Author



Kate Schmidgall, the founder of BitterSweet, is a storyteller and creative leader who has spent two decades working alongside nonprofits, large and small, to help them discover and share the stories that matter most.

Kate and her colleagues at BitterSweet Creative and BitterSweet Monthly have earned numerous awards for their work and invested thousands of listening hours in dozens of countries, including conflict and post-conflict zones, with heavily trauma-affected populations navigating a broad range of crises.

Introduction

Trust matters more than ever. For those of us in the nonprofit sector, it's the currency we operate on. Without it, our work becomes harder, if not impossible. Yet, building and maintaining trust through storytelling presents a tricky challenge. On one hand, we run the risk of sticking with traditional, organization-focused narratives that feel safe but fail to connect. On the other hand, we risk relying too heavily on beneficiaries to tell our story for us, which can lead to unintended harm.

This ebook is for nonprofit leaders, marketers, and communications professionals who feel caught in that tension. We'll explore what gets in the way of effective storytelling, including the common tropes and pitfalls many of us fall into. More importantly, we'll provide a clear path forward.

You will learn how to use the Character Triangle, a method we invented and refined for ourselves and now offer to you. It's a simple tool for creating balanced, compelling, and respectful stories—narratives that honor every person involved in your organization's work and amplify your impact.

***“Public trust is the currency
of the nonprofit sector.
Without it, our work becomes
harder, if not impossible.”***

Trust in Nonprofits and Philanthropy,
Independent Sector. June 2024.



Photo of Hilaria Aloisi Morisi for the story "The First Light in the Last Mile"

Credit: Erica Baker | BitterSweet Monthly

Who We Are

For the past 15 years, BitterSweet has organized teams of creative professionals to travel the country and the world. We've had the privilege of listening to the stories of people creating hope in every context imaginable: in slums and schools, from the minefields of long-ago wars to the frontlines of active conflicts, and from small towns in the United States to the foothills of the Himalayas.

As writers, photographers, and filmmakers, we have logged many thousands of interview hours, sitting knee-to-knee with people eager to share their experiences. We've spent just as much time—if not more—turning those interviews into thoughtful narratives. It hasn't always been easy weaving. We've made our share of missteps along the way, and those failures taught us invaluable lessons about the importance of honest self-reflection and vulnerability.

Through it all, a few core values have kept us anchored: empathy, transparency, and a deep respect for both the story and the storyteller. This experience, seeking out and celebrating the world's most inspiring nonprofits, gives us a front-row seat to what works—and what doesn't—in nonprofit storytelling. We've seen firsthand how authentic stories can brighten feeds and fuel support, and we believe this guide can help you do the same.



Explore some of our favorites from BitterSweet Monthly's 15 years of storytelling:



"I feel like a dancer."

StandProud (Democratic
Republic of Congo)



***For Someone Who
Has No One***

Snehalaya (India)



Hope After Apocalypse

Living Hope Wheelchair
Association (Texas, USA)

Why Storytelling Matters

At its core, a great story is simple. It centers on real people and clearly reflects their challenges, hopes, and growth. It moves beyond feel-good moments to strike a balance between the honesty of a struggle and the satisfaction of hard-won progress. When we get this right, stories do more than just create awareness; they build deep, lasting understanding.

For nonprofits, storytelling is one of our most powerful tools. It makes our impact visible and tangible, allowing audiences to connect to the difference our mission is making. Thoughtful stories nurture trust. By being honest about our progress and our setbacks, we become more relatable and credible. Research from Independent Sector shows that the nonprofit sector is more trusted than any other group of organizations in the U.S. Storytelling is your chance to build on that trust and convert it into meaningful action.

***"Everything we believe
is based on a story we
were told."***

Heather McGhee, The Sum of Us

In a world overloaded with information, a compelling narrative captures attention, inviting your audience to pause, reflect, and connect. Stories have the unique power to move people from passive observation to active participation, sparking generosity, volunteerism, and advocacy for lasting change.

Photo of Veronique Bitondo for the
story "A World of Radical Welcome"

Credit: Erica Baker | BitterSweet Monthly



Why Most Non-Profit Storytelling Falls Short

All nonprofits want to tell good stories. But we face constraints—real and imagined—that hold us back. Limited time, tight budgets, and the pressure to stick with the status quo can lead us to recycle content from last year's annual report just to meet a deadline. We've all been there.

As a result, many stories written by or about nonprofits fall into the same traps. We repeatedly center our organization, missing the chance to broaden the aperture. We lean on statistics, which can make our narratives feel cold and disconnected. The "savior" trope frequently creeps in, overshadowing authentic community

voices and diminishing the agency of the people we serve. We simplify complex issues into neat, positive endings, glossing over the messy reality of the work.

Without a clear vision or a better process for gathering information, we fall into old patterns. We write what we know and focus on what we think donors want to hear. But also, attention spans are shrinking. In 2004, the average attention span was 2.5 minutes. Today, it's just 12 seconds for millennials and 8 seconds for Gen Z. In this environment, our old storytelling habits are no longer effective at breaking through the noise.

Nonprofit Storytelling Tropes:

The "Founder Hero"

The "Oversimplified Challenge"

The "Grateful Beneficiary"

The "Vanity Metrics"

The "World-Changing Solution"

Focusing on "Who," not "How"

A (Slightly) Different Approach to Non-Profit Storytelling

Nonprofit storytelling doesn't have to be sterile or stale. It can, and should, be engaging, thoughtful, and deeply moving. To cut through the noise of modern life and lean into our role as trusted institutions, we need to craft stories that truly resonate.

Here are a few ways to start:

1. **Prioritize authenticity over perfection.** Focus on genuine, relatable stories that are more gritty than grand. Your audience will connect with honesty, not a polished facade.
2. **Engage emotionally and illuminate the ecosystem.** Instead of just pulling at heartstrings, aim to create a sense of meaning and connection to a bigger purpose. Show how individual stories fit into a larger system of change.
3. **Simplify your message while embracing nuance.** Counteract cognitive overload with clear, concise storytelling. You can be both simple and sophisticated. Complexity paired with a touch of humanity or even humor is a winning combination.
4. **Encourage reflection.** Develop content that prompts introspection. Ask questions that connect with your audience's own experiences and values. This invites them into the story, rather than just having them observe it.

Nonprofit Storytelling Opportunities:

**Prioritize authenticity,
stop polishing**

**Connect to a bigger idea,
hook to a higher level**

**Say what you
mean, plainly**

**Use follow-up questions
to get more depth**

**Focus on "how," not
just "who"**

Introducing the Character Triangle

At BitterSweet, we needed a simple tool to help us begin the listening and discovery process for every new story. We call it the "Character Triangle." It's a deceptively simple and highly effective way to find gaps and opportunities in your storytelling by examining the people and voices you feature most.

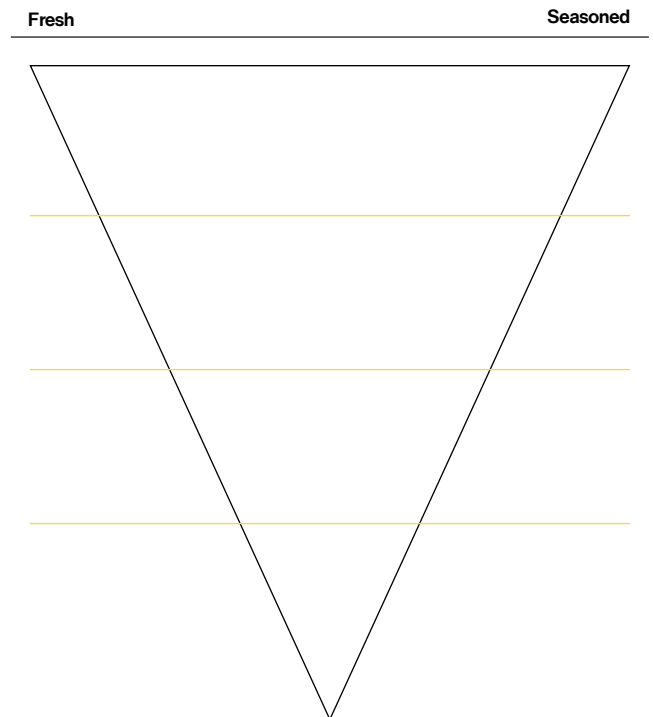
The triangle is organized into four main categories of people who hold different perspectives on your work:

Participants: At the top are the individuals who have interacted with your programs. They have been on a journey and can reflect on their personal transformation.

Staff and Volunteers: These are the people on the ground who can speak to your unique methods, the daily challenges, and the organization's hopes.

Community Partners: These third-party organizations or individuals provide an ecosystem perspective. They can speak to the broader context and the difference your organization makes within it.

Leadership: At the bottom are founders, executives, and board members. They can reflect on the history of the work and the vision for the future.



The triangle is intentionally inverted to suggest the volume of listening needed. To uncover new story dimensions, you need to listen most to those at the top. A horizontal line also runs through it, representing a spectrum from "fresh" voices (new to the organization) to "seasoned" voices (those who have been around a long time).

Using it is simple. Jot down the characters and voices you feature most often and place them in the triangle. Where do they fall? Are there gaps? In our experience, most organizations over-index on leadership and participants, while neglecting the rich perspectives of staff and partners. This is your opportunity to cultivate more robust and resonant stories.

The Character Triangle in Action

Ready to put the Character Triangle into practice? Here are a few suggestions to get you started.

1. First, audit your current storytelling with a critical, honest lens. Use the Triangle to see where your strengths and gaps lie. Next, involve your team and stakeholders in the conversation. Invite candid feedback on your existing narratives. Try rewriting a story to include more diverse voices from the different parts of the triangle.
 2. Commit to ongoing learning. The Character Triangle is a flexible guide, not a rigid rulebook. Adapt it, experiment with it, and learn as you go. If the categories don't work for you, change them. The goal is to be more intentional about whose voices you amplify and mix it up to offer new perspectives and connect new dots for your audience.
 3. Remember that meaningful change is iterative. You won't transform your storytelling practice overnight. Celebrate the small wins and learn from the inevitable setbacks. Stay curious, stay open to feedback, and remember that every story is a chance to build deeper trust, connection, and impact.
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If you need some inspiration, check out these stories we loved:



**ReStorying
Columbus Day:
What It Means to
Tell the Whole Story**

From Telos



**Turning the Tide
on Gun Violence**
From Rust Belt Magazine



**Boards Across Borders:
Two Chicago Brothers'
Love Letter to the
Guatemalan Skate
Community**
From Borderless



Questions?

Reach us at info@bittersweetcreative.com

Learn more about our work at

BitterSweetCreative.com