

STORYTELLING 101

The Basics You Need to Know

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WHO WE ARE

Hi! Brooke and Carlie here.

We co-own Magnolia Media Group, a story-driven marketing agency. We're passionate about **helping nonprofits & big-hearted businesses tell their story well.**



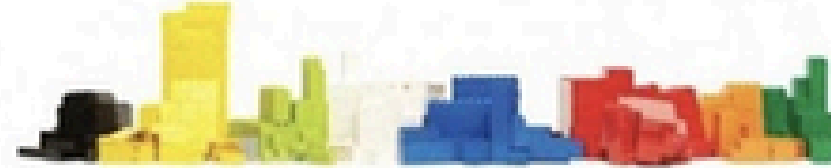
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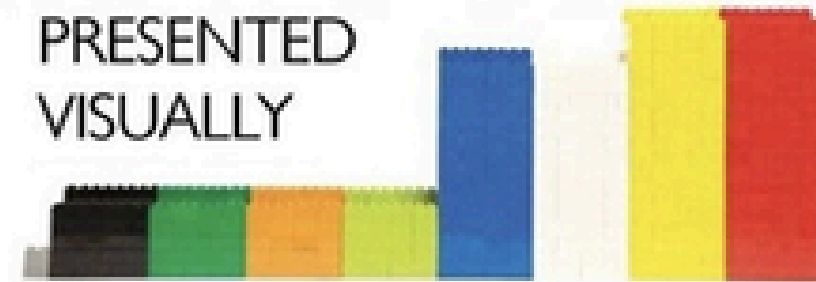
SORTED



ARRANGED



PRESENTED VISUALLY



EXPLAINED WITH A STORY



FACTS VS EMOTION

Facts lead people to a conclusion. Emotions lead people to action!

NUMBERS MATTER, BUT THEY'RE MORE EFFECTIVE WHEN ATTACHED TO A STORY.

Fact: "We served 500 families this year."

“Marcy never thought she’d need help, but after her surgery, the medical bills kept adding up. She had to choose between food and paying her rent. She chose to go hungry – until Lettum Eat! came knocking on her door to tell her about their mobile food event. Because of your generosity, we’ve fed 500 people like Marcy this year.”



**Marcy’s experience shows why those 500 families matter.
People connect with the ONE before they understand the MANY.**

SIMPLICITY WINS

Your brain processes one clear message at a time.

CLEAR > CLEVER.

(And not-so-fun fact: multi-tasking or **parallel processing is worse for your brain function and IQ than smoking pot!**)

DON'T

overwhelm your audience; avoid asking for too many things at once, like:

- Donate AND
- Attend an event AND
- Volunteer AND
- Share the post

INSTEAD:

Focus on ONE message and ONE action.

And ask them often! On average, it takes hearing the same message SEVEN times before someone takes action.



**WHAT MAKES A
GREAT STORY?**

(HINT, IT'S NOT YOU).

Great storytelling is NOT dramatic or sensational. It IS emotionally compelling, honoring and dignifying for the subject.

**ORGANIZATIONS OFTEN MAKE THEMSELVES THE HERO,
BUT THE BEST STORIES WORK DIFFERENTLY.**

- Hero (Storyteller) → the person being highlighted
- Storyguide → your organization

Your role is to help the hero succeed.

GREAT STORIES ARE

- Emotionally compelling
- Respectful and dignified
- Authentic
- Focused on real experiences

IMPORTANT REMINDER:

Not every story needs a perfect ending. Sometimes the most powerful stories are still in progress.

WHY UNFINISHED STORIES MATTER

IF PEOPLE ONLY SEE FINISHED SUCCESS STORIES, THEY MAY THINK:

- The problem is already solved
- What you offer isn't really needed

BUT UNFINISHED STORIES SHOW:

- Real need
- Real impact
- Where supporters/fans can help

They invite your audience to be part of the story, right now!

SEE THE DIFFERENCE?

Instead of waiting for the story to be finished:

“Lucy, an elderly homeowner, had faced one challenge after another. A severe lung disease had forced her to retire from her 35-year career, leaving her on a fixed income. Then, a recent flood drained her savings as she tried to protect her daughter’s and her own health.

When mold began to grow after their cleanup efforts, Lucy had no choice but to hire a remediation company – but she couldn’t afford the repairs afterward and was left living in a construction zone. Last September, Lucy reached out to Home Repairs Ministries for help.

Thanks to the generosity of donors who “adopted” her home, our team was able to fund and complete all necessary repairs!

Today, Lucy and her daughter are safe and comfortable in a home that’s fully restored – no more mold, no more construction chaos.”

Write it in the middle and use a first-person account when you can:

“I’ve just had one nightmare after the other,” shared Lucy, an older homeowner who recently contacted Home Repairs Ministries for help.

A severe lung disease forced Lucy to end her 35-year career and turn to fixed income to cover her bills. Then, a recent flood left Lucy in crisis after she drained her savings to protect her daughter’s and her own health.

“We were trying to handle [the damage] ourselves and clean it all up, but it grew mold,” Lucy explained. “I had to have a mold [remediation] company come out and take care of it.”

Without the physical ability to repair her home after the mold remediation or the savings to pay a contractor, Lucy has been living in a construction zone.

But last September, Lucy experienced hope when she found Home Repairs Ministries. She’s now on our waitlist until we can raise funds to cover her home repairs. That’s where you come in. Will you adopt a homeowner like Lucy and help cover their home repairs?”

STORYTELLING BUILDS TRUST

THINK OF STORYTELLING LIKE DATING.

You wouldn't ask someone to marry you on the first date. Some orgs:

- Introduce themselves
- Immediately ask for a donation/purchase

STORYTELLING ALLOWS PEOPLE TO:

- ✓ Get to know you
- ✓ Build trust
- ✓ See your impact

BEFORE YOU EVER ASK THEM FOR ANYTHING.

**WITH GREAT STORYTELLING
COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY.**



ETHICAL STORYTELLING MATTERS

When sharing someone's story: Always be transparent and respectful.

BEST PRACTICES:

- Explain how their story could be used.
- Ask permission.
- Let them choose where they want their story to go.
- Offer anonymity if needed. (*All the names we're sharing today have been changed!*)
- Use composite stories when appropriate.

USING COMPOSITE STORIES

For anonymous stories, you can create **composite stories**, in which multiple experiences are combined to protect individuals' privacy.

What happened is true, but *who it happened to and the details are protected*, putting a name to common experiences among your clients.

EXERCISE: HOW TO INTERVIEW (AND GET AUTHENTIC RESPONSES)

Imagine you're interviewing/surveying someone served by your organization. In pairs or small groups,

BRAINSTORM 3–5 QUESTIONS THAT:

- Make the client the hero.
- Encourage readers to act (What's your end-goal CTA? Donate, volunteer, etc.).
- Get to the heart of the story.

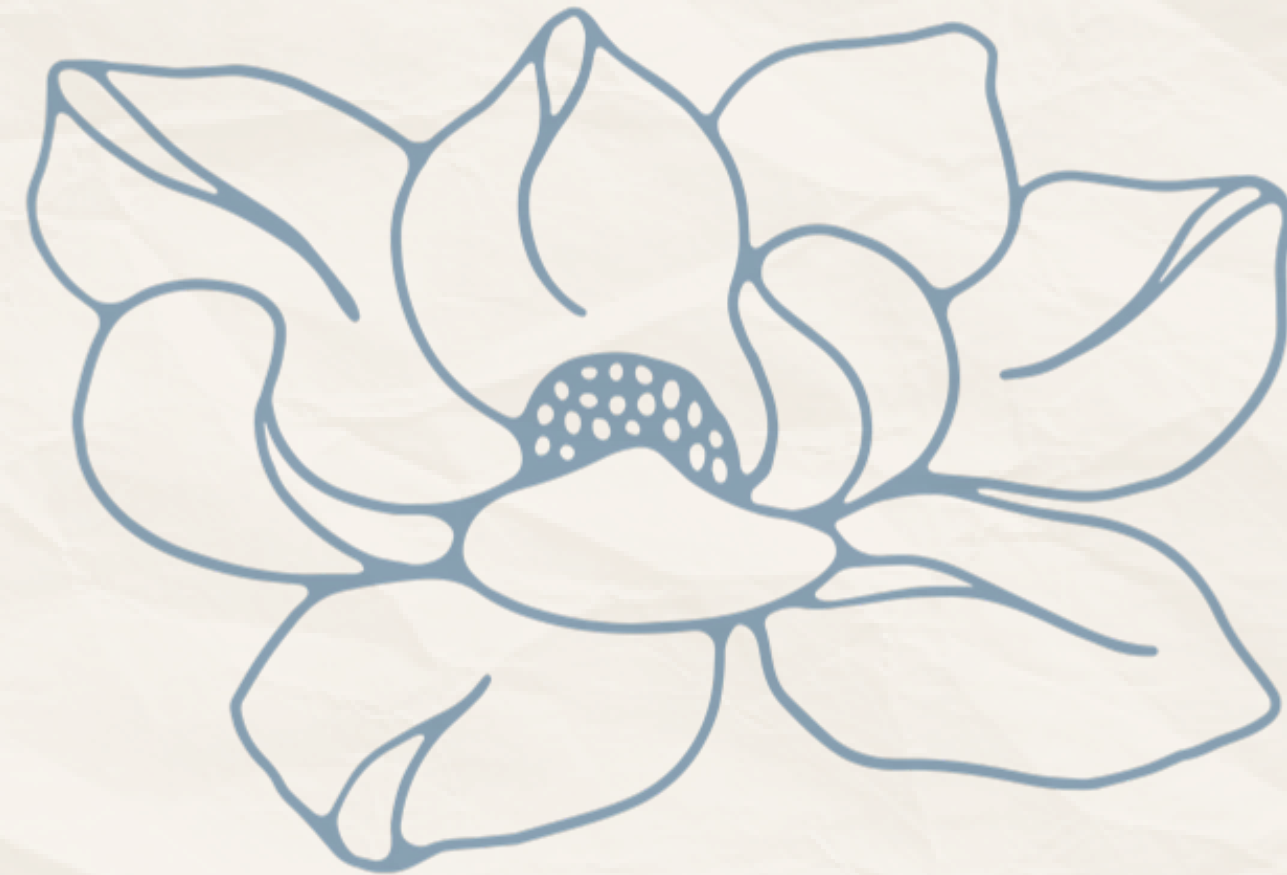
You have 2 minutes.

THE STRUCTURE OF A STORY

Traditional storytelling structure:

- Setup
- Inciting incident
- Rising action
- Climax
- Falling action
- Resolution

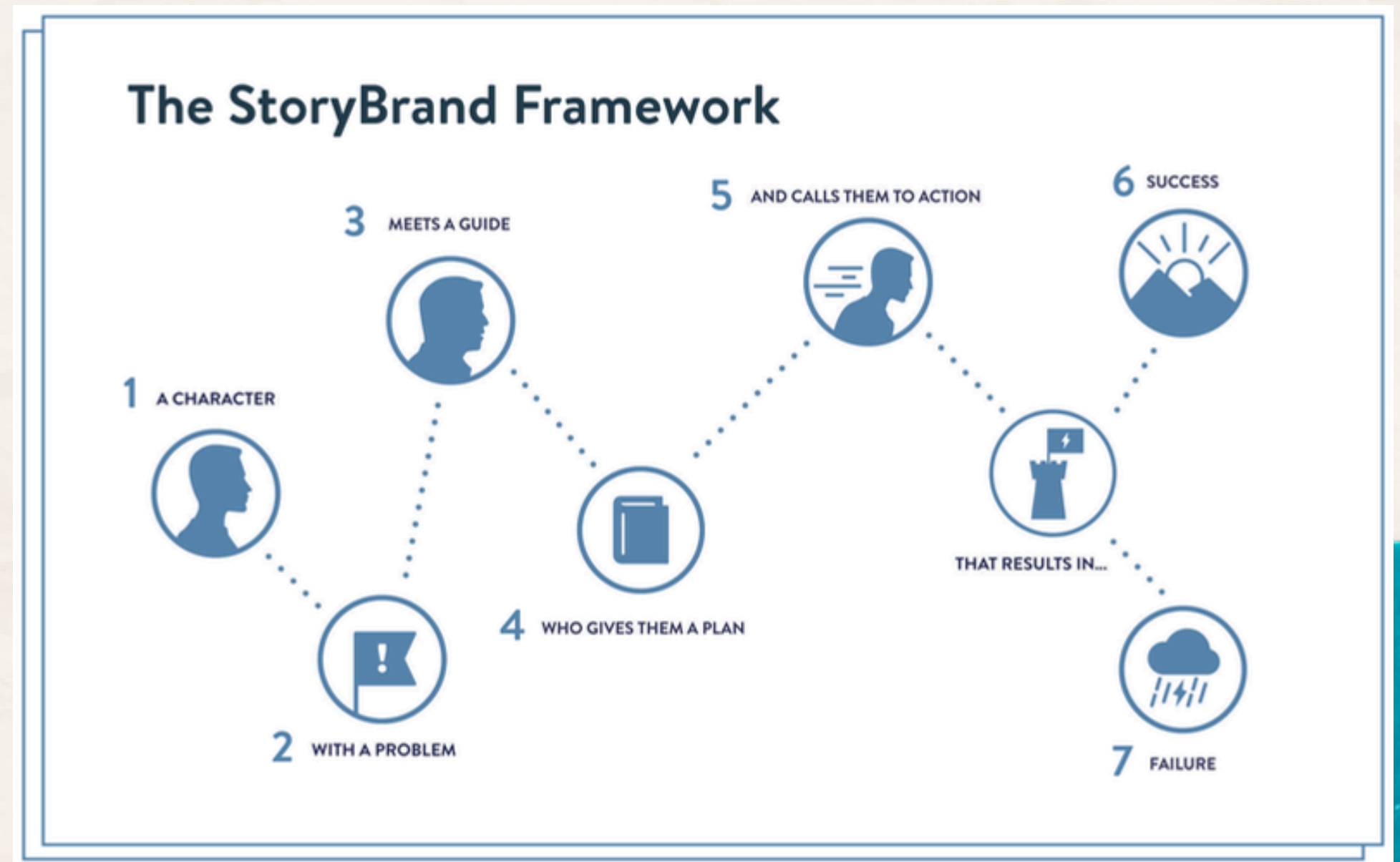
But wait! There's a simpler framework.



THE STORYBRAND FRAMEWORK

A GREAT STORY USUALLY FOLLOWS:

1. A character
2. With a problem
3. Meets a guide
4. Who gives them a plan
5. And calls them to action
6. That results in success and helps them avoid failure



FINDING A NEW PATH FORWARD: BRIE'S STORY

Brie felt like she had run out of options. She was living in her car and didn't know what to do.

“I have to find a job. I have no place to go. I have my baby. I'm just trying to co-parent while dealing with the divorce and everything,” she explained.

Everything changed when she heard about Home of Hope.

“I went in for an interview with Miss Renita and the rest is history,” said Brie.

*“It was definitely a place to heal. I was just feeling so much confusion with everything going on and was struggling with my mental health. **Home of Hope was a healing haven.** It allowed me to have some stability for a moment after feeling like things wouldn't be stable.”*

Life at Home of Hope included its fair share of challenges, though.

“When you go from having certain freedoms to then having restrictions placed on you, you feel a little irritated sometimes,” Brie continued. “However, I had to realize that these restrictions were put in place with a good thought behind them, of forming good habits.

“[Being at Home of Hope] has allowed me to pinpoint that I definitely do have issues with my spending sometimes. It’s been fun to watch my savings account grow.”

Living at Home of Hope gave Brie room to grow some of her dreams again, too.

“As for a short-term dream, since I'm at a legal office, my criminal justice degree is working for me. **I’m excited to see how far I can go!**” she said.

“It's all possible because of the donors and the volunteers and everyone who gives out of their time and money just to be able to help provide us more stability,” she said. “Without Home of Hope, I don’t know where I’d be. But when you're in a [difficult] situation like this, kindness moves mountains.”

BRIE'S STORY BROKEN DOWN

1. A CHARACTER

Brie

Brie felt like she had run out of options. She was facing homelessness alone.

“I have to find a job. I have no place to go. I have my baby. I’m just trying to co-parent while dealing with the divorce and everything,” she explained.

BRIE'S STORY BROKEN DOWN

2. WITH A PROBLEM

She is facing instability, housing uncertainty and emotional overwhelm.

Brie wasn't sure where to turn. With the divorce, her mom being sick, not having a job, and struggling with her mental health, Brie was facing multiple challenges at once while caring for her child.

BRIE'S STORY BROKEN DOWN

3. MEETS A GUIDE

Home of Hope and its leadership

Everything changed when she heard about Home of Hope.

“I went in for an interview with Miss Renita and the rest is history,” said Brie.

BRIE'S STORY BROKEN DOWN

4. WHO GIVES THEM A PLAN

Structure, healing space and practical life guidance

“It was definitely a place to heal,” shared Brie. “The first month was just for me to feel whatever emotions I needed and then allow me to get a job. It allowed me to have some stability for a moment after feeling like things wouldn’t be stable.”

BRIE'S STORY BROKEN DOWN

5. CALLS THEM TO ACTION

Brie commits to the program and embraces the habits it teaches.

“When you go from having certain freedoms to then having restrictions placed on you, you feel a little irritated sometimes,” Brie said. “However, I had to realize that these restrictions were put in place with a good thought behind them, of forming good habits.”

Through the program, she learned to live on a schedule, manage a family budget and build savings.

BRIE'S STORY BROKEN DOWN

6. LEADING TO SUCCESS AND AVOIDING FAILURE

Brie experiences stability, renewed dreams and hope for the future.

“It’s been fun to watch my savings account grow,” she said.

Brie now works at a legal office using her criminal justice degree and is exploring how far she can go in her career. She also dreams of owning land someday where she can garden and build a greenhouse.

“It's all possible because of the donors and the volunteers and everyone who gives out of their time and money just to be able to help provide us more stability,” she said. “Without Home of Hope, I don’t know where I’d be. But when you're in a [difficult] situation like this, kindness moves mountains.”

WHERE DO STORIES COME FROM?

**KNOWING HOW TO TELL A STORY IS AN AMAZING FEELING.
NOW, HOW DO YOU FIND THEM?**

Great stories are already happening around you. Storytellers can include:

- Staff
- Volunteers
- Board members
- Donors
- Community partners
- The people you serve
- Customers



EVERYDAY MOMENTS MATTER

What feels routine to you may be life-changing to someone else.

For example:

Here's a post from Isaiah 117 House (foster care support):

- Moment: A child broke a TV because they were unable to regulate their heavy emotions.
- The response: Supporters offering to buy a new TV – a specific way they can get involved. (This post isn't a donation ask; people felt compelled without being asked!)
- Similar posts: Unmade bed, a living room chair, shoes



Isaiah 117 House's Post



Isaiah 117 House

April 30, 2025 · 🌐

❤️💙🖤 Today, we want to share a different story from one of our open homes. A story of a guest who came in holding more than most. A guest who walked through things that most of us wouldn't survive. A guest who was angry, as we all would be! A guest who had a hard time regulating emotions and all the trauma he endured. A guest who was in a safe place but couldn't accept it just yet. A guest who we loved just as much as every other guest who's walked through our Red Door. A guest we showered with grace and dignity. A guest that had a really hard day, but we stood beside him in the hard! Our house is absolutely changing the way foster care begins, but some days are harder than others.

[#loveyouarenotalone](#) [#Isaiah117house](#)

Isaiah 117 House's Post



Isaiah 117 House

June 11, 2025 · 🌐

A story from one of our open homes...

When our guest arrived late at night, he was quiet — his face showing the exhaustion of a day filled with too many changes and too many unknowns. It had been a long, emotional journey to our red door.

That night, he was given a warm meal — anything he wanted, his choice. Then, he received a bag full of brand-new clothes, hygiene items, and other essentials. After a long day, he made his way upstairs and crawled into bed.

The next morning, we saw his bed.

To some, it might look like just an unmade bed — a sign that someone slept there. But to us, it tells a much deeper story. That unmade bed is evidence of something powerful. It's where a child who had faced so much in one day finally found rest. It's where he felt warm, safe, and okay enough to close his eyes, let go for a little while, and sleep.

As we looked at the rumpled sheets, we could hear his laughter echoing from downstairs as he played the Nintendo Switch with our staff. That sound — so light, so full of joy — was a beautiful reminder that even in the hardest moments, healing can begin with something as simple as a bed and a safe space.

In our homes, foster care doesn't have to start with fear and uncertainty. Because here, within these walls, even the way foster care begins can be different.

It can begin with hope.

It can begin with a bed that's more than just a place to sleep — it's a place to feel peace. ❤️🇺🇸

[#isaiah117house](#) [#changingthewayfostercarebegins](#)





Isaiah 117 House Bradley-Polk's Post



Isaiah 117 House Bradley-Polk

January 8 · 🌐

❤️ You see this little chair?❤️

Almost everything in this house sparks a memory. Today it was this little chair. I remember the call I received about a teenage girl, who had a baby, she was the victim of human trafficking. We didn't speak the same language. Google Translate really came through for me. But I will tell you this...everyone speaks the language of love. Every smile spoke something. As I held her sweet baby and spun around in this chair, the little baby giggles filled the room, the language barrier faded and for a that moment we just lived in the joy!

This house is special and what we get to be and provide in this community is a blessing!

Check this link for ways to be a part:

<https://linktr.ee/isaiah117housebradleypolkco...>



isalah117house

Follow ...



isalah117house 65w

❤️❤️❤️ A story from one of our open homes... After our guest received a new duffel bag, our other guest turned to her and said, "Can you believe it? We don't have to put our stuff in trash bags anymore!" This is how we are changing the way foster care begins...everywhere.

During this season of giving, please consider a gift to Isalah 117 House so we can continue changing the way foster care begins! To make a monetary donation, click

<https://support.isalah117house.com/isalah117house>. For non-cash, tax smart gifts, such as stocks or IRA's, please click

www.freewill.com/smartgiving/isalah117house.

#loveyouarenotalone #isalah117house

EVERYDAY MOMENTS MATTER

How does the moment make followers feel?

THEY THINK:

- A child shouldn't feel so hurt that they have to break a TV.
- A child should have a warm bed.
- A child should have shoes that fit and a bag for their clothing.

Small moments can tell powerful stories, even when your client wants or needs to remain anonymous.

HOW TO KEEP TRACK OF THE STORIES ALL AROUND YOU?

Keep a story journal! This could be:

- A shared document
- A Slack channel
- A simple notebook



ASK YOUR TEAM TO RECORD:

One meaningful moment each week.
Over time, you build a library of stories.
This won't come naturally at first, **so let's practice!**



EXERCISE: BRAINSTORM STORIES

Think of and write down any these types of stories your organization could tell:

1. An unfinished story showing an ongoing need (like Lucy's)
2. A long-form story (blog/article and a contact you want to interview)
3. A small moment (like the broken TV)

You have 2 minutes, and then we'll share some of your examples.

WHERE TO TELL STORIES

Now that we know how to practically find stories, let's chat about how we can tailor those stories based on where you want to share them.

BLOGS

BLOGS ARE IDEAL FOR:

- Long-form storytelling
- Transparency
- Deep impact stories
- Longer shelf life
- Build trust and authority

TYPICAL LENGTH:

1,000–1,500 words

Blogs also give you content that you own, unlike social media.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is often the first digital handshake.

People discover you there and then decide if they want to learn more.

STORIES HERE SHOULD:

- Educate
- Engage
- Entertain

FORMATS INCLUDE:

- Video
- Photo series
- Quotes
- Short stories

Long stories can also be repurposed into social posts.
For example...



Families 4 Families



A difficult placement nearly caused _____ and _____ to close their home for good. But their continued "yes" opened the door for two precious girls to find a loving, forever home.

"When we first got married, I was told I wouldn't be able to have children," _____ shared. "Fostering was something the Lord put on our hearts, to just be available."

Then God blessed _____ and _____ with their first biological son. They still felt God calling them to foster care, but they waited until their son was three years old to officially open their home.

Their first placement stretched their family to its limits.

"It was a really hard placement," she said. "It was no fault of the kid by any means, but it was just rough.

"I felt like our hearts were kind of closed off [after that], but then the Lord put our girls in our lives and put on our hearts that they needed a place to be."

Read how the Lord opened _____ and _____ hearts to more: <https://loom.ly/MFyBYWg>



STORY-BASED POSTS DON'T ALWAYS HAVE TO BE ATTACHED TO A FULL FEATURE ARTICLE.



Families 4 Families



Every day, little hearts and minds are carrying much more than they can handle.

When foster parents welcome little ones, they often tackle complex behaviors as these precious children struggle to understand the loss of everything familiar.

Moms and dads might spend their days mopping spilled juice after a child threw their sippy cup during another tantrum or quietly playing with Barbie dolls on the floor until a child feels safe enough to open up. They're soothing fears, wiping tears and ending every day with a warm hug.

"We're just people who are trying to walk through very traumatic experiences with little people who don't understand what's going on, and just having someone that can listen and be supportive is so important." — [Name], Families 4 Families mom



AND THEY DON'T HAVE TO INCLUDE QUOTES, NAMES OR FACES AT ALL!



FOOD INSECURITY

can look like a single mother living paycheck to paycheck, struggling to put healthy meals on the table for her family.

It can look like an adult who lives alone and just lost his job. He only has enough saved to pay his lease and buy

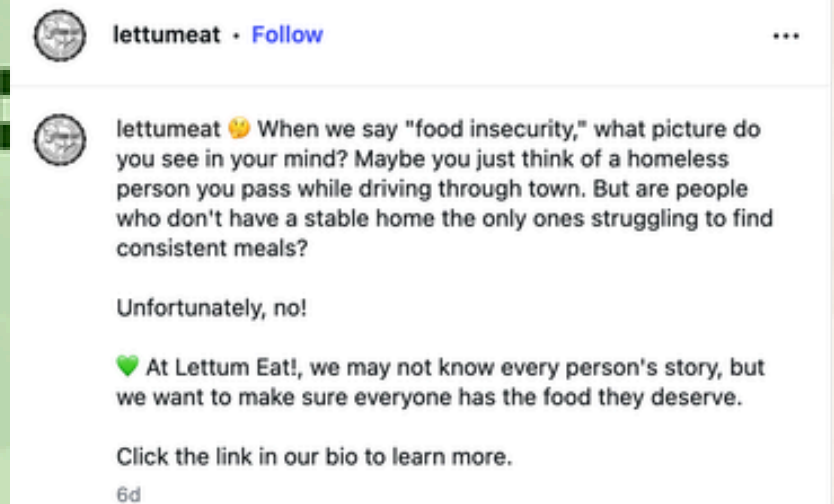
CHEAP FAST FOOD.

IT CAN EVEN LOOK LIKE

a senior adult who owns their home but doesn't receive enough Social Security to cover an adequate portion size for each meal.



LETTUM EAT!



lettumeat · Follow

lettumeat 🍌 When we say "food insecurity," what picture do you see in your mind? Maybe you just think of a homeless person you pass while driving through town. But are people who don't have a stable home the only ones struggling to find consistent meals?

Unfortunately, no!

♥️ At Lettum Eat!, we may not know every person's story, but we want to make sure everyone has the food they deserve.

Click the link in our bio to learn more.

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EMAIL STORYTELLING

Email allows for:

- More depth
- More vulnerability
- Direct communication

ONE OF THE BEST STRATEGIES:

Let one story unfold across multiple emails. (Hint: This is really great for campaigns when you do not have multiple first-person accounts.)

This builds connection over time.

EMAIL APPEAL WITHOUT A STORY:

To:

Recipient's email address

From:

Home Repairs Ministries
info@homerepairs.org

Subject:

Will you help us provide critical repairs to homeowners in need?

Preview Text:

Our waitlist is growing. We need you now more than ever.



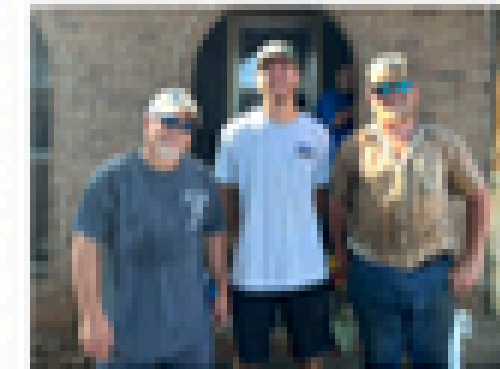
Hey <<First Name>> —

You believe that everyone deserves to stay safe, dry and warm in their own home. That's why I am asking, will you [give today](#) to provide critical home repairs to over a dozen homeowners on our waiting list?

This past year was record-breaking for Home Repairs Ministries! We repaired more homes and completed larger projects than ever before, BUT with expansion comes growing pains.

We are receiving more and more requests for large-scale repairs — water heaters, HVAC, roofs, etc. — and we don't have the funds to keep up with the demand.

Will you [give today](#) to help a homeowner in need?



One in five people spend over 30% of their annual income on housing, and in metro Atlanta, over 150,000 homes will be over 50 years old by 2040 — meaning people's budgets are already tight, and a lot of homeowners in our area will not be able to afford needed repairs and maintenance on their aging homes.

Your gift to Home Repairs Ministries helps repair more than homes; we work to repair hearts, too. Every gift to Home Repairs Ministries reminds homeowners that they are not alone and that they matter.

Will you [give today](#) to help a homeowner in need?

[Here's my gift!](#)

DO YOU REMEMBER:

- What percentage of annual income homeowners spend on home repairs?
- How many homes will be over age 50 by 2040?
- How many homeowners are on Home Repairs Ministries waitlist?

Data tells part of the story, but it does not connect — or stick — as well as a story.

EMAIL APPEAL WITH A STORY:

To:

Recipient's email address

From:

Heather Loveridge
info@homerepairs.org

Subject:

Angela's home has critical repair needs — can you help?

Preview Text:

After escaping abuse, Angela's home was left damaged and unsafe. Your gift today can help.



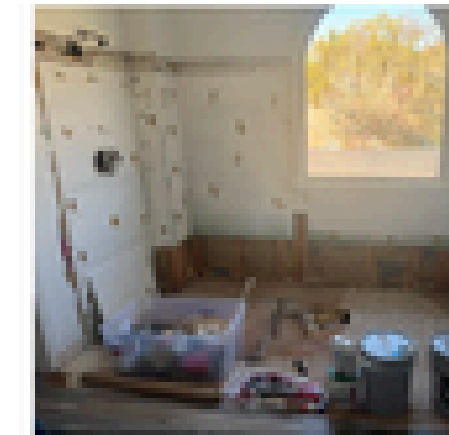
Hey <<First Name>> —

We know you believe that everyone deserves to stay safe, dry and warm in their own home. That's why I am asking, will you [give today](#) to provide critical home repairs for people like Angela and her children?

Two years after escaping from an abusive marriage, Angela was finally able to access her home again. Relief quickly became stress when she found that her ex-husband had destroyed their home: broken walls, moldy cabinets, a damaged water heater and more.

She couldn't fix it on her small paycheck. [That's where you come in.](#)

Thanks to generous people like you, Home Repairs Ministries has sent volunteers to her home to complete the critical repairs, including her water heater.



"I have been completely isolated from my community that doesn't understand the level of abuse that I went through," Angela shared, "yet here jump in strangers. They're just showing me so much love, care and compassion.

"They don't just say, 'We're going to pray for you.' They jump in and help out."

We celebrate the progress we've made for Angela, but many repairs are still incomplete, and without your help, her family will continue to struggle in an unfinished home.

Will you [give today](#) to help complete Angela's home repairs?

[I want to help!](#)

DO YOU REMEMBER:

- What happened to Angela's home?
- How Home Repairs Ministries helped?
- If there's still work to be done?
- How you can help Angela?

Notice the difference between an appeal full of only facts and one that focuses on the story. **Which one do you remember? Which one makes you care more? Which one makes you feel there's a place for you to help?**

STORY-BASED EMAIL APPEALS

Secret Sauce Structure for email appeals:

- Start with you + donor = in this together
- Make a clear, simple ask
- Share a real, incomplete story
- Skip unnecessary details
- Ask for the donation 3+ times
- Include a short, direct donation link
- Keep design minimal and feeling personal
- Show what happens if they don't give
- End with a donate button
- *Bonus: Remember to add bolded/underlined text as most people skim-read!*



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Storytelling helps people:

- Connect emotionally with your mission
- Understand why your work matters
- See the real impact of their support

What you need:

- People
- Experience
- Compassion

You just need to start noticing the stories around you.



LET'S STAY CONNECTED

**IF YOU'D LIKE HELP FINDING OR
TELLING YOUR STORIES,
WE'D LOVE TO CONNECT!**

Magnolia Media Group

Email: stories@magnoliamedia.group

Scan the QR code to schedule a discovery call.

