The question arises at least once during every storytelling workshop I lead, and it drives me crazy. "Can my *organization* be the protagonist of my story?" a well-meaning nonprofiteer will ask politely. "No!" I want to scream. "No! No! A thousand times no!"

Discretion prevails, however, and I explain just as politely that people relate to people, so stories about your work — *any* line of work, really — must provide human protagonists to draw the audience in and lead them through the narrative. And that's not just a recommendation, I hasten to add. When it comes to telling stories that an audience will remember and even repeat to others (the ultimate payoff for a well-told tale), consider this a law.

The 10 Immutable Laws of Storytelling

In fact, through the process of leading dozens of storytelling workshops for literally hundreds of nonprofits, I've been able to identify ten such laws. With very few exceptions, the stories that have risen to the top in these workshops tended to follow every one of these laws to the letter.

1. **Stories are about people.** Even if your organization (a) is devoted to saving flora and/or fauna, (b) toils in the dense thicket of policy change, or (c) helps other organizations work more effectively, *human beings are still driving the action.* So your protagonist has to be a person. And since this person also serves as the audience's guide through the story, it's essential to provide some physical description when he or she is introduced. This helps your audience form a mental picture — after all, it's hard to follow what you can't see. And don't forget to include your characters' names. Audiences will relate more readily to "Marcus" than "the at-risk youth," even if you have to use a pseudonym to protect your subject's identity.

2. **The people in your story have to want something.** A story doesn't truly begin until the audience knows precisely what the protagonist's goal is and has a reason to care whether or not it is attained. So within the first paragraph or two, make sure it's clear what your hero wants to do, to get, or to change. And given that stories are driven by some kind of desire, *beware the passive voice!* When you write, "a decision was reached," the people in your story magically disappear and suddenly the action is forced by an unseen hand. (For more on problems with using the passive voice, see Gonzales, Alberto.)

3. **Stories need to be fixed in time and space.** Audiences don't require every detail of longitude and latitude up front, but the moment you begin telling your tale, they will want to know: Did this happen last week or ten years ago? Are we on a street corner in Boston, a Wal-Mart in Iowa, or somewhere else? If you help them get their bearings quickly, they will stop wondering about the where and when of your story and more readily follow you into the deeper meaning within.

4. **Let your characters speak for themselves.** When characters speak to each other in a story, it lends immediacy and urgency to the piece. Audience members will feel as if they are the proverbial fly-on-the-wall within the scene, hearing in real time what each person has to say. Direct quotes also let characters speak in their idiosyncratic voices, lending authenticity to the dialogue. "The name is Bond, James Bond," is way better than, "The agent introduced himself, characteristically repeating his surname twice."

5. **Audiences bore easily.** Human beings are hard-wired to love stories, but in this, The Age of Too Much Information, people don't have time to wait for your story to get interesting. Within the first paragraph or two, you have to make them wonder, "What happens next?" or "How is this going to turn out?" As the people in your story pursue their goal, they must run into obstacles, surprises, or something that makes the audience sit up and take notice. Otherwise they'll stand up and walk away.

6. **Stories speak the audience's language.** According to national literacy studies, the average American reads at a sixth grade level. So if your ads, posters, and publications are intended for mass consumption, plain speaking is the order of the day. Good storytellers also have a keen ear for the colloquialisms and local slang that quickly establish common ground between the teller and listener.

7. **Stories stir up emotions.** Human beings (which should, hopefully, comprise the majority of your audience) are not inclined to think about things they do not care about. We all have too much on our plate as it is. So even when you have mountains of hard evidence on your side, you have to make your audience *feel* something before they will even glance at your numbers. Stories stir the emotions *not* to be manipulative, *not* simply for melodramatic effect, but to break through the white noise of information that inundates us every day and to deliver the message *this is worth your attention.*

8. **Stories don't tell: they show.** Intellectually, your audience will understand a sentence such as, "When the nurse visited the family at home, she was met with hostility and guardedness." But when you write, "When they all sat down for the first time in the living room, the family members wouldn't look her in the eye," your audience will see a picture, feel the hostility, and become more involved with the story.

9. **Stories have at least one "moment of truth."** At their essence, the best stories show us something about how we should treat ourselves, how we should treat other people, or how we should treat the world around us. Since the first forms of humankind gathered around the first fires, we have looked to stories to be containers of truth, and your audience will instinctively look within your story for this kind of insight.

10. **Stories have clear meaning.** When the final line is spoken, your audience should know exactly why they took this journey with you. In the end, this may be the most important rule of all. If your audience cannot answer the question, "What was that story all about?" it won't matter how diligently you followed rules one through nine.

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