Namati Guide: Story Writing

1. A case study versus a story.

The Namati Case Study Template (that is also part of this toolkit) gives examples of the kinds of questions to ask to build a detailed case study that demonstrates in detail how your organization undertakes its mission.

A case study may have the purpose of informing potential donors, operational partners and other specialist stakeholders who need a lot of detailed information about your work.

While a story can also be shown to all of these specialist readers, a story can also be used to appeal to a much wider, less specialist, readership than a case study. They may be members of the public, journalist, interested professionals in unrelated fields, or officials whose support you need, such as parliamentarians or regulators.

2. Start with a catchy lead or 'intro'.

The first two sentences of a story are the most important. You need them to capture the reader's attention and draw them into the story. There are various types of lead paragraph or 'intro' you can use.

At its most simple the intro can summarise the whole issue or story for example:

> This is a simple story of how a child's life was saved.

Another type of intro might use a startling fact, statement or quotation for example:

> "My baby was dying and I didn't know what to do," says Maria, as she clutches her only son.

Or:

> In Mozambique's villages, children are dying because of ignorance.

Another kind of lead could be one that sets the scene or physically roots the story in a specific place. For example:

> At the end of the red, dusty highway, many miles from the nearest town, is a range of tree-covered hills. In the shade of the palms lies the village of Maccaruene.

3. Show don't tell. News versus Features.

In journalism there are two basic types of story, a news story and a feature story. A news story is typically a collection of important facts about an event. It needs only to convey information. A feature story conveys information, but in a much more descriptive and colourful way. Importantly a feature story gives more background information about people's lives and it relies less on *telling* you how things are and more on *showing* you how things are.

For example:

Telling:

> In Mozambique 55% of clinics haven't implemented a new protocol on treatment of children under five with HIV.

Showing:

> Baby Bento and his mother Maria live in a rural village. When he stopped eating and started losing weight she had to carry him for two hours to reach their nearest clinic. A nurse wrongly told Maria that his blood cell count was above the level for receiving treatment and they were sent home. His life was saved because Hortencia, Namati's health advocate, knew the protocol on treating under-fives had changed.

4. Draw word pictures.

A feature story should provide the kinds of detail that make the subjects come alive to readers – this can be backed up with statistics, but it is important to paint a picture of people's lives. For example:

> Baby Bento's family live in traditional round houses, almost like those in a child's drawing of Africa, made from reeds and thatched palm leaves. Tall corn swaying in the breeze surrounds their homestead of five buildings.

The more word pictures and illustration you use, what journalists call "colour", the more you are prompting readers to create mental pictures.

Often it is the things that strikes you as interesting, intriguing or odd that will also be of interest to the reader – so trust your instincts to add sometimes unusual or quirky details from a personal perspective:

> "I briefly wondered where all the people in the village must be hiding – it was so very peaceful and quiet."

5. Use simple language.

The internet and bookshops are full of writing manuals and advice, but the key thing to remember is that you are trying to communicate – you want people to easily understand your story, you're not showing off your complex vocabulary.

Do:

Use short words instead of long words.

Use common words, not unusual or rare words.

Mostly use short sentences. Chop long, multi-clause sentences up into several short simple sentences.

Vary sentence length somewhat to inject rhythm to a piece of writing.

Don't:

Use jargon understood only by people specialist in your field of work.

Use clichés whose meaning has been de-valued by over-use.

Use a passive sentence structure, unless you do so deliberately to achieve a certain tone or rhythm.

(Active: "Baby Bento holds on to his mother". Passive: "Maria was being held on to by Baby Bento")

6. Connect the subject to your readers.

When you work regularly with the same community it is easy to forget that other people, perhaps from far away, will be curious about how your subjects live their daily lives. Basic facts about a subject can remind the reader of the similarities they share with the subject – even if they live in very different circumstances. When you interview your subject always start with a series of basic questions:

How old are you?

Where do you live? Who shares you house? How many rooms in your house?

How many children do you have? How far is their school?

> How do you make your living? What do you mainly eat? Where is your market?

Always be respectful, not demanding, ask if people are happy to share information about their lives.

Explain that the people who read your story may live in a different country. They might have a very different life and you want to show how people live in the subject's country.

7. Give your subjects a voice.

Quotations allow you to give the subject the chance to tell their own story in their own words – but be selective.

There are some styles of interview that are just question and answer, but they rarely paint a picture of their subject's circumstances and as a writer you should aim to re-write or paraphrase the less interesting quotations – but which move the story on – and save direct quotations for most arresting and colourful phrases, especially those that describe the subject's feelings.

For example:

> "I carried him in my arms for two hours in the heat of the day. Then I was turned away from the clinic with no treatment. I was very scared. I didn't know who to turn to".

8. Information and purpose: the "W" questions.

While storytelling gives you a great opportunity to try out your flair for description, don't forget the information purpose of the story.

What is the issue you want the reader to understand – that there is a problem? Or that there is a way of solving the problem?

Is there some action you want the reader to take? For example do you want them to join a campaign, write to a politician, or donate some money?

To ensure you're getting all the information across that you should, make a checklist of "Ws" – have you answered the W questions:

Who, what, where, when and why?

9. Respect your subjects.

Just because someone is the beneficiary of one of your organization's programs you must never think you are doing them a favour by writing about them and highlighting their plight.

Ensure you write about their life and circumstances in a way that is not only truthful, but in a way that is also respectful and that describes their all-around experience - few people are entirely defined by the problems or issues they face.

No matter how difficult their circumstances may appear to you, remember always that they are an individual, not just a 'hard case' or a 'sad story'.

A simple way to do this is to write stories as if you expect the subjects themselves to read them while sitting next to you – given the increasing accessibility of digital communications, many people shall be able to read your stories about them.

It may be the first time in their life they have been written about – so think hard about how you describe and define their lives.

10. Consider anonymity.

Individuals can live on forever on the Internet. Children especially are likely to grow up and one day may find themselves written about in a way they find embarrassing or humiliating. Consider giving your subjects false names and add a line at the end of the story informing your readers:

Maria and Bento's names have been changed to protect their privacy.

This is particularly the case when you may be revealing someone's health status or private family circumstances.