

TIPS FOR TELLING THE STORY OF YOUR RESEARCH

The power—and science—of storytelling

Human beings are wired to respond to stories. The brain of someone listening to a story will sync up with the storyteller, making storytelling a powerful and persuasive tool for scientists, researchers and global health professionals. Stories in a narrative format build more compassion, can change attitudes and spur curiosity more than hard data and facts alone.

Pair a data point with a human story to amplify your results

Most scientists are trained to convey results and data but not to communicate the findings through storytelling. Data and a human voice together work better to ensure that a scientist's study goes beyond the journal and translates to change in practice, policy, or public opinion.

Story rocket fuel

Details, surprise, quotes and brevity. Write it down, say it aloud, cut what isn't essential, and test it on a colleague or friend.



Know what you want your audience to know, feel, and do

A strategic story is not just interesting. It is built to move a specific audience toward a specific goal. Before you start, decide what you want listeners to **know**, what you want them to **feel**, and what you want them to **do**.

Four steps to a story

- **Setting:** provide details of the where and when, set the scene for the listener.
- **Character:** anchor the story on a person, and individual that audience can picture, it could be a health worker, a patient, an every day person who is affected personally by the issue you're describing. The character in the story could be you.
- **Conflict:** You must give the listener conflict or the story will not land. The conflict can be old versus new, two personalities clashing over the central issue, or the character facing an uphill battle or doubt.
- **Meaning:** Tell and show the audience by it matters and what it could mean if progress was made, typically as a result of that scientific break through or developing a new way of working.

Finding the story in your research

- **Start with the why of your work:** Was there a turning point or setback? A personal moment that made you want to tackle this issue?
- **Pick a protagonist.** Pick one person inside the system, for example a health worker or government official, and talk about their quest to change the system and why.
- **Be honest about the results.** Do not force a happy ending or results that have not come through yet. End on a vivid picture of what success looks like and why it is urgent.
- **Distill it into one sentence** that shows the arc. If you can't, the story isn't ready.

Writing for advocacy: using op-eds and letters to make your case

Even the most compelling research or effective health program does not automatically translate to public support or improved policies. You can play an important role in scaling your impact by drawing in supporters, engaging your community, and making a call to action to policy makers. Writing an Op-ed is one one way to do that. A 2018 Yale study found that Op-Eds are "an effective means for changing people's minds," with "large and long-lasting effects."

What makes an op-ed work

- **A compelling, focused topic.** Choosing it is the most important decision.
- **A strong beginning.** If your first sentence doesn't grab readers, they'll never reach the second.
- **A clear call to action.** You've shared important information — what should readers do with it?
- **No "blah-blah."** If it repeats what experts have already said, it won't be published, or read.

Four ways to begin

- **Bold:** a direct claim that stakes out your position.
- **Personal:** a moment from your own life or work.
- **Surprising:** a perspective the reader doesn't expect.
- **Descriptive:** a scene the reader can see.

A simple structure

1. **Beginning** — grab the reader
2. **Call to action** — what needs to happen
3. **Supporting points** — data, a personal story, history, expert voices
4. **Call to action again** — stronger, now that you've made the case
5. **Closer**

Strengthen it by acknowledging the weaknesses in your argument, answering your opponents, and painting the future you want.

A properly timed op-ed can move a field forward

In Feb. 2020, infectious disease expert Arturo Casadevall wrote a 600-word op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* proposing convalescent plasma for COVID-19.

Within days, $4 million in grants were offered; within six months, about 100,000 people had been treated.

Letters to the editor

A faster, shorter option: respond within **48 hours** of the article, stay under the outlet's limit (often **250 words**), state your position plainly, and give one or two local examples. Include your title and affiliation.

Write in plain language

Write so a non-specialist understands you on first read. Minimize jargon or anything too technical or industry-specific. Write in sentences, and explain any term you can't avoid.

Tell it responsibly

Use other people's stories with respect and permission, tell them in ways that help a community rather than hurt individuals, and stay true to the data.

Consortium of Universities for Global Health

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