Climate Storytelling: A Quick Guide

From APHA's Center for Climate, Health and Equity workshop, "Making Climate Change Personal for Effective Communication."

There is power in your personal story!

Have you or those you care about felt the physical and mental health effects of climate-related events? What actions have you taken, and which solutions have worked? Personal experience makes you your own expert, and your story has more power to drive climate action than facts alone.

Stories make climate change relatable by drawing on common experience and core human values, like health. Compelling stories generate empathy and understanding. They take listeners on an emotional journey and offer a sense of hope that inspires positive change.

Not sure where to start?

Use these guiding principles in your story:[1]

- **People:** Put people first! **Understand your audience's** experiences, knowledge and social contexts.
- **Values:** Connect with the values of your audience, **spark empathy** and **be relevant** to what is already going on in their lives.
- **Ambivalence:** Show people that their **action is needed, doable and worth it.** Too much fear, confusion or apathy surrounding the climate crisis creates emotional numbing and feelings of hopelessness.
- **Action:** Emphasize solutions and benefits. **Inspire and empower** your audience with clear ways everyone can contribute to solutions.
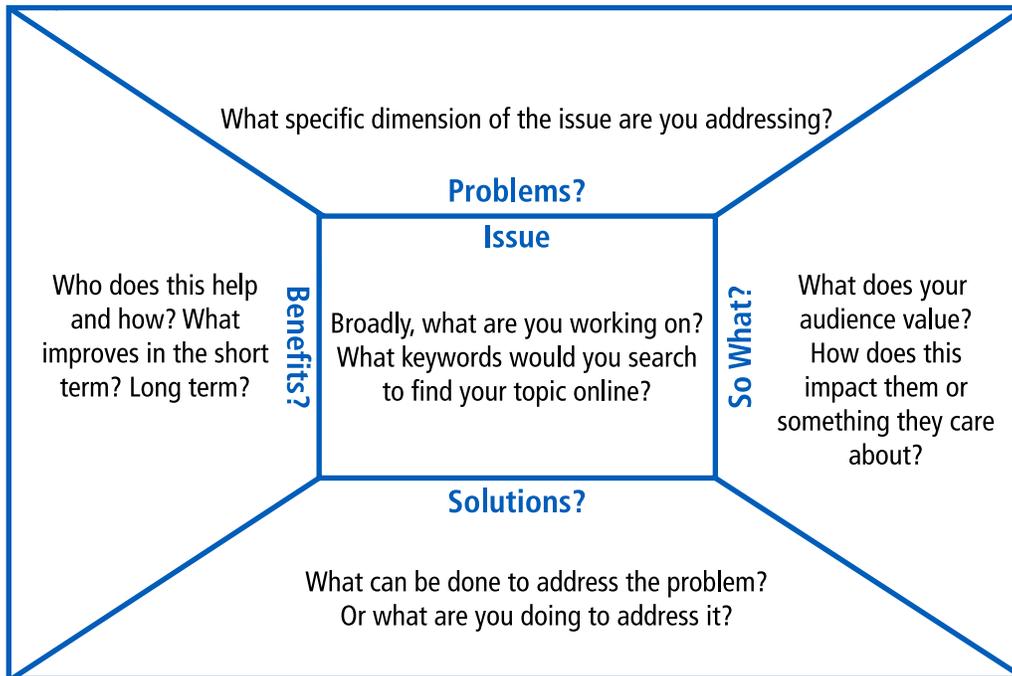
Build your story using ABT:[2]

- Exposition/Beginning: "And" sets the scene
- Climax/Middle: "But" shows the problem or challenge
- Resolution/End: "Therefore" describes action to solve the problem

Classic Narrative Arc

Climax

Rising Action

Falling Action

Exposition

Resolution
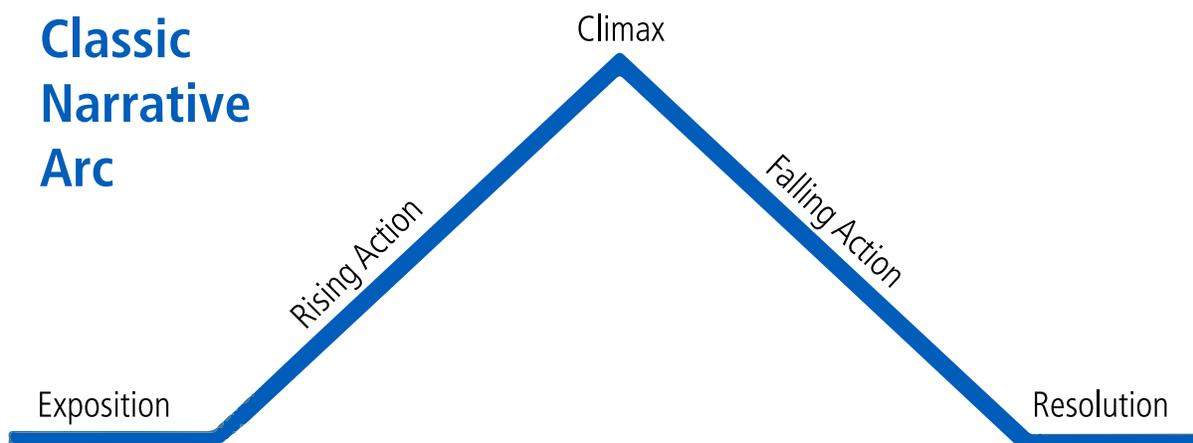
Adapted from Cheryl Brumley's "Stepping out of the academic box"
Geographical Society Annual Conference, 2014

Frame your story with a message box.

Audience: Who is impacted by this? Who can change this? Who cares about this?

What specific dimension of the issue are you addressing?

Problems?

Issue

Broadly, what are you working on? What keywords would you search to find your topic online?

Benefits? Who does this help and how? What improves in the short term? Long term?

So What? What does your audience value? How does this impact them or something they care about?

Solutions?

What can be done to address the problem? Or what are you doing to address it?

Adapted from COMPASS Science Communication, Inc., Message Box Workbook, 2017, available at https://www.compassscicomm.org/message-box-online

Use these universal story elements:[3]

☐ A relatable protagonist, who changes over time

☐ A narrative arc that builds tension and anticipation

☐ Action that puts people in conflict with obstacles

☐ A plot resolution to end tension and provide payoff

☐ A larger meaning that informs and inspires

General Tips:

Match audience to message. Are you speaking to a colleague? Family member? Elected official? How you tell your story depends on who is listening and how you want them to respond.

Show, don't tell. Facts tell how climate change impacts health, but a story shows how climate change affects real people and what can be done about it. Through emotion and connection to common values, like health, stories create empathy and understanding.

References

1. Markowitz, E., Hodge, C., & Harp, G. (2014). Connecting on Climate: A Guide to Effective Climate Change Communication. Retrieved from http://ecoamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/ecoAmerica-CRED-2014-Connecting-on-Climate.pdf

2. Olson, R. (2015). Houston, we have a narrative: why science needs story. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press

3. ecoAmerica: 2016. 15 Steps To Create Effective Climate Communications. ecoAmerica. Washington, D.C. Retrieved from https://ecoamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/5_ea_15_steps.pdf

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