

COLLECT MEANINGFUL DATA: Using True Storytelling as Data

Purpose: Storytelling—like focus groups, 1-on-1 interviews, photo voice and case notes—is another method for collecting **qualitative data** (see the *Beyond Numbers: Collecting Qualitative Data* emPower Tool). Written or recorded stories can be analyzed for themes using **qualitative data analysis** (see the *Analyzing Qualitative Data* emPower Tool) or used as testimonials and oral histories for fundraising, grant applications, decision making, advocacy and more (see p. 2).

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What is True Storytelling?

We are all storytellers. There is no secret talent or skill required to tell a true story. You recount your lived experiences (true stories) to others (audience) all day, every day.

Describing a story as “true” doesn’t mean we do not embellish or rearrange the truth when we recount our experiences, it just means for the purposes of this tool, we are referring to experiences that *actually happened to you* as opposed to making up a fictional account, writing a fable, or describing a fantasy.

Why Use True Storytelling?

- Sharing true stories with each other about our lived experiences builds empathy through interpersonal connection. The process of sharing our stories has the potential to change our minds, as well as humanize and surprise us.
- Narrative storytelling activates the pleasure centers of our brains!
- Similarly to oral histories or testimonials, when focused on a particular evaluation question, written and recorded stories can be used for qualitative data analysis.
- When focused on an aspect of service delivery, storytelling among members and clients of your organization can be a great way to demonstrate the impact of your work.
- There are many different ways to engage people in storytelling. You can use a storytelling prompt to invite individuals to write a story to share privately with you. You can host a community storytelling event. You can invite volunteers to write a story for a fundraising event. You can include storytelling as part of an employee retreat.

Organizing a True Storytelling Event

A good story is one that connects the listener and the teller. Storytelling is not a performance, a homework assignment, or a work of art. Authenticity is far more effective than skills.

Specificity	Flexibility	Time Management	Continuity	Sincerity	Privacy
Help your storytellers narrow in on a topic by providing them with a place to start with a prompt (see Storytelling Prompts below).	Limit the number of rules for storytelling. Rules and ideas about quality often work to silence marginalized voices.	Set a time limit (100 words/1 minute of speaking) for sharing stories. Give storytellers enough time to prepare and encourage them to practice with a stopwatch.	Encourage storytellers to write a beginning, middle, and end. The stories don't have to follow a sequential order, but this invites the listener in, brings them along, and shows them the way out.	It is okay if storytellers don't memorize their stories. Invite participants to read their stories from paper or an electronic device.	Get storytellers consent for their participation and video or audio recording. Respect their decision to participate or not.

Storytelling Prompts

Use these 3 prompts to help get the creative juices flowing:

Speak to the body

Use your 5 senses—sight, smell, sound, touch, taste—to help you recount an experience.

Describe learning to do something new like swimming, playing soccer, riding a bike, learning a language.

Speak to feelings

Focus on your emotions and how you felt during the experience you are recounting.

Describe an interaction you had with someone using only the emotions you experienced while it was happening.

Self-reflect

Take time to seriously examine your character, motivation, or actions as you attempt to recount an experience.

Describe a time you acted poorly or felt shame about something you did or said.

Example prompts for stories:

- Write a story about engaging in physical play with your child.
- Write a story about a difficult interaction you had with your child and how you resolved it.
- Write a story about a time you feel that you failed/succeeded at parenting.
- Write a story about a time that you felt you struggled to connect with a client.
- Write a story about a time you felt very connected to a client.
- Write a story about a time you feel that you failed/succeeded at your job.

Do More with Your Data!

Check out these *emPower Tools* for more ideas on how to use storytelling to support your clients:
(thecapacitycollective.org/resources/empower-tools)

- *Amplify Your Story: Conducting a Root Cause Analysis*
- *Amplify Your Story: Data for Decision Making and Improvements*
- *Amplify Your Story: Using Data for Grant Writing*
- *Amplify Your Story: Advocacy for Nonprofits*

Making the Storytelling Practice Inclusive and Culturally Responsive

- Whether regarding writing, art, film and video, or other forms of creative production, ideas about what makes a good or bad story are generally determined by those with the most power in society. Many people will be reluctant to volunteer to tell their story because they don't see their stories as being important or as being "good enough." Take special care to encourage and nurture those who you don't often hear from.
- Diversify participants across social identity (race, class, nationality) and role (client, service provider, administrator).
- Storytelling is an important cultural process for many groups of people and in some cases may be tied to religion, ritual, and empowerment. Don't conflate true storytelling for qualitative data with someone's cultural practice. Take care to be explicit about your goals.
- Be prepared to accommodate a diversity of languages and literacy levels.
- Set expectations for the audience and performers to create a brave space where being vulnerable is accepted and valued.
- Provide participants with the opportunity to sit out of the activity or to take a break when they are sharing their storytelling.

We encourage you to share these resources with your organization, and other local social service organizations. PLEASE NOTE this handout is the intellectual property of The Capacity Collective. Please do not duplicate parts, or adapt, without the express permission of The Capacity Collective. Thank you for supporting our work! **Special thank you to Mary Robertson for her work on this tool!**