Bottom-Up Storytelling

Telling stories about people, not programmes
A guide for story scouts and story builders
Why bottom-up storytelling?

As part of the BRAC family, you may often be asked to tell stories about our work. The best stories, though, are told by our clients themselves: microfinance borrowers, community health workers, patients, and millions of others with captivating, true stories of transformation, change, and progress toward ending poverty around the world.

The goal of bottom-up storytelling is to enable our clients to tell their own stories -- with you as the enabler. This guide explains how you and your colleagues can begin finding these stories and documenting them, on video or in writing. These stories create emotional connections between our clients and others who may want to support or play a role in our movement.

Our guide

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We are often asked for stories about BRAC’s work. Consider two types:

1. **Case studies** may contain details about a client’s life, but they are primarily about a BRAC programme, how it works, and how it has helped the client. Case studies are told from a top-down perspective -- the perspective of BRAC.

2. **Bottom-up stories**, on the other hand, are told from the perspective of a client. They are about a person, not an programme or an organisation.

Opposite, you’ll see two examples of the same story told in different ways. What do you notice that is different?

**Which one would you consider to be a “bottom-up story”?**

**Version 1**

Beatrice is a Ugandan woman who is a BRAC livestock promoter. In 2012, she earned 2,000 Ugandan schillings from her poultry vaccine activities. She attributes higher and more secure income to having vaccinated cows thanks to BRAC training. She performs vaccinations for about 30 farmers in her community while also hosting monthly poultry vaccine education sessions. Beatrice has several children, including a daughter who is a peer mentor in BRAC’s Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents programme.

**Version 2**

My name is Beatrice Nakabirwa. I got married when I was young and had three children. My husband’s family told me they didn’t believe in immunising children. One of my babies got sick and developed a cough. It was measles, and my baby died. When BRAC came, they provided information about immunising both children and animals. My healthier cows now produce more milk to sell - enough that I now have money to send my children to school. I also mobilise others and give them knowledge. I’m proud to have brought development to my community. My baby died of ignorance. He was just one and half years old. But if he were here today, I know he would be proud of me.
In order to make bottom-up storytelling efficient and scalable, BRAC has devised two roles: story scouts and story builders.

**Story scouts** are primarily field staff who have the most daily interaction with clients. They identify potential stories and perform initial interviews. The aim is to get a quick snapshot of how the client’s life has changed and how BRAC played a role in that change.

**Story builders** are primarily area or head office staff. Scouts report their preliminary interviews in notes or verbally. Together, scouts and builders decide which stories are worth recording or “building,” on camera or in writing. Story builders are responsible for creating the final product, be it a write-up, photo essay or video.

This guidebook is designed to help staff in both roles work together to produce inspiring stories that will strengthen BRAC’s communications and advocacy capacity. It will help everyone find better stories and get story builders started on making the final products.
In order to inspire others, a story has to create a sense of connection. It also has to be memorable. You can do both by balancing out the familiar with the new and interesting. When choosing which stories to document, consider this balance.

Here are three ways stories can create a sense of connection through familiarity:

1. **Familiar characters.** Stories that create connections often have characters that remind us of ourselves or people we know from our own lives. It could be the demanding parent or the strong-willed child. The story might take place in a context that is strange or foreign to us, including situations of extreme poverty, but people will still respond emotionally to familiar characters. Inspiring stories don’t ignore what makes us all different, but they do tend to emphasize the things we have in common.

2. **Familiar themes and plots.** Stories can emphasize familiar themes, such as work ethic, problem-solving skills, or the determination to make a better future for our children. The plot of a story can also be familiar: the first time someone from a family does something like going to school, playing a sport, or opening a business; moving to a new city with your family or finding a new job; having your first child or a new baby sister or baby brother. Life events, whether hopeful or tragic, are important ways to establish familiarity between a story and audience.

3. **Familiar structure.** When taking notes or recording a story, always try to identify the basic structure of “beginning, middle, end.” This is called the “narrative arc.”

   - **Beginning**
     a. Set the scene: not just names of locations, but what it looks like. What is life like for the people who live there?
     b. Establish your main character: her name, something about her background that others can relate to, her hopes and aspirations, her daily routine.

   - **Middle**
     a. Now show a change. What happens to the main character that breaks up her original routine? Does she meet someone new? Move to a new place? Suffer a tragic loss in the family?
     b. How does the main character respond to these changes? Does her inner life or outlook change?

   - **End**
     a. Finally, set a new scene: What is life like now for the main character?
     b. And the future: Where does she see her life going from here? What does she want to change for herself, her family and her community?

**TIP FOR STORY SCOUTS:**
Use the elements of familiarity to identify stories. As you consider which clients to recommend to a story builder, think of the familiar connections you might have to the client yourself.
Whether acting as a story scout or a story builder, the basics are the same. These guidelines are valid for both scouts and builders.

**Ask open-ended questions, not yes/no questions.** Don’t ask: “Have you ever started your own business?” Instead, ask: “Can you tell me about a time when you started your own business?” You’ll get more details that way.

**Ask follow-up questions.** Ask about the emotions the subject feels and the things she does on a daily basis -- what she sees, hears, smells, eats, and thinks. This will create a connection with the audience. Encourage the subject to illustrate these in her own words.

**When filming, always have client repeat the question with the answer.** You might ask, “When did you start your own business?” If they reply, “Three years ago,” ask them to repeat: “I started the business three years ago....” Be silent during taped interviews, but always show you are paying close attention.

**Prepare questions in advance, but be spontaneous.** You don’t have to stick to the list or use every question on the list.

**Remember beginning, middle and end.** Your conversation with the client may not cover these in chronological order, but remember -- the final story will need details that describe each of the three stages. Ask them to repeat to catch these details.

**Pay attention to what the client is excited to talk about.** It may not always be your initial idea, so keep an open mind about the story. It could be about a daughter, nephew, or neighbor. There will likely be a BRAC connection.

**TIP FOR STORY SCOUTS:** You’re already used to gathering information from clients during your work. Use these interactions to gather stories following these guidelines. If you think you’ve found a good story, start taking notes and record as many details as you can. **The more you collect in the scouting stage, the better the final story will be.**

**TIP FOR STORY BUILDERS:** Don’t hesitate to go back and clear something up. Ask the client to repeat, and you’ll often get better footage or quotations than the first time around -- especially for important details. You can select the best during the editing stage.
Part 5 Choosing the best elements

Always remember: you will only use a small portion of the details you gather or the video footage you take.

The goal of bottom-up storytelling is to create an emotional connection. Brevity is essential to telling an inspiring story, one that creates an emotional connection.

Keeping the story short may involve leaving out details that, while they might be valuable, aren’t necessary to achieve your goal. For example, using some details from the story in part 1:

**Valuable:** In 2012 she earned 2,000 Ugandan schillings from her poultry vaccine activities, and in addition she attributes higher and more secure income from selling milk to having vaccinated, properly maintained cows.

**Necessary:** After implementing the training, my healthier cows now produce more milk to sell – enough that I now have money to send my children to school.

While the first might be valuable information, it’s not immediate to an outsider what 2,000 schillings might be worth. In the second instance, we say what her income is now able to provide and also what else she does with the knowledge she has gained.

Here are three concepts that will help you pick out which details to keep.

**A hero**
Your chosen details should create a strong character at the center of your story, someone with whom outsiders from thousands of miles away can relate. What are her interests? What is she most proud of? What is her vision for the future of her family, her community, or her country?

**A journey**
Remember, beginning, middle, and end: the details you choose to keep should be easy to group into one of these three stages. If you have trouble deciding what details to keep, it may be helpful to group your details in this way first, and see which stage may have more than the others or which stage may have more than is necessary to describe.

**A transformation**
How -- and when -- did the central character’s life change over the course of a story? What was the moment she realised her life had changed? What did she learn? How is her life different today?
**Five starting questions for a short film**

1. What is the name of your film?
2. What is the message of your film?
3. Who is the star of your film?
4. Why should an audience be interested?
5. What are the two most special moments of your film?

**Capturing a story in nine photos**

1. Simple, head on portrait with smile. The subject is looking at the camera with a big smile.
2. Home setting shot. A photo of the subject’s home, inside or out.
3. Home action shot. Subject is not looking at the camera, but performing an action in their household, such as cooking, cleaning, playing with kids, relaxing, etc.
4. Family shot. Portraits of subjects’ children or family members (either posed or action shot).
5. Serious portrait. The subject is looking either at the camera or into the distance, thoughtfully and reflectively.
6. BRAC action shot. The subject is active in a BRAC programme setting.
7. Community walking shot. The subject is walking through their community.
8. Hero shot. Often taken from slightly below, the subject appears as the hero.
9. Empty space. Take several photos with plenty of “empty space,” such as a wall or the sky. These are useful for placing titles.
Shooting good video in nine steps

1. During the interview, be sure to frame the subject properly: place the interviewee in an upper third of the frame (as shown), at the intersection of the upper and horizontal third, with their eyes looking in the direction of the empty space in the frame.

2. Steady the camera by shooting with your elbows pressed into your body. Use a tripod wherever possible.

3. Always frame the image horizontally.

4. Pick one subject for each shot and hold it. No “hosing”! Don’t wave your camera around to get all points of interest.

5. Shoot all shots for at least 10 seconds.

6. If you do need to switch the point of interest quickly in the middle of a shot, use a swish-pan, where you move your camera rapidly and horizontally.

7. Instead of zooming, move the camera closer to the subject instead.

8. Keep pans minimal (one per scene max).

9. Shoot cutaway shots of hands and b-roll to avoid jump cuts.

Seven essential b-roll shots

For essential b-roll, be sure to capture each of these for at least 10 seconds.

1. BRAC programmes in action.

2. Video portrait, smiling or serious: Subject looks thoughtfully at a point in the distance.

3. Subject doing everyday activities: cooking, cleaning, playing with children.

4. Subject working.

5. Subject interacting with others.

6. Shots in their communities, courtyards, etc.

7. Exterior shot of subject’s home.

Tip

FOR STORY BUILDERS: Keep it short! Yes, it might seem difficult or even impossible to fit a person’s story into less than five minutes of video or less than 500 words. Dealing with constraints is hard work, but it can also make you surprisingly creative.
If you remember nothing else, bottom-up stories should ultimately be three things:

- Client-centered
- Relatable to outsiders
- Short