

Numbers into Narrative: Where Data Meets Storytelling

In a world full of data, stories are what people remember. In grant writing, storytelling is not about tugging on heartstrings just for effect, it is about grounding your work in real experiences that illustrate need, show impact, and reflect the values of your organization. Grant proposals often require a compelling case for support, and a strong narrative can set you apart in a competitive field.

Facts inform, but stories persuade.

Imagine a reviewer reading dozens of applications for workforce development grants. One proposal outlines a clear need: the county's unemployment rate is 8.6%, nearly double the state average. Another introduces Ellen, a former hospitality worker in a rural tourism town who lost steady income during the off-season. Through a regional workforce initiative, she completed bookkeeping training and now works year-round for a small local business. Both proposals present a compelling case, but one makes the issue personal and memorable. That is the power of storytelling when paired with data.

How to Use This Training

This sub-training is designed as a go-at-your-own-pace guide to help you strengthen your grant writing through effective storytelling. You can work through the modules in order or skip to the parts most relevant to your current project.

Each module includes:

- Practical guidance on using narrative in key grant sections.
- Examples that show how to combine story and data effectively.
- Reflection prompts and exercises to help you apply concepts to your own work.



Use this resource as a hands-on reference whenever you need to bring clarity, connection, and purpose to your grant proposals. You will learn how to create balance between narrative and data, gather real stories ethically, and write in a way that is both authentic and funder-focused.

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Module 1: Why Storytelling Matters in Grant Writing

Storytelling is not just a creative technique; it is a strategic tool. In grant writing, a compelling story helps reviewers understand the “why” behind your work. It builds empathy, frames the problem clearly, and makes your project memorable among dozens of proposals. While data is critical, story gives that data context and emotional weight. Together, they make your application more persuasive, more fundable, and more reflective of your community.

In this module, you will learn:

- Why storytelling is a powerful tool in grant writing.
- Where stories belong in a grant proposal and how to use them strategically.
- How to balance personal narrative with data and evidence.
- How different types of funders respond to storytelling.
- Examples of strong storytelling across sectors like workforce, housing, and open space.
- Practical tips for applying story in key grant sections, including budget and evaluation.

Why Storytelling

Grant reviewers often read dozens (sometimes hundreds) of proposals. Many of those proposals include excellent data and technically sound plans, but the strongest ones stand out because they tell a clear, human-centered story that makes the reviewer care.

Example Improvements:

Before: “Our county has a workforce participation rate that is 15% lower than the state average.”

After: “Mark, a county resident, had worked the night shift at a local gas station for seven years. When it closed, he was out of work for months with no clear next step. Our workforce program helped him complete training and secure a stable job at the local utility. Mark’s story is one of many in a county where workforce participation is 15% lower than the state average.”

Both examples deliver the same data. However, the second one invites the reader to feel the issue and visualize the impact.

Where Storytelling Shows Up in Grant Applications

Storytelling can be used throughout a proposal, but it must serve a purpose. Each section of a grant application offers opportunities to integrate the story, while still meeting funder expectations for clarity, results, and accountability.

Statement of Need

This section defines the problem your project addresses. It is a natural place for storytelling.

Use storytelling to:

- Put a face to the data.
- Help reviewers feel the urgency of the issue.
- Show the real-life consequences of inaction.

Example:

Before: “Due to limited affordable housing, many working families in our town are unable to find a place to live that fits their needs or budget.”

After: “Jill works full-time at the local grocery store, but there are no rentals in town she can afford. She and her two sons now live in a camper on her cousin’s property, 35 miles away. Each morning, she drives nearly an hour just to get to work. Like many families in our region, Jill is doing her best, but the housing options simply do not match the needs or incomes of the people who live and work here.”

Pro Tip: Pair one story with a local statistic or trend. This keeps the story grounded and avoids overreliance on anecdote.

Project Description

This section outlines what you plan to do and how it will work. Stories here help describe change.

Use storytelling to:

- Show the “before and after.”
- Demonstrate program logic through real-life experience.
- Humanize activities that might otherwise feel abstract.

Example:

Before: “The project will expand licensed care by 20 slots and add one new infant provider.”

After: “In our community, parents like Deena and Jordan take turns missing work because there are no infant care slots available in town. With this funding, we will open a new licensed infant room and serve 20 more children, so families like theirs can work without worry.”

Pro Tip: Describe the change in real terms. What will be different for a person, household, or neighborhood if your project succeeds?

Evaluation and Outcomes

This section is usually data-heavy, but story can help illustrate success.

Use storytelling to:

- Paint a picture of what success looks like.
- Demonstrate how you will measure meaningful change.
- Bring outcomes to life with short examples.

Example:

Before: “Our program aims to support 30 small businesses with technical assistance and capital.”

After: “One of those businesses is a startup farm operated by a first-generation farmer in our county. With early access to funding and guidance, she grew from three clients to 40 and now employs two part-time staff.”

Pro Tip: If you are working in a rural area, describe how systems or geography make impact more complex. Story can help explain nuance.

Budget Narrative

This section often feels dry. But when done well, it shows reviewers that your dollars are tied to people and real results.

Use storytelling to:

- Explain why each expense matters.
- Tie line items to the project’s story.
- Highlight how dollars translate to outcomes.

Example:

Before: “\$22,000 is requested for trail equipment and signage.”

After: “This \$22,000 request will fund trail materials and signage that improve safety, accessibility, and educational value for all users. Clear, durable signage will help visitors navigate the new loop and learn about the area’s natural and cultural significance which will enhance the experience for families, students, and outdoor programs alike.”

Pro Tip: Even in budget justifications, you can reference the people and places that make the numbers matter. Keep it brief but visual.

The Role of Story: Not data replacement, but a frame for it

It is easy to think of storytelling and data as separate or competing elements, but they work best together. Story provides the emotional and human context. Data provides credibility and scale.

- Story without data can feel anecdotal or overly emotional.
- Data without story can feel dry, abstract, or forgettable.

Effective proposals use story to frame the data: Who is affected? What changed? Why does it matter?

Example:

Before: “There are 326 unemployed adults in our rural county,”

After: “After losing her restaurant job, Maria, a single mother, began picking up odd jobs to make ends meet. She joined our workforce program last fall. Today, she works full-time at a dental office after completing a 6-month training certificate. Maria’s story reflects the pathway many of the 326 adults in our county who experienced unemployment last year who are working to rebuild through local workforce training and support.”

Tone Matters: Matching Your Style to the Funder

Different funders respond to storytelling in different ways. Tailor your use of narrative based on who will read it.

Funder Type	Best Tone and Use of Story
Private/Foundation Grants	Emotionally resonant, human-centered, mission-driven.
Corporate Giving Programs	Community impact, positive outcomes, local relevance.
State Grants	Results-oriented with grounded local context.
Federal Grants	Clear, concise, data-forward with minimal narrative (used sparingly to frame).

Pro Tip: If using story in a federal application, keep it brief and immediately follow with measurable outcomes or references to research.

Closing Insights

Strong storytelling sets your proposal apart by helping reviewers understand the human impact behind your work. When used thoughtfully, narrative brings clarity, purpose, and emotion to an application without losing credibility or focus.

This module introduced where stories appear in grant writing, how to match your tone to your funder, and how to combine story with data for maximum impact. Whether you are writing about workforce training or land conservation, storytelling helps funders connect with your mission and see the value of investing in your work.

Key takeaways from this module:

- Storytelling is not a replacement for data, it gives data meaning and context.
- Strategic stories can be used in the statement of need, project description, budget, and evaluation sections.
- Matching your storytelling tone to your funder type is essential for credibility.
- Real examples grounded in your community make your proposal more memorable.

- Even short narratives can help funders feel the urgency and impact of your work.

Practical Tools

Reflection Prompt:

Take a few minutes to think about a recent or upcoming grant proposal. Ask yourself:

- Where in the proposal did I (or could I) include a story?
- Is the story connected to the data I used, or does it stand on its own?
- Does the story reflect the real people or communities we serve, with respect and clarity?
- Would a reviewer walk away with a strong sense of why this work matters?

Jot down any changes you could make, or stories you might start gathering now for future proposals.

Storytelling Readiness Checklist

Use this to assess how effectively you’re using storytelling in your current or next application.

Question	Y N
Have I included at least one short, real story that illustrates the problem?	
Does my story connect clearly to the data I use?	
Have I described the “before and after” impact of my project?	
Is my tone appropriate for the funder I’m applying to?	
Have I avoided exaggeration, pity language, or overly emotional framing?	
Does the story reinforce the outcomes I have promised to deliver?	

Module 2: Building a Strong Grant Story

Once you understand why storytelling matters in grant writing, the next step is learning how to build a story that works, one that supports your proposal, fits the grant’s tone and goals, and reflects the real people and communities you serve.

Your grant story is not a marketing pitch or a dramatic anecdote. It is a purposeful narrative that illustrates the need for your project and shows how it will create change. A strong grant story is grounded, respectful, and clearly tied to outcomes.

In this module, you will learn:

- The core elements of a strong grant story: protagonist, problem, solution, and vision.
- How to connect your story to your project goals and funder priorities.
- How to tell a story that is respectful, grounded, and strategically focused.
- Practical tips for using stories across sectors like childcare, housing, and open space.
- Reflection prompts and checklists to help you plan and apply your own story effectively.

What Makes a Strong Story in Grant Writing

In a grant proposal, the goal of your story is to help the reviewer visualize your work in action. It should illustrate:

- Who your work serves.
- What challenge they face.
- What you are doing to address that challenge.
- What will change as a result.

Whether you are writing about a program to expand broadband, increase access to childcare, conserve open space, or support a local food hub, this narrative structure helps reviewers understand not just what you are doing, but why it matters.

The Four Core Elements of a Grant Story

To build a story that strengthens your grant proposal, it helps to understand what makes an effective narrative in this context. In grant writing, stories are not just compelling, they are purposeful. The most useful stories follow a clear structure that mirrors how your project creates change. These four core elements help ensure your story is aligned with your goals, your community, and the funder's priorities.

1. Protagonist: Who is at the center of this story?

This could be an individual participant, a family, a small business owner, or even a neighborhood or community. Choose someone who reflects the population your project is designed to support.

Example:

Sierra is a nurse who works night shifts at the local hospital. After giving birth to twins, she could not find infant care during the hours she worked. She nearly quit her job until she got one of the few openings at a local provider.

Pro Tip: Use respectful, humanizing language. You are not writing about someone; you are writing with care for how they are represented.

Reflection Prompt: Who in your work best represents your mission in action? What details about them show the impact of your program or services?

2. Problem: What barrier or challenge does the protagonist face?

The problem should connect directly to the issue your project addresses. Use the story to illustrate the human experience behind the data.

Example:

After being priced out of her apartment, Sierra moved back in with her mother and sister. Three adults and four children now share one bathroom. She works full time but cannot find another rental she can afford in town.

Pro Tip: Use a short example to make the problem feel real but follow with data. You want funders to see both the individual and the broader trend.

Reflection Prompt: What is one statistic you often cite, and what story could bring it to life?

3. Solution: What action is your organization taking to address the issue?

Your project is the intervention. This is where the story connects directly to your programming, services, or community effort.

Example:

Through the regional career development program, Sierra received career coaching, applied for

medical assistant training, and got help with childcare. Within three months, she was back in the workforce with reliable hours and a supportive schedule.

Pro Tip: Keep the story specific to your program. Show how your work made a difference, not just that the person succeeded, but that your program helped make it possible.

Reflection Prompt: What changed because of your program or service? How do you know?

4. Vision: What is the long-term impact if this work continues or expands?

End your story with a sense of possibility. What does a better future look like if your organization gets the funding?

Example:

Sierra now helps train others entering the program. She tells them, “You have to take the first step and this team walks with you.” Her experience is one of hundreds that reflect what a locally rooted, equity-driven workforce strategy can accomplish.

Pro Tip: Funders invest in the future. Show them what sustained impact looks like, without overstating the change.

Reflection Prompt: What does long-term success look like, for the people you serve, and for the community?

Tips for Building Stories that Fit Your Grant

Not every proposal needs a long, sweeping story. Often, a short paragraph or even 2 to 3 vivid sentences can help your application stand out.

Here are key things to keep in mind as you develop your grant story:

- **Make it relevant:** The story must connect directly to your project’s goals, not just a feel-good anecdote.
- **Keep it true:** Do not exaggerate or manipulate emotion. Let the impact speak for itself.

- **Respect your subjects:** Avoid exploitative or “hero/savior” language. Focus on dignity, not drama.
- **Frame it clearly:** Make sure the story helps illuminate the need, not distract from it.

Closing Insights

Storytelling in grant writing is not just about making a connection; it is about making your case. A strong story gives your proposal meaning, helps funders understand the people behind the numbers, and shows what change can really look like.

This module offered a framework for building a clear and impactful story, along with real-world examples and prompts to guide your own narrative development. With this structure in place, you can strengthen every part of your application.

Key takeaways from this module:

- A strong grant story includes a protagonist, a challenge, your intervention, and a vision for impact.
- Good storytelling is respectful, specific, and directly connected to your program goals.
- Sector-specific stories help illustrate relevance without losing clarity or credibility.
- Reflection tools and planning checklists can help you apply storytelling to real proposals right away.

Practical Tools

Apply What You’ve Learned

Use these reflection prompts to begin shaping your own grant story.

Story Planning Questions:

- Who is your protagonist, and how do they represent the community you serve?
- What challenge or barrier are they facing?
- How does your organization’s work address that challenge?
- What changes because of your project, in their life, in the system, or in the community?

Story Planning Checklist

Question	Y N
Does the story center a real, relatable person or community?	
Is the challenge clearly defined and connected to your project’s goals?	
Is the organization’s role specific, credible, and clear?	
Is the story respectful and grounded in real outcomes?	
Does the story suggest broader, longer-term impact if funded?	

Module 3: Applying Your Story Across Your Proposal

You have built a strong, respectful, and relevant story, but where should you use it in a grant proposal? In this module, you will learn how to strategically apply storytelling across different sections of an application to create a proposal that is both technically strong and emotionally resonant.

The goal is not to write a long narrative in every section. Rather, the goal is to weave story into your proposal in ways that support your data, strengthen your message, and help the reviewer clearly understand the problem, the solution, and the impact.

In this module, you will learn:

- How to integrate storytelling into the main sections of a grant proposal.
- When and how to use narrative in the statement of need, project description, budget, and evaluation.
- Examples of how story supports different proposal goals across sectors.
- How to keep stories concise, relevant, and aligned with funder expectations.
- Simple paragraph rewrites that show storytelling in action.
- A checklist and reflection prompt to help apply storytelling to real proposals.

Incorporating Story

Story in the Project Description

A The project description outlines what you will do, how you will do it, and who it will serve. Storytelling here brings your process to life and helps funders picture how your work unfolds in the real world.

How Story Helps Here:

- Shows your approach in action.
- Makes technical or logistical details more understandable.
- Helps reviewers connect people to outcomes.

Example:

“This project will expand care in our County by converting a classroom into an infant room. Five new infants will be served by a qualified caregiver, trained through our region’s childcare apprenticeship program. One provider, Tanya, recently completed the training and is preparing to open her home to infants after receiving state licensing. Her story reflects a larger goal: increasing care capacity through local workforce development.”

Pro Tip: Choose moments that demonstrate how your model works. Even short vignettes of real activities can make your implementation plan more believable and relatable.

Story in the Budget Narrative

Budgets tell reviewers where the money will go. Budget narratives explain why the funds are needed and what difference they will make. Even a short sentence of story can add meaning to a line item.

How Story Helps Here:

- Ties expenses to impact.
- Reinforces your priorities.
- Humanizes line items that might otherwise feel generic.

Example:

“\$5,000 will cover translation services for training materials, ensuring entrepreneurs like Carl, who recently launched a mobile auto repair business, can access resources in their primary language.”

Pro Tip: Use 1–2 sentences to spotlight a person, business, or use case. It turns your numbers into people-centered investments.

Story in the Evaluation Section

Evaluation sections often feel rigid and data-heavy, but a brief story can help illustrate what success looks like in human terms.

How Story Helps Here:

- Brings outcomes to life.
- Describes what meaningful change will look like.
- Helps funders picture impact beyond numbers.

Example:

“Success will be measured through trail usage data and community feedback. Last year, Rosa, a retired teacher, led five nature walks for school-age kids after we restored access to the trail system. Her experience will serve as a model for how restored trails support intergenerational learning.”

Pro Tip: Describe the human benefit alongside the metric. Reviewers want to see both the number and the meaning behind it.

Story in Letters of Support

While letters of support are written by others, they are an important extension of your proposal’s story. Encourage partners to share concrete, respectful examples of how your work has made an impact.

How Story Helps Here:

- Confirms credibility from external sources.
- Demonstrates community support.

- Adds diversity of voice and perspective.

Pro Tip: Provide talking points or a short outline to your partners if they are writing letters. Ask them to include one brief example or story when possible.

Sample Paragraph Rewrite: Before and After

Let's look at a basic paragraph and how storytelling improves it:

Before:

"Our youth program provides mentoring, tutoring, and life skills support to high school students in the region."

After:

"Dre, a 16-year-old in our rural county, had missed more school than he had attended. Through our youth program, he connected with a mentor, attended weekly tutoring sessions, and gained the confidence to return to class. He is now on track to graduate. His experience reflects the challenges and possibilities for many students in our region."

Pro Tip: You do not need long stories. A few focused sentences with a name, a challenge, an action, and a result can go a long way.

Closing Insights

Storytelling is most powerful when it is placed with intention. The best proposals do not rely on one strong story, they use brief, well-placed narratives to support the data, bring meaning to budget items, and show what change looks like in real life.

This module explored how to apply story across a proposal in a way that enhances rather than distracts. Whether you are highlighting a community member in your statement of need or illustrating success in your evaluation plan, the goal is always the same: help reviewers understand what your work truly means.

Key takeaways from this module:

- Story can support nearly every section of a grant, but it must be purposeful and concise.

- Narrative works best when paired with relevant data or context.
- Budget and evaluation sections are often overlooked opportunities to include story.
- Letters of support can expand your story by showing broader community voice.
- Small changes, like a short paragraph rewrite, can elevate the clarity and impact of your proposal.

Practical Tools

Apply What You’ve Learned

Try This: Choose a section of a current or recent proposal (statement of need, project description, budget narrative, or evaluation). Ask yourself:

- Where could I include a short, specific story?
- Does this story support the section’s purpose?
- How can I balance it with the required data or format?

Story Application Checklist

Question	Y N
Have I used at least one short story to illustrate the problem?	
Does my project description include an example of the work in action?	
Have I humanized one or more budget line items with a person or story?	
Does my evaluation plan include a picture of what success looks like?	
Do my letters of support include real examples or community voices?	

Module 4: Using Data Strategically

In grant writing, data strengthens your story. It adds credibility, demonstrates need, and reinforces your impact. But data is only effective if it is used well and is relevant, local, clear, and balanced with the narrative that brings it to life.

This module will help you understand what types of data to use, where to find them, and how to present data in a way that strengthens your application without overwhelming it.

In this module, you will learn:

- What types of data are most useful in grant proposals.
- How to combine local and regional data with community voice.
- Where to find reliable, free data resources in Colorado.
- How to present data clearly and strategically across proposal sections.
- Tips for integrating data into narrative writing without sounding clinical.

Why Data Matters in Story-Driven Grants

Funders want to invest in projects that solve real, demonstrated problems. Strong data shows the scope and urgency of the issue and makes it easier for reviewers to justify funding your work.

However, data alone is not enough. It must be framed, explained, and applied strategically. That is where story and data work together.

Example:

Story: “Jared and his family moved three times in 18 months due to rising rent.”

Data: “In our region, over 54% of renters are cost-burdened, spending more than 30% of income on housing.”

Together: “Jared and his family moved three times in 18 months due to rising rent. Each time, he lost savings to security deposits and higher monthly costs, eventually forcing the family to move in with relatives. His story is not unique. In our region, over 54% of renters are cost-burdened, spending more than 30% of their income on housing. The need for affordable, stable rental options is urgent.”

Pro Tip: Lead with a brief story, then show that it represents a broader, measurable pattern. This helps reviewers connect emotionally and logically.

Types of Data to Include in a Grant Proposal

Needs Data – To define the problem:

- Population statistics.
- Poverty, unemployment, cost burden.
- Access gaps (childcare slots, internet, public transportation).

Example:

“Nearly 20% of households in our county report no access to high-speed internet, limiting access to education, health care, and employment.”

Demographic and Equity Data – To show who is affected:

- Age, race/ethnicity, language.
- Tribal, rural, and underserved community representation.
- Disparities across systems.

Example:

“While our county is 38% Hispanic, fewer than 10% of childcare providers offer services in Spanish.”

Local Impact Data – To show what difference your work makes:

- Program outputs (people served, services delivered).
- Outcomes (behavior change, access increase, job placement).
- Testimonials, case studies, or survey data.

Pro Tip: Funders love local data. Even a small, well-run survey or focus group can be more powerful than a national stat.

Where to Find Good Local and Regional Data

Here are trusted, free data tools we regularly use across southwest Colorado:

1. [OEDIT Rural Data Dashboard](#)
Provides monthly and quarterly county-level economic and workforce data.
2. [Rural Data Dashboard 101](#)
A guide to understanding what’s included in the OEDIT dashboards and how to interpret it.
3. [Data USA](#)
Search by county or city for demographics, income, health, and education data.

4. [DOLA State Demography Office](#)

Colorado's go-to resource for population projections, housing trends, and demographic reports.

5. [Colorado Information Marketplace](#)

A massive searchable database with everything from school data to agriculture and public safety.

Pro Tip: Start with regional or county data, but always add your local perspective. Numbers without context feel disconnected.

Tips for Using Data Effectively in Proposals

- **Keep it local.** Whenever possible, use county, city, or regional data over national statistics.
- **Use current data.** Outdated numbers can raise red flags. Look for data no more than 3–4 years old.
- **Explain the source.** Name the data provider briefly, reviewers want to know it is credible.
- **Keep numbers digestible.** Don't overload with stats. Use one or two per paragraph or section.
- **Visualize it when allowed.** Simple tables, charts, or infographics can go a long way, but follow funder formatting rules.
- **Pair it with a story.** Always connect the data back to people or systems, never let it stand alone.

Closing Insights

Strong grant proposals combine real human experience with credible, relevant data. When you balance story with facts, you give reviewers a full picture, what is happening, who it affects, and what difference your work will make.

This module provided tools for selecting and applying data thoughtfully, with examples from housing, broadband, workforce, and more.

Key takeaways from this module:

- Data and story should work together, not compete.
- Local, current, and clearly explained data is the most powerful.
- Funders want to see need, but also readiness and results, data helps with both.
- Use regional dashboards and state tools to build your case.
- Keep your data focused, digestible, and tied to people and place.

Practical Tools

Reflection Prompt:

Choose a recent proposal or project. Ask yourself:

- What data did we use and was it specific enough to our area?
- Could we have added a local quote, survey result, or anecdote to support the numbers?
- What’s one data point we rely on too much and how can we localize it?

Checklist: Are You Using Data Strategically?

Question	Y N
Have I included at least one local or regional statistic?	
Do I clearly explain what the data means, not just what it says?	
Have I paired data with story or lived experience?	
Have I cited recent and credible sources?	
Did I avoid overwhelming the reader with too many numbers?	
Have I used data to support my narrative, not distract from it?	

Closing Thoughts: Connecting Story and Strategy

Effective grant writing is more than filling out forms, it is about showing funders why your work matters, who it impacts, and how it creates measurable change. Throughout this training, we explored how to use story and data together to create stronger, more compelling applications.

Key Takeaways from This Training:

- A clear, human-centered story helps reviewers understand the why behind your work.
- Relevant, localized data builds credibility and strengthens your case.
- Story and data work best when they are balanced, each supporting the other.
- Strong proposals are thoughtful, intentional, and grounded in real community needs.

Looking Ahead:

Use the tools and reflection prompts in this training to start building a library of stories and data points that reflect your work. Whether you are applying for a local grant or a large federal opportunity, keep your narrative grounded in people and place and let your data show the scale and potential of your impact.

The goal is not just to write a strong proposal, it is to tell the truth of your work in a way others can see, support, and believe in.