

Storytelling from the Margins:

An introduction to documentation

Adapted for the Justice Coalition of Religious from a training by:




Open Space

Reasons to Document Your Work

Why document?

- Build others' understanding of your work by demonstrating
 - Challenges faced in the community you serve
 - Effort you put into responding to the challenges
 - Impact you have on the community you serve
- Raise credibility
 - Become a resource person or group who can inform others on a specific topic
- Generate financial support for your work
 - Articulate need and potential impact to funders
- Build partnerships with others who share your goals by communicating
 - Ideas
 - Innovations (new methods or tools)
 - Questions
 - Lessons learned from experiences of success, error, challenge

Why document?

- Local contextualization

Capture details of who is in your local community, what they know and have, what they need as these details differ from other nations, districts, and communities (can inform how/why policies and programmes designed at other levels will or will not be effective in your community)

- Institutional learning

Preserve lessons learned and wisdom earned in practice to pass to those who will follow you in your congregation and ministry so as to:

- Encourage building upon successes
- Avoid repetition of missteps

Why document?

For advocacy:

- Apply local knowledge and past experience to analysis of government policies
- Demonstrate need for support or change to government leaders your capacity to meet
- Recommend scaling up of good practices
- Present yourself as a partner, filling gaps between local needs and current government response

The Case Study: Documentation as Storytelling

Case study

Helpful for:

- Illustrating the impact of a large-scale injustice on the lives of ordinary people
- Illustrating the impact of your ministry on the lives of ordinary people
- Inviting emotional engagement of those who are far removed from the reality you are describing

Elements of a Case Study

The story should cover:

- The “backstory” or situation
 - before your intervention or first encounter with
 - before a problematic policy/action was taken by the government
- Personal experience of a person (or family) affected by injustice, including their:
 - When, where they experienced the injustice
 - Why this particular person (or family) was affected (personal circumstances as well as gender, ethnicity, wealth, education level, urban/rural...)
 - Struggles and triumphs
 - Emotions experienced
- The changes that the intervention or policy made in the life of the person (or family)
- The number of people (or families) in the community with similar experiences
- Requests or recommendations to support the work that remains to be done to rectify the injustice

Case Study Tips:

As soon as possible in the text—preferably in the first paragraph itself—include:

- Whose story is being told
 - (It can be powerful to make their name the very first word of the story!)
- When
 - The person/family experienced the injustice
 - You encountered the person/family
- Where (including exact location and the closest well-known place)
 - The person/family experienced the injustice
 - You encountered the person/family
- What
 - injustice they experienced
 - What intervention you offered
- Why they experienced this injustice
- How they were affected by
 - the injustice
 - the intervention you offered

Stages of Documentation

- Pre-Writing Reflection
- Drafting
- Review

Pre-Writing

Reflection:

What? Who? Where?

What story do I want to tell?

- Who have I met in the context of ministry whose names I carry in my heart—with joy or with sorrow—long after our initial encounter?
- What experiences of heartbreak or sorrow do I bring before God in prayer again and again?
- What experiences of progress do I turn to for inspiration in moments of great sadness or desolation?

Who needs to hear this story?

Ask: Who is in a position to make a change or offer a form of support that will...

- Support the needs of the community I serve?
- Allow me to better support that community?

Consider the intended readers'

- Gender
- Age
- Education
- Rural or urban location
- Interests
- Income
- Existing knowledge/perceptions of the community I serve

Where do I hope this story will be heard?

Consider: In what context would the intended readers apply the facts and lessons of my story?

- Internally (within my congregation or place of ministry)
- In a public resource library (for the purpose of academic, training, or research)
- In the field (service setting outside my congregation or place of ministry)
- In a corporate or public governance process (policy and programme-setting conversations within the government or a business)

Drafting Guidelines

The ABCs

All documents should be:

- **Accurate**
 - *Facts are sacred, but comment is free.*
- **Brief**
 - *Be short, be sweet, be gone.*
- **Clear**
 - Short sentences
 - Simple words
 - Points or events organized in logical order

Helpful Elements to Include

- Humour
- Quotation or testimony of an affected community member
- Comparison/contrast (present to past, one place to another, one group's experience to another's)
- Human interest (details of an individual's personal journey)
- Visual aids
 - Illustrations
 - Photographs
 - Videos
 - Tables/charts/graphs
- Statistics

Statistics

- Add authenticity to your position
- Are useful only if you have complete data
- Complement a case study by showing how an individual experience is representative of a widespread a problem affecting entire communities

Tips for Using Statistics

- Put a large data set into a table or graph to present the information in a concise way that will also break up the text of your story
- Give each table a self-explanatory title
- If you are not using your own data, cite sources from which you obtained the figures
- Explain the most important statistics in sentences
- Present numbers in a meaningful way:
People relate best to figures between 1–100.

Instead of saying,

“17,382,000 Ugandans live in extreme poverty”

say,

“38% of Ugandans...”

or

“Nearly 2 in 5 Ugandans...”

Tips for Creating Statistics

If you did your own research...

- Be consistent with your data collection methodology
- Recheck and explain any abnormal data points
- Acknowledge both limitations and strengths of the data
- Have complete data (including everyone involved) or a representative sample of the group you are speaking about (i.e. gather data from a subset of the group that reflects the overall group in terms of gender, age, education...)

Review Guidelines

Review for Clarity

Ensure your language can be understood by your intended reader.

- Remove figures of speech that they would not be expected to know
- Write full names of places, organizations, or programmes rather than using acronyms or abbreviations

Ensure your story is focused.

- Trace the experience of just one person or family at a time
- Describe events in chronological order
- Avoid half-explanations of secondary issues that you do not have time/space/expertise to address in your document

Review for Sensitivity

Ensure your language is:

- Politically correct where referring to a marginalised group (Ask: What name are people in this group using *for themselves* at this moment in time?)
- Unbiased (i.e. non-discriminatory) with respect to...
 - Gender
 - Ethnicity
 - Language
 - Age
 - Ability
 - Culture
- Anonymous (protects the privacy of any individuals whose stories were included by omitting or altering any identifying details)

Review for Visual Appeal

- Vary sentence lengths/styles to
 - Highlight or emphasise most important points (shorter sentences)
 - Hold readers' interest
- Use
 - **Boldface**
 - *Italics*
 - Underlining
 - ...**but** *only* a small amount!

Review for Visual Appeal cont.

- Use headings and subheadings to indicate the transition from one set of ideas to the next
- Balance images and text
 - Too much text: intimidating
 - Overly small margins make the document look difficult to read
 - Too much white space is a waste of
 - Paper
 - Postage
 - Distribute images/charts throughout text