

Writing Human Interest Stories for M&E

Introduction

Human interest stories personalize project impact results and reports by documenting the personal experience of individuals who were influenced by the project. These stories are a perfect complement to other M&E data collection techniques that provide a different account of project impact.

There are two types of human interest stories: the success story and the learning story.

- A success story illustrates a project's impact by detailing an individual's positive experiences in his or her own words. Success stories include the when, what, where, how, and why of a project's impact.
- A learning story focuses on the lessons learned through an individual's positive and negative experiences (if any) with a project. Learning stories examine individual responses to challenges that arise out of the project.

This edition of *Short Cuts* summarizes the content of two modules: *Human Interest Stories* and *Success and Learning Story Package*. This edition provides guidance to those responsible for writing the human interest story and to those managing the process. Seven key steps are outlined to guide and support effective project impact report writing. These steps will lead to a high quality, interesting, and accessible final story.

7 Steps to Writing A Human Interest Story

Step 1
Select the right type of human interest story

Step 2
Determine the story focus

Step 3
Write a scope of work, identify a team, and draft an action plan

Step 4
Select sites and participants

Step 5
Gather the information needed

Step 6
Write the story

Step 7
Disseminate the story



Step 1 Select the Right Type of Human Interest Story

The first step is to **determine what to document**: success stories or learning stories. In selecting the story type, consider the primary audience for the story. Which type of story will resonate most with this audience? Donors or stakeholders may stipulate which type of story is of most interest to them. In many cases, current donors are interested in learning stories—as a part of a midterm or final evaluation—whereas donors for future projects may be most interested in project success stories. Be sure to follow any guidance provided by the primary audience, whether donors, other stakeholders, or your own agency.

The story's primary purpose will also influence whether it should be a learning story or a success story; however, both types of stories can contribute greatly to a range of information needs. Success stories are often more appropriate for agency marketing and funding proposals. Learning stories are usually better suited as a contribution to ongoing M&E systems and reporting.

Both types of stories may be useful for the impact report. In this case, make sure to differentiate between the two types of stories when developing the tools, choosing sites, and selecting participants.

Step 2 Determine the Story Focus

Once the type of human interest story is identified, then attention is turned to the story itself. **Identifying a specific focus** will help guide the development of the tools and to structure the writing. Decide whether the story will concentrate on one sector or all sectors of a project (if applicable) and which type(s) of learning or success are to be highlighted.

Step 3 Write a Scope of Work, Identify a Team, and Draft an Action Plan

Next, **draft a scope of work (SOW)**, a major step in the planning process. The SOW will help different team members to clarify their expectations and to reach a consensus on methods and other issues. Generally, the SOW should include the project staff's expectations in developing the stories, the deliverables or final products, and the responsibilities of different team members in the process. Make sure to reference how the stories will fit in with broader evaluation objectives and methods. Include partners and other stakeholders, as appropriate, in developing the SOW. The Human Interest Stories module provides a sample SOW with the key components.

Identify the team members (staff and consultants, as appropriate) to be involved in each step of the process. Determine whether it is appropriate to rely solely on internal staff or whether a consultant would add value by providing needed technical assistance and increasing the validity of the findings for a broader audience. The donor or your organization may have certain expectations about the inclusion of external consultants for the process. Select staff and consultants to ensure the team

has strong skills in program evaluation and photojournalism—writing good human interest stories requires a balance of both.

Develop a draft action plan that outlines the logistical support required, the estimated number of person-days for each task, the staff assigned to the process, recommendations for sites and participant selection, and the dissemination plan. At this stage, the action plan is a draft and will likely be revised as the work proceeds.

Key Components of a SOW

- Brief overview of the program, project, or development context
- Purpose and type of story, target audience, and how the story fits into the broader evaluation process
- Major issues and questions that the story should address
- Suggested data-gathering methods
- Explicit reference to the need for respecting the security, dignity, and self-worth of individuals being interviewed and photographed
- Key documents that the country program will provide
- Schedule of deliverables and place of performance
- Story format
- Production timeline
- Dissemination plan

Step 4 Select Sites and Participants

There are no clear rules to **determine how many sites or interviews are needed** to produce a human interest story or which sites to select. For areas that are similar in context, in level, and in project impact, fewer sites or interviews are needed. Greater similarity will allow sites to represent larger areas while, conversely, more sites are needed to represent areas that have had different types of impact or have largely different contexts. The story focus, project budget, and feasibility of reaching different geographic areas will also ultimately influence the number of sites visited. Sites should be selected based on the story focus and the site's relevance to the story. Include partner staff and other stakeholders who have good knowledge of project communities in team discussions about site selection.

Human interest stories require information from multiple sources including a combination of project participants—such as individuals, households, and committee members—non-project households, private voluntary organization (PVO) staff, partner staff, and local leaders. Again, there is no rule about the number of participants required for each story, but include enough participants to validate the data and the information collected.

With input from local leaders and partner staff, create a list of possible participants from which to choose. In the list, include information about how and for how long each person has participated in the project and whether or not each has experienced difficulties or successes. Select participants best

suited to provide the perspectives sought. Remember that these individual stories do not have to be representative of the broader population.

Including interviews with local community leaders will provide a greater context and background information on the project, the community, and possibly the household (or other subject of the story). In human interest stories, data is collected only from individuals who have been successful or learned from the project. This element of bias is not necessarily negative, but PVOs should be transparent and explicit in explaining how subjects were selected and state the limitations in generalizing the results in representing the broader population in the evaluation report.

Step 5 Gather the Information Needed

There are many methods for collecting information for human interest stories, but a combination of secondary information, a review of project documents and reports, observations and photographs, and semi-structured interviews have proven to be very effective and efficient. Semi-structured interviews use open-ended questions and allow the interviewer to ask follow-up questions to gather more detailed information.

Data for these stories can be separated into four components:

1. Basic project information
2. Project-specific information
3. Participant-specific information
4. Story subject

Data should be collected in different phases (see table 1):

- Phase 1: Collect basic project information through a review of secondary information and reports or through interviews with PVO or partner staff.
- Phase 2: Gather project-specific information from PVO partner staff familiar with the project through semi-structured interviews.
- Phase 3: Collect participant-specific information from PVO or partner staff who are aware of how the project affected the participant.
- Phase 4: Conduct a semi-structured interview with the story subject.

Following Ethical Guidelines

- Brief overview of the program, project, or development content
- As with all data collection methods, it is important follow ethical guiding principles at each step in the process. In particular:
- Ensure that participation in human interest stories will not cause physical or emotional harm by violating rights or privacy
- Obtain consent prior to interviewing or observing individuals or taking their photograph
- Do not share information that individuals would prefer to keep private
- Respect and observe local cultural values

Refer to the American Evaluation Association's *Guiding Principles for Evaluators* for further guidance and the *M&E and Ethics* edition of *Short Cuts* for additional considerations.

The tools for the semi-structured interviews should be tailored to the information needs of each human interest story and developed either by or with input from the person responsible for writing the stories. Examples of useful tools are provided in the *Human Interest Stories* and in the *Success and Learning Story Package* modules. Field-test all tools prior to use.

Component	Description of Information Collected	Tool	Interviewee
Basic project information	Project title; start and end dates; location and number of participants; primary project activities; primary partner(s) and donor(s); project’s financial value	Secondary data or semi-structured interviews	Project documents, PVO or partner staff
Project-specific information	General characteristics of the community or site; type of project activities implemented at the site; targeting criteria for participants; participants’ involvement in project For success stories, include major project accomplishments For learning stories, include challenges and lessons learned	Semi-structured interviews	PVO or partner staff
Participant-specific information	Individual’s (story subject’s) or the household’s demographics; situation of individual or household prior to project; rationale for targeting this individual or household; the staff’s perception of the impact on the individual or household	Semi-structured interviews	PVO or partner staff
Subject of the human interest story	Individual or the household’s current situation and the situation prior to the project; the ways the project impacted the individuals’ life	Semi-structured interview and photographs	Subject of story

The data quality generated for the story will depend on the quality of the tool and the interviewer’s skills.

Tips for conducting a good interview include:

- Be clear about the purpose of the interview at the beginning.
- Create a supportive environment that encourages dialogue and allows the interviewer to build rapport with the interviewee. Treat the interview as a conversation.
- Minimize the social distance between the interviewer and the interviewee by following cultural norms and appearing to be a neutral party.

- Select a skilled translator if the interviewer does not speak the language of the interviewee.
- Record the conversation in the interviewee's words to capture quotations that can be used in the story. Consider the pros and cons of using a tape or digital recorder during the interview. For example, a tape or digital recorder should not be used if there is a risk it will make the interviewee hesitant during the interview.
- Use photographs to record observations during or after the interview. Photographs should be simple, clear, and evoke emotions to complement and enrich the human interest story.

Tips for Taking Photographs

- Ask permission first.
- Create a comfortable atmosphere.
- Create a setting that will explain, clarify, and strengthen the story.
- Get close to the subject.
- Use the "rule of thirds" and place the subject in the top or bottom and left or right third of the frame.
- Use available light instead of flash whenever possible.

Provide copies of the photos to the subject. The *Human Interest Stories* module provides examples of strong and weak photos.

Step 6 Write the Story

Writing human interest stories should follow the basic principles of good journalism. The opening paragraph should answer the basic six questions: who, what, where, when, why, and how. If possible, begin with an anecdote about the subject that quickly engages the reader in the story. The body of the story should focus on either the success or learning achieved, depending on story type, as recounted by the subject. Include enough background information on the household and community, and on project activities so that readers are able to frame the success or learning in the local context.

Keep the story short. Between 500 and 750 words is ideal for maintaining readers' interest and conveying the information.

Do . . .

- Keep your target audience in mind. Check the story's readability by asking a target audience member to read the story prior to publication.
- Include the subject's personality, surroundings, and his/her appearance (if relevant to the story).
- Focus on qualitative information, adding supporting quantitative information where appropriate.
- Include direct quotes from all information sources. If staff are quoted, present their background, qualifications, and project experience.
- Avoid acronyms, jargon, and foreign words.

- Include details to help non-technical readers understand any technical information provided.
- Proofread the final story.

Don't . . .

- Overdramatize the information as this may lessen credibility.
- Make subjective judgments, whether positive or negative, about an individual's appearance, character, or experiences.
- Dehumanize interviewees by using impersonal language (for example, it is better to write "a person improved his/her situation," rather than "a person was rehabilitated").

Step 7 Disseminate the Story

The final phase is **developing a dissemination plan** to outline when, how, and with whom the story will be shared (see step 3 on developing a draft action plan, including dissemination). Plan in advance to increase the timeliness of the information shared. The initial dissemination plan can be amended to include additional audiences. Discuss the plan with the project manager and other appropriate staff. Be sure that the plan includes adequate time for these managers to review and finalize the stories before they are disseminated.

Often, projects take time to develop high-quality human interest stories, but set aside too little time to share them. Avoid this common mistake by planning ahead! In addition to pursuing standard dissemination audiences and avenues, think creatively about how and when these stories can be best shared.

Tailor the submission to each audience. Standard dissemination audiences include community members, partners, country program staff, regional and headquarters staff of your agency, and donor agencies. Dissemination avenues and spaces include community of practice knowledge spaces (internal and external), handouts at partner meetings, donor newsletters, United Nations newsletters and listservs, academic journals, and Web sites. Communities may prefer a reading of the story during a community meeting if literacy rates are low. For Web pages or newsletters, plain text with a photo and caption may be sufficient. For donor agencies, include a cover letter explaining the story purpose and links to other relevant human interest stories that your organization has published. Within the story, edit the level of background information for different audiences; for example, provide more background information for those less familiar with the project and context.

Refer to the Human Interest Stories module for suggested dissemination avenues and the corresponding contact information. The *Communication and Reporting on an Evaluation* module (and corresponding Short Cuts) provides additional guidance on dissemination to a variety of stakeholders.

The Human Interest Stories module includes the following:

1. Example of a SOW for a human interest story writer
2. Sample data collection packet for human interest stories and semi-structured interview guides
3. Examples of human interest stories
4. Suggested dissemination avenues
5. Tips for taking good photographs
6. Suggested further readings

This edition of *Short Cuts* was produced in 2008. Please send your comments or feedback to: m&efeedback@crs.org.

The Success and Learning Story Package module includes the following:

1. Recommended do's and don'ts for Title II success story writing
2. Sample data collection tools and templates
3. Examples of human interest stories

For further guidance, please visit the American Evaluation Association Web site at www.eval.org.

This publication is part of a series on key aspects of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) for humanitarian and socioeconomic development programs. The American Red Cross and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) produced this series under their respective USAID/Food for Peace Institutional Capacity Building Grants. The topics covered were designed to respond to field-identified needs for specific guidance and tools that did not appear to be available in existing publications. Program managers as well as M&E specialists are the intended audience for the modules; the series can also be used for M&E training and capacity building. The *Short Cuts* series provides a ready reference tool for people who have already used the full modules, those who simply need a refresher in the subject, or those who want to fast track particular skills.

The M&E series is available on these Web sites:

- www.crs.org/publications
- www.foodsecuritynetwork.org/icbtools.html
- www.redcross.org

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