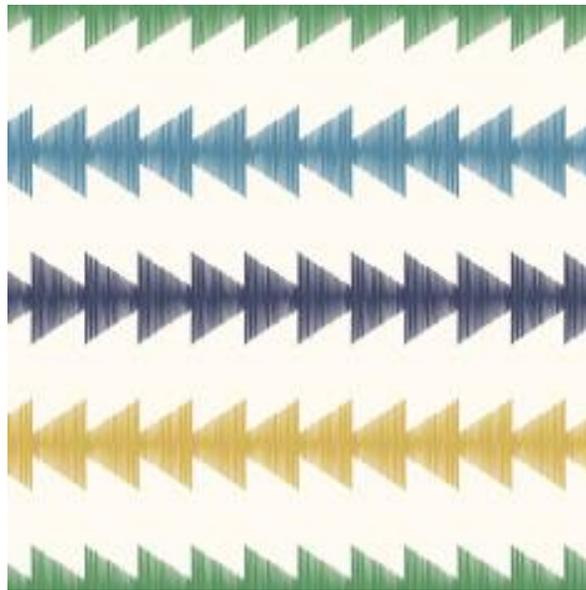


# **The Power of Stories**

## **Enriching Program Research and Reporting**



**OPRE Report #2016-32a  
March 2016**

**THE POWER OF STORIES:  
ENRICHING PROGRAM RESEARCH AND REPORTING**

OPRE Report #2016-32a

March 2016

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Submitted to:

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U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Contract Number: HHSP23320095612WC

This report is in the public domain. Permission to reproduce is not necessary. Suggested citation: Keene, K., Keating, K., & Ahonen, P. (2016). The Power of Stories: Enriching Program Research and Reporting. OPRE Report# 2016-32a. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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# Overview

Stories can enrich program research and reporting. Historically, tribal communities have used storytelling to share language, traditions, and beliefs from one generation to another. Tribal social service programs and others can build on this rich tradition by using stories within a qualitative research framework.

Qualitative research can provide insight into whether, how, and why a program works (James Bell Associates, 2009). Common qualitative data collection methods include interviews, focus groups, and observations. With these methods, programs can draw stories from program participants, staff, elders, community members, and other key stakeholders.<sup>1</sup>

Here are key points to consider when using stories in program research and reporting:

**Stories are powerful because they are accessible and enlightening.** Stories resonate with us and can illuminate common and unusual experiences of program staff and participants.

- **Stories provide rich information** to explore, describe, or explain program activities and participant outcomes.
- **The methods for story collection and analysis depend on your purpose and intended audience.** Stories can be collected through interviews, story circles, or visual and performance-based approaches. Stories can be coded for themes and analyzed.
- **Effective formats for story reporting depend on your purpose and audience** but might include vignettes, case studies, or multimedia.
- **Stories are deeply personal, and storytellers' rights must be honored.** Potential storytellers need to be engaged from start to finish in conversations about the story collection purpose, safety, confidentiality, data ownership, verification, and approval to share stories.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on conducting program evaluation in American Indian and Alaska Native communities, see Tribal Evaluation Workgroup. *A roadmap for collaborative and effective evaluation in tribal communities*. Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. September 2013. Available at [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/tribal\\_roadmap.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/tribal_roadmap.pdf).

# Introduction

Historically, tribal communities have used storytelling to share language, traditions, and beliefs from one generation to another. Tribal social service programs and others can build on this rich tradition by using stories within a qualitative research framework.

Programs often use quantitative research to monitor implementation and track outcomes. Qualitative research is of equal value. It can provide insight into whether, how, and why a program works (James Bell Associates, 2009). Common qualitative data collection methods include interviews, focus groups, and observations. With these methods, programs can draw stories from program participants, staff, elders, community members, and other stakeholders.

The power of stories was observed in a study of tribal demonstration programs (2011 Tribal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and Child Welfare Coordination grants) by James Bell Associates under contract to the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families. While there were no local evaluation requirements, the grantees were required to track and report program activities and achievements. They did so, in part, using stories from participants and staff. This report explores opportunities, considerations, and methods for using storytelling to understand and communicate about social service programs in tribal communities.

## Why Stories Resonate So Strongly

The social and personal significance of stories is evident throughout history and across cultures. Stories are used to entertain, to teach, and to pass on traditions and knowledge. They are presented in many forms, usually written and oral, and convey experiences at individual, group, and universal levels.

The human brain is  
hardwired for stories.

Both the nature of stories and our predisposition to them make storytelling a powerful means of sharing information about human experiences. We all know and can relate to stories. They strike our emotions as well as our intellect, help us to better understand our own and others' experiences, and describe the world around us.

Research suggests the human brain is hardwired for stories (Bentley, n.d.). When presented with a story, both sides of the brain work to process the words, interpret the story, and store its meaning in memory. Facts activate only the language processing areas of the brain, while stories activate the motor and sensory areas as well. Essentially, stories make the brain behave as if we are experiencing the events firsthand. For example, a frightening story might trigger the heart to beat faster. The combination of these brain responses makes us empathize and connect with stories (Berns et al., 2013; Weldon, 2014; Zak, 2013).

## How Stories Can Enrich Program Research and Reporting

*Sometimes there is a need for something more to make people sit up and listen.*

—Jane Field (2002)

Stories can effectively communicate the experiences of people involved in programs, including participants, staff, and community members. Stories provide insight and understanding that cannot be directly observed or quantified, and they give context to program activities and outcomes.

While stories often occur naturally, there are ways to systematically collect and use them as narrative data.<sup>2</sup> Stories are a particularly valuable data source because they are—

- **Accessible.** Everyone has a story, and many individuals who provide or receive program services may have valuable perspectives they are willing to share.
- **Enlightening.** Storytelling is a time-honored way of sharing information and knowledge, and it is a particularly potent means of “knowing” in communities where oral traditions are strong.
- **Versatile.** Stories can be told in a number of ways and presented in a variety of formats. They accommodate diverse voices and perspectives.
- **Empowering.** Storytelling allows people to share their thoughts, feelings, experiences, and behaviors in their own way. The storyteller becomes an active participant in furthering the program’s efforts.
- **Effective.** Stories are more likely than other forms of information to be remembered, provoke emotions or reactions, and motivate action.

Think about what you already know about your program from existing data or through your work with staff and participants. This may help you determine how you can use stories for program research and reporting. Here are four examples (Krueger, 2010):

- **Illustrating numerical data.** Your program may already have numerical data from surveys, assessments, or other documents. Stories reveal the reasons behind the numbers. They provide context for the motivations, values, emotions, interests, and other factors that influence behavior.
- **Enhancing quantitative methods.** Stories can inform future quantitative data collection. For example, they can provide insight into the questions to include on a participant or staff survey, increasing its relevance.

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<sup>2</sup> In the field of qualitative research, narrative often refers to written or spoken words or visual representations of individuals’ lives and experiences as told through their own perspective or story.

- **Identifying patterns and themes.** You do not have to use storytelling in conjunction with quantitative methods. As a standalone method, storytelling can reveal patterns and themes about your program’s activities, successes, and challenges.
- **Offering insights on rare occurrences.** Stories can highlight a specific experience or new perspective. For example, a participant’s story may alert you to a service delivery barrier, community resource, or unexpected outcome. You may explore the issue further or take action to address it.

Keep in mind how you plan to use stories as you determine your objectives and research questions, plan data collection and analysis, and choose a reporting format.

## Planning Story Collection

Before beginning to collect stories, it is important to clarify your objectives and research questions, the type of stories you will collect, and the audience with whom you will share the stories.

### What are your objectives and research questions?

Your intended use of stories will help determine your objectives and research questions. Objectives for collecting stories may be exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory (Marshall, 1999). Your objectives will guide the development of your research questions and the selection of methods for collecting stories.

For example, if numerical data show a pattern or trend in participant outcomes, your objective for collecting stories may be explanatory, to gain a deeper understanding of the contributing factors to the trend. If you plan to use stories as a standalone method for learning about program activities and outcomes, your objective may be descriptive or exploratory, to understand participants’ perspectives.

To determine your research questions, seek input from elders, tribal community members, or other key stakeholders. Consider the kinds of questions stories can and cannot address (see exhibit 1).

## Exhibit 1. Questions Stories Can and Cannot Address

Stories can...	Stories cannot...
✓ Answer research questions that ask how or why about an experience, event, or outcome	✗ Answer research questions that ask how much, how many, or how often about an experience, event, or outcome
✓ Provide in depth information and understanding of individuals' thoughts, behaviors, and experiences	✗ Provide information that is generalizable to other people or settings
✓ Provide data that are sometimes more compelling than quantitative data	✗ Make quantitative assessments or predictions about outcomes
✓ Describe patterns, themes, and rare occurrences	✗ Assess measurable impact or change in outcomes

## What stories will you collect?

You will need to choose the type of stories to collect and the storytellers. For example, will you focus on stories from participants, staff, elders, or tribal community members, or will you collect a combination of perspectives? If your objective is exploratory, you may set out to broadly learn about participants' experiences and, in the process, collect stories about successes, challenges, lessons learned, and outcomes. Individual experiences are often complex and varied, so you may collect different stories from the same storyteller. Examples of the types of stories you may collect include—

- Stories about your program's **structure and procedures**
- Stories about **implementation processes** (e.g., facilitators and barriers to implementation)
- Stories about program **success or lessons learned**
- Stories about program and participant **outcomes**
- Stories that provide **contextual information** about the community and the history of your program
- Stories on **topics or trends** that have already been identified as program themes or patterns
- Stories about **unusual or rare occurrences or outcomes**

Your objectives and research questions should inform the type of stories you collect (see exhibit 2).

**Exhibit 2. Sample Objectives, Research Questions, and Story Types**

Objective	Research Questions	Story Type
Exploratory: Understand a concept or situation you know little about	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are participants' experiences with your program?</li> <li>How do participants feel about your program?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stories about participants' outcomes</li> <li>Stories about program successes and/or lessons learned</li> </ul>
Descriptive: Document and describe a concept in more detail	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are the characteristics of the community and families you serve?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stories that provide contextual information about the community and the history of your program</li> </ul>
Explanatory: Explain patterns and relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do certain factors (attitudes, beliefs, events, or policies) affect outcomes?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stories on identified themes or patterns</li> <li>Stories about implementation processes (e.g., facilitators and barriers to implementation)</li> </ul>

Whether your program collects stories directly or uses an outside researcher to collect them, engage program stakeholders in selecting the stories you will share.

## Who is your audience?

The audience with whom you will share the stories may influence the type of stories you decide to collect, the methods for collecting them, and the presentation format. Is your audience a federal project officer, grant manager, community leader, or prospective participant? Some methods are best suited for incorporation into written reports for program funders, while other methods, such as visual or performance-based story narratives, may work better for program outreach.

## What challenges should you expect?

Stories in the context of qualitative research and reporting differ from stories in other contexts. By taking the time to organize and plan your approach, you can overcome common challenges (see exhibit 3). These strategies will enhance the trustworthiness, credibility, and transferability of your story collection process and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of these concepts, see the Qualitative Research Guidelines Project at <http://www.qualres.org/HomeLinc-3684.html>

Stories do not often emerge in perfect form for sharing. Plan time for several rounds of editing and verifying stories until the final form emerges.

### Exhibit 3. Common Challenges and Strategies

Challenge	Strategy
Collecting and using stories takes time	Plan carefully. Choose storytellers thoughtfully, and organize editing tasks.
Stories can be dismissed as anecdotes	Be deliberate and systematic in your approach to collecting stories. Clearly describe in your report the process used for obtaining, handling, and verifying the stories you have collected.
Obtaining stories requires skill	Develop guidelines and protocols for collecting stories, and review them with story collectors.
Stories do not often emerge in perfect form for sharing	Plan time for several rounds of editing and verifying stories.

## Collecting Stories

Once you have identified your objectives and research questions, the type of stories you will collect, and the audience, it is time to begin collecting stories. Qualitative research methods offer structured and systematic approaches for collecting stories. Stories are often shared verbally, so the most common methods are interviews. However, storytellers can also be engaged to share their experiences and perspectives through visual and performance-based methods, such as photography, quilting, or theater.

You can increase support for your research by engaging stakeholders such as elders and tribal community members in the selection and implementation of story collection methods. Stakeholders may also have ideas about what methods are most important and feasible within the community. They may be willing to be trained to collect stories.

## Individual and Small Group Interview Methods

The purpose of interviews is to learn about the subject's feelings, thoughts, and experiences. In other words, we want to hear their stories. Interviews with program staff may focus on their roles and thoughts about the program's operations and outcomes. Elders, tribal community members, and other program stakeholders might also be engaged to share their perspectives on the program. The interviewer must provide an environment and framework in which people feel comfortable telling their stories.

Common individual and group interview methods include participant interviews, institutional memory/staff interviews, oral history/community interviews, and story circles. These methods are summarized in exhibit 4, and additional information is provided in the appendix.

**Exhibit 4. Individual and Group Interview Methods for Collecting Stories**

Method	Overview
Participant interviews	Interviewing program participants provides an opportunity to understand their experiences with and perceptions of the program and its effect on their lives. Conducting individual interviews with multiple participants can identify patterns or unexpected experiences or outcomes.
Institutional memory/staff interviews	Institutional memory is a shared set of concepts, experiences, and knowledge. Program staff retain institutional memory about the program and can provide context for program outcomes. They may also provide information on barriers, facilitators, and strategies. The history of a program can be documented to strengthen institutional memory and sustainability during staff turnover.
Oral history/community interviews	Oral history interviews with elders or other tribal community members can provide data about the program's historical, social, and cultural context that may not be available in written records. Community interviews can provide insight into outcomes in the broader community, external influences, and support for the program and its participants. They may generate ideas for future research or program development.
Story circles	The story circle is a traditional method that has been used in many cultures to share perspectives and pass on information. Story circles may be considered a form of group interviewing. However, unlike group interviews that ask a series of questions, story circles often focus on one particular question, such as "What have you learned from being a part of this program?" Small groups are preferred (no more than 15 people), and each person should be allowed an equal amount of time (about 3 to 5 minutes) (Roadside Theater, 2014).

Determine whether an individual or group approach is more appropriate. For example, roles of staff and supervisors might limit participants' comfort level in group interviews. A benefit of group interviews is that members of the group may help each other to recall their stories and confirm their validity. Group interviews may provide useful information on program progress, trends, and areas for improvement.

Open-ended interview questions yield the greatest amount of information. Arranging open-ended questions into a standardized interview guide helps the interviewer to best use the time available, makes multiple interviews more systematic and comprehensive, and keeps interactions focused while still allowing for flexibility (Patton, 1990; Turner, 2010). It is helpful to

start with simpler questions such as biographical information or questions about how the person entered the program. The interviewer should establish trust and rapport before progressing to more complex or sensitive questions. When necessary, use probing or follow-up questions to gain additional insights or clarification, such as “Can you tell me more about that?”

It is particularly important when collecting individuals’ stories to ensure that they are fully informed about the purpose and potential uses of the information being collected. The interviewer must obtain individuals’ consent and maintain their confidentiality unless they choose to be identified.

Audio recording interviews with the storytellers’ permission is the best way to capture the story in their own words. If they do not provide permission, the interviewer will need to rely on notes. In either situation, it may be helpful to have an additional note taker on hand during the interview.

Finally, participants in either individual or group interview settings need to feel free to discuss both positive and negative issues related to the program. It is often suggested that interviewers or story circle facilitators should be individuals who do not have direct contact with storytellers through the program (Johnson et al., 2005).

## Visual and Performance-Based Methods

*There are elements of our lived experiences that may not always be captured or best expressed through textual forms.—Leavy (2009)*

While theatrical storytelling is a long established practice, new methods have emerged for conveying individual and collective stories. Several use technology to collect and present stories through creative and powerful imagery and art forms. These methods are participatory, enabling the storytellers to have a role in sharing their experiences and perspectives through data collection, analysis, and construction of the final story product. Visual and performance-based methods are summarized in exhibit 5, and additional information is provided in the appendix.

The participatory nature of Photovoice allows it to be used in a variety of settings. It can build capacity and a sense of ownership among participants in the research and evaluation process (Castleden et al., 2008). The recorded narrative of the author is a unique aspect of digital storytelling, which lets listeners hear a person’s voice and get a sense of that person’s unique experience and perspectives (Barrett, 2009). Scrapbooking and portfolio assessment can be a particularly useful method for programs that have flexible or individualized goals and outcomes (Sewell et al., n.d.). Theatrical approaches generate themes and “illustrative moments” that may be particularly effective in triggering empathy (Kaptani and Yuval-Davis, 2008).

## Exhibit 5. Visual, Auditory, and Performance-Based Methods for Collecting Stories

Method	Overview
Photovoice	Photovoice was developed as "photo novella" in the early 1990s and is also known as participatory photography. It typically comprises two sessions (Wang & Burris, 1997). Session 1 is used to provide an overview of the process, provide cameras and train participants to use them, and discuss confidentiality and ethics. Participants take photos that relate to a question or topic. In Session 2, participants select pictures and draft captions or narratives that connect the photographs to their story.
Digital storytelling	Digital storytelling was developed in the 1990s and combines the tradition of storytelling with digital technology. Digital stories are produced, stored, and shared using media such as photography, video, audio recorded narrative, and music. Good digital stories address a dramatic question or specific point of view, contain emotional content, and are told in the storyteller's own voice (Ballast, 2007; Lambert, 2002).
Scrapbooking	Participants, staff, elders, or other stakeholders keep a scrapbook, documenting program activities and outcomes. Materials (sometimes called "artifacts") may include drawings, images, and text. Scrapbooking sessions can address a theme, such as the influence of the program on participants' lives, participants' perceptions of the program, challenges and lessons learned by staff, or program successes.
Story quilting	Storytellers' quilt squares represent their personal reflection on the program's activities, processes, or outcomes. Squares might include narrative, pictures, or drawings made using paper or traditional quilting techniques. Participants may be asked to respond to a question or theme. Each participant contributes a square, and the assembled quilt tells both individual and collective stories.
Theatre	Theater has been used to share stories and interpret human experiences for thousands of years. Techniques called applied theatre, participatory theatre, and popular theatre have gained recognition as creative and effective approaches for imparting knowledge and motivating social change. Scripts emerge from role-playing exercises, story circles, or interviews. They may be performed for an audience or presented in interactive vignettes that engage the audience in a facilitated discussion of issues and findings (Stetson 2008; Torres et al., 2005).

## Number of Stories to Collect

Unlike quantitative research, which emphasizes large sample sizes, qualitative research does not prescribe a minimum sample size or framework. An appropriate sample for a qualitative study is one that adequately answers your research questions. The number of stories you decide to collect will depend on your purpose, what you want to know, what you want to be able to share with others, what will have credibility with your target audience, and what is feasible with your available time and resources (Patton, 1990).

Qualitative sampling techniques include randomly selecting participants; selecting participants based on a specific characteristic (e.g., young mothers); representative sampling (e.g., if your program operates across multiple offices or communities, you may decide to collect stories from five participants in each office or community); or conveniently sampling those who are most approachable, which is useful with hard-to-reach populations. Choose an appropriate strategy, and be transparent about your rationale in your reporting (Anderson, 2010; Krueger, 2010; Patton, 1990).

## Analyzing Story Data

Once the stories have been collected, the next step is to analyze the story data. The analysis will be based on your purpose, research questions, and any requirements from funders. Insights developed during the data collection process may contribute to your analytic approach (Patton, 1990).

## Qualitative Data Analysis

Stories are qualitative data and therefore are analyzed using qualitative analysis techniques. Exhibit 6 provides an overview of the common phases of qualitative data analysis. The amount of time needed for analysis will vary based on the length and number of stories you have collected. The first step is to convert all data into written documents.

With “deductive” coding, the analysis begins with codes already in mind. Codes are often developed directly from the interview guide or protocol. With “inductive” coding, the analysis begins without any predetermined ideas about the codes. Codes emerge from the data during your review. Labels for inductive codes are often descriptive (a word that interprets a section of text) or in vivo (a direct quote from a storyteller). It is common to complete a first round of coding deductively, followed by additional rounds using an inductive approach to identify emergent themes.

## Exhibit 6. Common Phases of Data Analysis

Phase	Description
Transcribe	Transcribe all data, including audible and visual data, into written text. Build in adequate time for this task.
Familiarize yourself with the data	Review the transcribed data multiple times to identify patterns, themes, and relationships. Write notes to capture your initial impressions.
Organize the data	Seek clarification from storytellers regarding content you do not understand.
Code	<i>Hard copy coding:</i> Use symbols, descriptive words, or categories to mark meaningful sections of the data, using your initial notes as a guide. <i>Electronic coding:</i> If your program has coding software, upload the written text into the software to facilitate marking and coding of the data.
Identify themes, patterns, and relationships	Review your coded data to identify themes, recurring ideas, words, and other response patterns. Group related codes together for easier analysis.
Report	Summarize the findings of your analysis, and include a description of your analysis process.

Through the coding process, you will begin to identify themes. If your objective is descriptive, you may choose to report your findings following an initial level of analysis. If your objective is explanatory, your efforts will require more in-depth analysis with multiple rounds of inductive coding to build a theory around the recurring themes.

For example, you may have collected stories about barriers experienced by program participants. Your first round of analysis might include deductively coding for barriers to participation based on a question in your interview guide. Following this round, you may begin to identify a pattern or theme related to transportation as a barrier. At this point, you would go back through your story data again to code for information about access to transportation. Transportation is an emergent code.

Once you have a grasp on the foundations of qualitative data analyses, you can apply an analytic approach. Common approaches include content analysis, constant comparison/grounded theory, discourse analysis, and phenomenology/heuristic analysis. Resources on these approaches are provided in the appendix.

## Visual Data Analysis

Visual storytelling methods involve storytellers in the production and analysis of visual data through images and scripts. The scripts can be treated as textual data, transcribed, and analyzed as described above. Other aspects of visual data should also be considered during analysis. Visual characteristics reflect storytellers' views and choices about what they want to show to others. For example, participants may select a range of photography subjects, and photos may be staged or candid.

Analytic techniques for visual data include—

- **Photo interviewing**—participant analyzes a photograph through an interview
- **Visual semiotic analysis**—interpretation of the symbolic meaning of visual data
- **Visual content analysis**—identification of characteristics and themes in visual data

Interpretations of visual data should be confirmed with storytellers and used in reporting with permission.<sup>4</sup> Additional resources on visual data analysis are provided in the appendix.

## Sharing Stories in Program Reports<sup>5</sup>

Not all stories can or should be shared in your program's reports. Select stories based on your analysis, and present them in a format that is appropriate for the target audience.

Identify stories that stand out, perhaps because they powerfully capture an experience or fit your objective (e.g., demonstration of a success story or lesson learned). Consider the representativeness and uniqueness of the stories you have collected. For example, is there a story that reflects the experiences of the broader group? Or is there a unique story that highlights an unexpected outcome or other new knowledge about your program? Both of these might be good examples to share in your reporting.

### Effective Formats

Once you have identified the story data you want to use in your report, you will need to transform it into a format that is suitable for your audience. Program staff and stakeholders should be able to understand and interpret the information so they may use it to inform practice and system improvements. Including large portions of interviews is unnecessary and cumbersome for the reader (Anderson, 2010). Edit the stories to make them concise, but

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<sup>4</sup> For an example of participant photos used as a data collection, analysis, and presentation method, see Holm, G. (2008). Photography as a Performance. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*. 9(2). Available at <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/394/856>

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed treatment of reporting evaluation findings beyond the use of stories, see James Bell Associates (2013, November). *Reporting and Presenting Evaluation Findings*. Arlington, VA: Author.

include the background, problem, resolution, and purpose of the storyteller’s experience as it relates to your program (Krueger, n.d.).

Potential options for incorporating story data in reports include vignettes, case studies, Web-based dissemination of multimedia, and nontraditional alternative formats. These options are described in exhibit 7.

**Exhibit 7. Qualitative Reporting Formats for Stories**

Format	Overview
Vignettes	<p>Vignettes are short, powerful written statements that illustrate and contextualize points about your program’s processes or outcomes. Vignettes are generally no more than 200–250 words and may be presented in text boxes in the report alongside other data or as examples. Vignettes are often developed from interview data that have been recorded and transcribed, but performance-based data and other types may also be presented as vignettes.</p> <p>Spalding and Phillips (2007) highlight three types of vignettes: portrait vignettes, which are based on the storyteller’s own words (e.g., an interview); snapshot vignettes, which describe researcher observations (e.g., how people interacted or reacted in a theatre workshop or story circle); and composite vignettes, which depict a combination of experiences as a single narrative. Portrait vignettes may be more effective for illustrating outcomes, while snapshot vignettes might add greater context to your findings.</p>
Case studies	<p>A particular story may stand out because it fits your objective, the storyteller was dynamic, the story is representative of a larger group, or the story is unique. You may consider developing a case study about this person’s experience. Like vignettes, case studies are often based on interview data, but they also include contextual information about the storyteller and the program such as demographics, personal history, community factors, and the organizational structure of the program.</p> <p>Case studies are generally longer and more detailed than vignettes, but they should hold the reader’s attention. They may include a description of the problem and why it is important, the steps taken to address the problem, the results, challenges and how they were addressed, whether the results were sustained, and lessons learned (Neale et al., 2006).</p>
Web-based multimedia	<p>Sharing the products of digital storytelling, Photovoice, or other visual and performance-based stories can be challenging. A program Web site can provide a forum to share visual displays, pictures of scrapbooking or story quilts, and videos of theatrical performances. There are many no- and low-cost options for developing Web sites and blogs. Other free options include social media channels such as Facebook and YouTube. Written reports that summarize findings from analysis of visual data may include pictures and Web links to videos or images.</p>
Alternative presentations	<p>Alternative presentation formats may make your story data more accessible, allow for more personalized interpretations, and provide a more intense interactive experience (Torres et al., 2005). Examples include brochures, poetry, skits, photography, music, and song (Johnson, et al., 2013).</p>

Vignettes may emerge during coding. For example, you may have coded a few sentences from a participant's story about transportation. The statement may be a powerful and representative example of an identified pattern about barriers to program participation. The selected text may already be in an appropriate format to use as a vignette.

Coding may also inform the structure and content of case studies. You may develop an outline and headings for a case study based on the story data you linked to deductive and inductive codes during your analysis. You may need to rearrange the order of the excerpts or connect themes and quotes. However, your completed analysis will make this process easier and ensure the credibility and validity of your case study.

Be sure to verify each story and ensure that the manner in which it has been documented accurately represents the storyteller's experience (Krueger, 2010). Describe the methods used to collect and analyze the stories and the process used to verify them. Also describe the sampling approach and the procedures for engaging storytellers and addressing confidentiality.

## Using Stories in Program Planning and Improvement

Program research and reporting is often viewed as a requirement of funders, community leaders, regulatory bodies, and others. However, you can use the findings, including those from stories, to improve your program and outcomes.

Stories can support quality improvement, recruitment of participants and partners, and sustainability efforts. They can deepen program administrators' understanding of participants' experiences and broaden staff discussions. Programs that are conducting other research can use stories to help meet objectives and funding obligations. Stories can reveal community strengths and needs and inform the design of new programs.

# Honoring the Storyteller: Responsible Use of Stories<sup>6</sup>

When conducting qualitative research using stories, it is essential to engage storytellers throughout the process and observe confidentiality and ethical practices. Storytelling allows program stakeholders to be active participants in clarifying program activities and outcomes and improving the program. The collection and use of their stories require mutual trust and respect. Trust is established when research is conducted in an open, honest, and transparent manner from start to finish.

## Engagement of Storytellers

Begin by clearly explaining the research goals to the participants, explaining what you want to learn, and describing how their stories will be used. You may develop a letter of invitation to participants explaining what they should expect if they choose to participate, including how much time is required, what type of information will be sought, how you will ensure confidentiality, and how they can contact you with questions. Stakeholders may be engaged in the planning stages to determine story collection methods, and they may be trained to serve as story collectors.

Responsibility to storytellers does not end once their stories have been collected. Before sharing information from stories, confirm with storytellers that your final product reflects their experiences, and ask whether they recommend any changes. Verification ensures story authenticity and accuracy and is a critical final step in engaging storytellers in the process.

## Confidentiality and Ethics

Varying levels of confidentiality may be required or preferred depending on the storyteller, cultural norms, context in which the story was shared and will be reported, or methods used. Levels of confidentiality range from reporting the story and revealing its source; reporting the story without revealing its source; reporting general concepts from the story, but not details; and not reporting the story, concept, or source at all (Krueger, 2010).

Visual and performance-based storytelling methods raise additional considerations. As these methods may include the images, voices, or performances of storytellers, they challenge the common research concept of confidentiality as anonymity (Gubrium et al., 2014; Stuttaford et al., 2006).

Sometimes, regardless of the methods used, participants want to be credited by name for their contributions. Participants and the community should be engaged in conversations about safety,

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<sup>6</sup> For a full discussion of confidentiality and ethics in program evaluation and reporting, see James Bell Associates (2007, December). *Evaluation Brief: Program Evaluation and Research Ethics*. Arlington, VA: Author.

consent, the need to obtain consent from others (e.g., Photovoice images), confidentiality, and ownership.

Most importantly, not all stories that are told are appropriate for sharing. For example, information may be sensitive, embarrassing, identify other individuals such as children and family members, or relate to inappropriate or illegal behavior. Storytellers might not fully understand the need for confidentiality until after they have shared their story. Therefore, even when a consent form has been signed, honor and respect storytellers by seeking ongoing consent.

Resources for sample institutional review board applications, consent forms, and photo release forms are provided in the appendix.

## Conclusion

Stories are an accessible, valid, and effective data source that can be systematically collected and analyzed using qualitative research methods. Program administrators, researchers, and others can gain a deeper understanding of the program and its outcomes through stories. Determine whether your program would benefit from the power of stories, and explore qualitative methods for including stories in your program research and reporting.

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## Appendix: Additional Resources

Topic	Resources
<p>Research and evaluation techniques rooted in storytelling</p>	<p>Dart, J., &amp; Davies, R. (2003). Quick-start guide: A self-help guide for implementing the Most Significant Change technique (MSC). Available at <a href="http://www.clearhorizon.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2008/12/dd-2003-msc_quickstart.pdf">http://www.clearhorizon.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2008/12/dd-2003-msc_quickstart.pdf</a></p> <p>Labonte, R., Feather, J., &amp; Hills, M. (1999). A story/dialogue method for health promotion knowledge development and evaluation. <i>Health Education Research</i>, 14(1), 39–50. Available at <a href="http://www.transitionemergingstudy.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/StoryDialogue-Method-Labonte-et-al.pdf">http://www.transitionemergingstudy.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/StoryDialogue-Method-Labonte-et-al.pdf</a></p> <p>The Center for Appreciative Inquiry. (2015) Generic processes of appreciative inquiry. Available at <a href="http://www.centerforappreciativeinquiry.net/more-on-ai/the-generic-processes-of-appreciative-inquiry/">http://www.centerforappreciativeinquiry.net/more-on-ai/the-generic-processes-of-appreciative-inquiry/</a></p>
<p>Qualitative research purpose statements and questions</p>	<p>Author. (n.d.). Writing good qualitative research questions. <i>Masscommtheory.com</i>. Available at <a href="http://masscommtheory.com/2011/05/05/writing-good-qualitative-research-questions/">http://masscommtheory.com/2011/05/05/writing-good-qualitative-research-questions/</a></p> <p>Creswell, J.W., &amp; Clark, V.L. (n.d.). Principles of qualitative research: Designing a qualitative study [PowerPoint Presentation]. Available at <a href="http://www.andrews.edu/leaderpart/RoundTable/2004/workshops/2b/AU-Qual-071504-jwc-vpc.pdf">http://www.andrews.edu/leaderpart/RoundTable/2004/workshops/2b/AU-Qual-071504-jwc-vpc.pdf</a></p>
<p>Data collection methods</p>	<p>Anderson, J., Michol, J., &amp; Silverberg, J. (1994, 2001). Ready for action: A popular theater, popular education manual. The Waterloo Public Interest Group (WPIRG). Available at <a href="http://www.popednews.org/downloads/Ready_For_Action.pdf">http://www.popednews.org/downloads/Ready_For_Action.pdf</a></p> <p>Center for Digital Storytelling. (2014). Home. Available at <a href="http://storycenter.org/">http://storycenter.org/</a></p> <p>Center for Digital Storytelling. (2014). Center of the story. <i>youtube.com</i>. Available at <a href="https://www.youtube.com/user/CenterOfTheStory">https://www.youtube.com/user/CenterOfTheStory</a></p> <p>McNamara, C. (2009). General guidelines for conducting research interviews. Retrieved from <a href="http://managementhelp.org/businessresearch/interviews.htm">http://managementhelp.org/businessresearch/interviews.htm</a></p> <p>nDigiDreams.com, (2012). Digital Storytelling and Stories. Available at <a href="http://www.ndigidreams.com">http://www.ndigidreams.com</a></p> <p>Photovoice.org, (2014). PhotoVoice: Photography charity. Available at <a href="http://photovoice.org">http://photovoice.org</a></p> <p>Turner, D. (2010). Qualitative interview design: A practical guide for novice investigators. <i>The Qualitative Report</i>, 15(3), 754–760. Available at <a href="http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR15-3/qid.pdf">http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR15-3/qid.pdf</a></p>

Topic	Resources
Participatory research and evaluation	<p data-bbox="457 268 1440 411">Community Tool Box. (2014). Section 6: Participatory evaluation. In Evaluation Community Programs and Initiatives. Work Group for Community Health and Development, University of Kansas. Available at <a href="http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/evaluate/evaluation/participatory-evaluation/main">http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/evaluate/evaluation/participatory-evaluation/main</a></p> <p data-bbox="457 432 1422 537">New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault. (2000–2012). Factsheet: Models of Participatory Research. Available at <a href="http://www.svfreenyc.org/research_factsheet_119.html">http://www.svfreenyc.org/research_factsheet_119.html</a></p>
Analysis of narrative data	<p data-bbox="457 562 1369 705">Taylor-Powell, E., &amp; Renner, M. (2003). Analyzing Qualitative Data. Program development &amp; evaluation (G3658-12). University of Wisconsin-Extension Cooperative Extension, Madison, Wisconsin. Available at <a href="http://learningstore.uwex.edu/Assets/pdfs/G3658-12.pdf">http://learningstore.uwex.edu/Assets/pdfs/G3658-12.pdf</a></p> <p data-bbox="457 726 1403 793">Taylor, C. &amp; Gibbs, G. R. (2010). How and what to code. <i>Online QDA Web Site</i>. Available at <a href="http://onlineqda.hud.ac.uk/Intro_QDA/how_what_to_code.php">http://onlineqda.hud.ac.uk/Intro_QDA/how_what_to_code.php</a></p> <p data-bbox="457 814 1395 919">Cohen D, Crabtree B. (2006, July). Common analytical approaches. Qualitative Research Guidelines Project. <i>Robert Wood Johnson Foundation</i>. Available at <a href="http://www.qualres.org/HomeComm-3821.html">http://www.qualres.org/HomeComm-3821.html</a></p>
Analysis of visual data	<p data-bbox="457 940 1414 1050">Kolb, B. (2008). Involving, sharing, analyzing: Potential of the participatory photo interview. <i>Forum: Qualitative Social Research</i>, 9(3), Art. 12. Available at <a href="http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0803127">http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0803127</a></p> <p data-bbox="457 1071 1417 1285">Parsa, A. F. (2004). Visual Semiotics: How still images mean? Interpreting still images by using semiotic approaches. In 2nd International Symposium, Communication in the Millennium: A dialogue between Turkish and American scholars, in cooperation with University of Texas, Anadolu University, and Istanbul University, 843–853. Available at <a href="http://cim.anadolu.edu.tr/pdf/2004/1130853696.pdf">http://cim.anadolu.edu.tr/pdf/2004/1130853696.pdf</a></p>
Storytelling reporting formats	<p data-bbox="457 1318 1437 1528">Blodgett, A. T., Schinke, R. J., Smith, B., Peltier, D., &amp; Pheasant, C. (2011). In indigenous words: Exploring vignettes as a narrative strategy for presenting the research voices of Aboriginal community members. <i>Qualitative Inquiry</i>, 17(6), 522–533. Retrieved from <a href="http://www.academia.edu/3164158/Exploring_vignettes_as_a_narrative_strategy_for_co-producing_the_research_voices_of_Aboriginal_Community">http://www.academia.edu/3164158/Exploring_vignettes_as_a_narrative_strategy_for_co-producing_the_research_voices_of_Aboriginal_Community</a></p> <p data-bbox="457 1549 1403 1692">Bronwyn Becker, Patrick Dawson, Karen Devine, Carla Hannum, Steve Hill, Jon Leydens, Debbie Matuskevich, Carol Traver, &amp; Mike Palmquist. (1994–2012). Case studies. Writing@CSU. Colorado State University. Available at <a href="http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/guide.cfm?guideid=60">http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/guide.cfm?guideid=60</a></p> <p data-bbox="457 1713 1403 1818">Keen, S., and Todres, L. (2007). Strategies for disseminating qualitative research findings: Three exemplars. <i>Forum: Qualitative Social Research</i>, 8(3), Art. 17. Available at <a href="http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0703174">http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0703174</a></p>

Topic	Resources
Confidentiality and research ethics (including sample participant consent forms and IRB applications)	<p data-bbox="441 268 1446 380">Davies, K. (2008, July). Informed Consent in Visual Research. Seeking consent for the use of images obtained in photo elicitation: Reflections from the Living Resemblances project. Available at: <a href="http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/543/">http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/543/</a></p> <p data-bbox="441 388 1446 499">Minter, Ed. (March 2003). The Ethics of Interviewing. University of Wisconsin-Extension. Available at: <a href="http://www.uwex.edu/ces/tobaccoeval/pdf/EthicsInt.pdf">http://www.uwex.edu/ces/tobaccoeval/pdf/EthicsInt.pdf</a></p> <p data-bbox="441 508 1446 560">The ethics application repository. Available at <a href="http://tear.otago.ac.nz:8080/jspui/">http://tear.otago.ac.nz:8080/jspui/</a></p>