

## Storytelling Toolkit

“Storytelling is the most powerful way to put ideas into the world.”

—Robert McKee

“Stories are memory aids, instruction manuals, and moral compasses.”

—Alex Krotoski

“A good story cannot be devised; it has to be distilled.”

—Raymond Chandler

### Purpose of Storytelling

As the changes you are carrying out in your school begin to grow beyond their initial testing grounds, a subtle shift in the work tends to occur. Now that you have started to spread the good ideas you have developed, the people who will be carrying them out begin to matter as much as the ideas themselves. As this shift occurs, the stories you tell about your work will become an invaluable tool for keeping the work going and growing. Stories are valuable to improvement work because they:

- memorialize the work and experiences of your team and the students you are supporting.
- efficiently convey the purpose and trajectory of the work to others.
- support cross-school collaboration and sharing.
- package and share your change ideas with others.
- perpetuate elements of your school’s working culture and knowledge over time.

### Purpose of This Tool

Any writer will tell you that a blank page can be an intimidating thing. This tool provides steps, advice, and guiding questions to support you in preparing to tell the story of your improvement team’s work. In sharing a story, you will be representing your team and the broader school community. This tool provides guidance on incorporating your team’s viewpoints in order to make the story you tell a collective one, and to craft a story that effectively communicates to your desired audience, whether they be teachers within your building or at other schools, parents in your community, colleagues that you work with directly, or educators from across the country.

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## When to Use This Tool

A good time to think about starting work on your team’s story is either after you have created a successful change that has been scaled and adopted as an ongoing practice within your school, or after your work has led to a discovery or shift in your team’s thinking about your students or the problem. Natural pause points, such as the end of a school year or before an event where you will share your work, are also good times to use to think about storytelling.

## Step 1: Reflection

The work of your improvement team has likely taken several twists and turns and is full of detail and nuance. All of this can be invaluable to telling your story, but too much of it can be superfluous and distracting, depending on the audience(s) and overall message you want to get across. Taking the time to reflect on everything that has happened as well as the goals of your storytelling is a critical first step.

### Decide How to Include Your Team

The writing of your story can be an individual or a group process, but the story of the efforts of a group of educators should include the input of all of its members. The perspectives of different members of your team will enrich the story, and participation in the process will build ownership among your team members, amplifying its value for them. Be careful to balance inclusivity with the efficiency of the process, so you don’t wind up with “too many cooks in the kitchen” when it comes to key decisions about what to include or cut.

Using the following list of suggested approaches as starting points, take a moment to decide how you want to include your colleagues in the crafting of your story.

1. Start by reflecting on your work as a group. Review any artifacts you created along the way. As a group, discuss things that made you proud, things you learned, challenges you faced, and lessons to carry forward.
2. Reflect along the way. If you don’t have an immediate deadline, it can help to have periodic check-ins to compile ideas organically as they occur over time.
3. Ask team members how they already describe the work when they speak of it with others or with each other. You can also task team members to come up with 30-to-60-second “pitches” to share and use as fodder.
4. Create a working group to represent your team or school, and use the rest of the team to provide feedback.

Choose from these approaches, mix elements from more than one, or come up with your own approach. Make your decision based on your knowledge of your team and your school.

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## Reflect Using Guiding Questions

It is much easier to make big decisions, solicit feedback, and refine your story before you put pen to paper to start writing. Critical decisions about the intended audience and overarching message will determine the shape and content of the rest. Use the following guiding questions, alone or with team members, to reflect on your trajectory before writing:

- Reflect on where you started and where you are now. What has changed?
  - Why were you tackling this problem in the first place? What sparked this effort?
- What have you learned?
  - About the problem you are facing?
  - About your students and their needs?
  - Were any assumptions challenged?
- What progress has been made?
  - For whom has the progress been greatest?
  - What artifacts/evidence best capture progress?
  - What remains challenging or unfinished?
- What was the experience of doing this work?
  - For team members and teachers?
  - How did students experience this? What have they told you?
  - Has the improvement science process contributed anything new to school culture?
- Who is the audience of your storytelling?
  - What is the most useful for them to hear?
  - What context do they need to understand it?
- Do you want your audience to adopt a practice you have developed?
  - What are the critical steps?
  - What tools or artifacts do they need to do so?

## Step 2: Documenting Your Story

### Decide What Form Your Story Is Going to Take

Once you have finished reflecting on your journey, shared your ideas with your team and school leadership, and settled on your story's essential elements, it is time to think about the form the story will take. Think about your audience(s), your time and resources, and the skill set of your team as you decide on a format. Common choices include written case studies, PowerPoint presentations, videos, or posters.

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## Choose from the Following Story Components

Review the following list of suggested components to include in your story, and pick and choose the ones that enable you to best convey the message you have chosen to the audiences you have in mind:

- School introduction:** Help your audience orient themselves by telling them a little about your school and improvement team.
- Problem:** What is the problem, or the corner of the problem, you are tackling? Make a case for why it is worth spending time on.
- Single student vignette:** Use a single student to be the exemplar of both the challenge and the progress you have made. A portrait of one student can quickly bring your story to life.
- Change idea(s):** Describe one change (or complementary changes) that has been successful or led to key learning.
- Impact so far:** Describe the goals you have met. What are the indicators you can point at to show progress?
- Data display:** Display just one piece of data that helps tell your story. One chart or graph is the perfect complement.
- Measures:** Share your measurement strategy. It reveals how you define progress and helps others learn from your example.
- Rationale (or theory):** You may want to position this piece of the work within a larger project. Show the driver diagram, or specific pieces of it, like a single row.
- A how-to guide** with two separate parts: Like any good lesson plan, it should balance concise instructions with important nuance. Taking the time to separate these is critical to making it usable to other educators!
  - **Steps and guidelines:** These are a handful of necessary steps. There are the core elements that are always used.
  - **Common pitfalls and potential adaptations:** These are the optional tips and tricks you have learned through implementation. Think of this as advice from a “helpful teacher down the hall.”
- Protocols/rubrics/tools:** Share the documents you have created so that others can try your change idea themselves.
- What you want to learn next:** Improvement is ongoing. Where has this experience led you? What are the next steps?

### Step 3: Revise, Revise, Revise

- Revision is an essential part of storytelling; nobody publishes a first draft! Ask a member of the team or a teacher down the hall for suggestions. Revise for clarity, then ask again.
- Remove any identifying student information such as names or individual characteristics.
- Finally, make sure you get approval for the final version from your principal.