
Creating Video *for* Impact

CARA JONES

Storytellers for Good



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Coastal Program

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The Importance of Conservation Storytelling

“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

— MAYA ANGELOU, author, Civil Rights activist and poet

And herein lies the power of story.

We’re living in world where we are constantly being bombarded with [messages](#), and with so much chatter, how can your message stand out from the crowd? The key is to create a message that resonates in a person’s heart. Compelling stories have a unique capacity to make an emotional connection with an audience. Organizations that can tell a good story can stand out among the crowd.

Given the challenges faced by conservation organizations, it is more important than ever to learn the art of storytelling in one of the most powerful mediums — VIDEO. Unlike traditional print communications, video has the unique power to create an immediate emotional connection. When done well and for the right audience, it can become your most powerful tool for generating community support, inspiring others and celebrating success.

Gaining Community Support

“Facts don’t have the power to change someone’s story. Your goal is to introduce a new story that will let your facts in.”

— ANNETTE SIMMONS, author

Our audiences may be unfamiliar with or have preconceived ideas about the work that we do. For example, a land trust may seek to explain the benefits of land conservation to people who do not know what a land trust is nor the importance of protecting a specific property. So, starting with a bunch of statistics and facts on biodiversity is unlikely to change people’s minds. A better approach would be to tell a story about the land, the organization and the difference it can make.

[Research](#) by neuro-economist Paul Zak has found that storytelling can increase oxytocin levels, the feel-good chemical that promotes empathy. Storytelling can make people care and drive them to action. According to [a video marketing report](#), 71 percent of marketers said that videos outperformed other marketing content.

Remember, people are bombarded with information daily, and it often doesn't change the narrative in their heads. Painting a compelling story is a more effective way to change someone's perspective. Stories give people a new way of seeing the world. When it comes to addressing your critics, rather than take a combative approach, share a story that helps them see things differently.

Inspiring Others

Storytelling expert Michael Margolis says *"If you want to learn about a culture, listen to the stories. If you want to change a culture, change the stories."* As we begin to share compelling conservation stories we have the power to inspire others to get involved, learn from us and take on some of the greatest conservation challenges of our time. It is both an opportunity and responsibility to tell the most compelling stories we can to conserve the special places in our communities.

Celebrating Success

Stories have the unique power to both engage new audiences and re-engage supporters. The opportunity to find and tell powerful stories connects supporters to your mission and values. As you take time to highlight the success stories of your organization, you'll motivate your teams to find and tell more of them.

We hope this guide will inspire you to produce compelling videos for advocacy and fundraising. It is time that we go beyond the "I came, I saw, I saved the land" or "leaf floating down a stream with orchestral music" type of videos we see all too often.

Here, we will take you on a journey to understand:

- Why use video
- What are your goals, audience, purpose and environment
- What are the key principles of storytelling
- How to apply those principles
- How to avoid common mistakes
- Build a culture of storytelling
- How to plan and produce a successful video

Check out [this video](#) to get a summarized version of the steps we'll be taking you through.



Videographer filming scenic landscape (b-roll) in Anchorage, Alaska. Photo credit: C. Eng (USFWS)

Getting Started



Why Use Video

Unlike the viral animal videos you may see on Facebook that are strictly for entertainment, our aim is to create compelling, purpose-driven content. Video's greatest power is its ability to create a short, emotionally impactful experience for an audience. When thinking about producing a video, land trusts and other conservation groups should focus on finding stories that deal in "motion" and "emotion." Clearly, video has a unique ability to capture things that are in motion—wolves running across a plain, someone swinging a hammer, a boat gliding across the water.

So if the story you are telling is particularly visual, video offers a richness that is unique to the medium. Video is also powerful in its ability to draw attention to an immediate emotional response: a distressed face, a look of wonder, a compelling sound bite and a facial expression reacting to it.

Unlike print media, video is not great at conveying in-depth statistics or difficult-to-process information. Avoid using excessive text, program details and statistics in video as it will give your audience little chance to absorb the material and decreases the emotional impact of your video. A better approach would be to create written materials that users can download from the site where you post your video.

Ultimate Goals, Objectives, Audience, Purpose, Environment

Nonprofits and other businesses are sometimes guilty of what is called the "play and pray" approach to marketing a video. This is when you simply make something and hope people are going to watch it. That approach rarely works. As you set goals for your video project and identify specific objectives, it is critical that you develop a strategy to maximize your return on investment.

Decide what is your ultimate outcome you wish to achieve — this will be your goal. Having a well-defined goal will help guide your activities to achieve your objectives.

Examples of goals include:

- Demonstrate the importance of the organization to the local community
- Gain community support for a land acquisition
- Increase community visitation to a preserve

With storytelling, it can often be difficult to evaluate impact. It's not always easy to capture someone's emotional response to your story. However, if your objectives are clear, you can more

easily measure success. Make sure they are both specific and realistic. Examples of objectives you can measure include:

- Donation amounts
- Numbers of Facebook shares
- Numbers of website click-throughs
- Email signups for your newsletter
- Number of participants at an event
- Sufficient funds for a new position

Before even thinking about what story you're going to tell, you should think through the answers to four important questions:

1. **Who is your target audience?** The story you select and the way you tell it will vary depending on the audience you choose. The general public is not considered a target audience because it is too broad a category; however, the community adjacent to a potential acquisition is an appropriate audience. Make sure you can clearly identify a specific audience. Note: For more assistance in identifying and working with your audience see the "Identify Your Audience Worksheet."

- Who are they?
- What inspires or motivates them?
- What story do they already have about your work?
- What type of story would most resonate with them?
- What is the best way to tell your story?

2. **What, above all, do you want them to understand?** Here you want to clarify the key point about your work you want your audience to walk away with.

- What one thing do you want your audience to know?
- What change are you trying to make in the world?
- How would you create this world?
- What core principle drives what you do?

3. **What are you asking them to do?** Here's where you get to be clear on what you would like this audience to do as a result of seeing this video. Be as specific as possible.

- How do you want them to feel at the end of the video?
- What do you want them to believe after watching the video?
- What do you want them to do — donate, volunteer, be aware?

4. **What is out there already?**

- How is your story different?
- What can your story add to the conversation?

Principles of Storytelling

While there are no hard and fast rules when it comes to storytelling, the following four principles can help you tell a good story.

- **Craft a Compelling Message.** When you frame your stories around hope, resilience or determination, you invite your audience to be a part of the story. People want to be a part of something that is inspiring and makes them feel good. Convey messages of possibility through your stories, and they will speak to broader audiences.
- **Let Characters Lead.** If you're telling a story about a broad issue, find someone to personalize it. As Mother Theresa says, "If I look at the mass, I will never act. If I look at one, I will." We are all looking to see ourselves in the stories we watch. Give your audience someone to care about.
- **Remember Structure.** Steven Spielberg has said "People have forgotten how to tell a story. Stories don't have a middle or end anymore. They usually have a beginning that never stops beginning." Stories need a beginning, middle and end. Remember to structure your story in a way that feels like it comes to a resolution. If you can, build a surprise into your video for added impact.
- **Aim for the Heart.** People are inundated by information and sensationalism every day. Now more than ever, sincere and emotionally compelling content is needed to stand out in the marketplace. Experts on viral videos (and Maya Angelou!) say that it's not the content but the feeling it generates that make people share. Prioritize your most authentic and emotionally resonant content above all else.

Applying Storytelling Principles

You may find the hardest part of storytelling is not about what to add, but what to leave out. This requires some tough choices. By focusing on what you want the audience to know or do, it may be a little easier to make these decisions. So let's see how to apply these principles in a conservation video.

How to Craft a Compelling Message

Ask yourself what the story is really about. We so often rely on our mission statements to explain what we do. We are very good about talking about what we do and about how we do it. However, we often forget to talk about why we do it and why people should care. Is your work about saving a particular plot of land or promoting a love of the outdoors for future generations? The latter is a more powerful framing of the story. In some cases, a compelling message that conveys the benefits of your work can carry an entire video.

This video called “Nature Brought Us Together” by [The Nature Conservancy](#) is powerfully framed around the idea of a community coming together to make change versus focusing on a particular land purchase.

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66L8A8zGddc>

In this example from [The Anti-Defamation League](#), notice how the message “Imagine a World Without Hate” is so much more powerful and universal than the organization’s mission statement: “to stop the defamation of the Jewish people and to secure justice and fair treatment to all.”

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3KylvMJefR4>

Imagine a World Without Hate® is a registered trademark of the Anti-Defamation League. Used with permission.

How to Let Characters Lead

Telling just one person’s story can be the most effective approach to telling your organization’s story. More than three lead characters will be hard for your audience to follow. This character approach is your “micro” story where you can dive deep, help your audience get to know and care about the character(s) and get a sense of the trajectory of their story.

The micro story should take up most of the video, and it’s where the emotional heart is. If you need to include a big picture view, you can use a spokesperson, text or still images to give a sense of the “macro” story in the video as well. Whereas the micro story is all about conveying the depth of your work, the macro story can convey its breadth. Remember that video is much better at showing the emotional impact of your work versus explaining programs.

In this short film for [Greenbelt Alliance](#) you’ll see both a micro and macro story at play. The Greenbelt Alliance is a policy organization that doesn’t have direct clients. Instead of making videos about its policies, the Alliance found a person broadly impacted by each of the land rights initiatives. Here’s one of them.

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bw1-tByovKI>

In this story about [Mama Hope](#), the film opens with the big picture macro story, which is also expanded on in the middle of the story. But the vast majority of this compelling film focuses on the emotional story of the founder of this organization.

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jJ5ibq2Lgig>

Sometimes, you can get creative with characters. In this video by [Sustainable Human](#), beautiful images were married with narration from a TED talk to create a powerful story with wolves as central characters.

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysa5OBhXz-Q>

How to Build Structure

The beginning of your story should have a hook that grabs people's attention and draws them in. This is where we introduce a protagonist or protagonists and what is at stake for them. The middle of the story is where we describe the barriers and obstacles they face. The end of the story is where we deliver a powerful resolution.

In this example by [The Nature Conservancy](#), the opening sets up the conflict between the Morro Bay fishing community and [The Nature Conservancy](#). Rather than resolve it right away and talk about a conservation victory, the first two-thirds of the video explains the multiple barriers the Nature Conservancy overcame, which allows the ending to be more powerful.

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LjT1sRAKnEI>

In this example by [Back on My Feet Chicago](#), we get to meet three protagonists and to see the many barriers they had to overcome. The first was getting out of homelessness, and the second was finishing the race. The film starts with a compelling hook at the beginning of the race such that the whole time the audience is left wondering if the runners will finish. This makes for a more powerful ending.

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y62lCVARsfg>

How to Aim for the Heart?

We identify most with the emotional elements of a story. What parts of your story will make you laugh, cry or just feel something? These elements are building blocks around which to build your story. Here are some examples of how to present those building blocks:

- **Compelling Sound Bites.** As you interview, pay attention to the sound bites that elicit an emotional response and take mental note of those above all others. Once you're done reviewing all your footage, you'll want to highlight these and craft the story around them.

Note: The quality of the sound bites you get are often determined by the quality of questions you ask. Check out our interview tips later in this guide.

- **Tight Shots.** Create an emotional experience of being in a place your audiences are not. To do this, we need to exaggerate what is there. While smell and taste are hard to convey in video, consider all the sensory details that go into making a story rich and compelling. Use your camera to create that experience by getting tight shots of the most important details: the curious look in someone's eyes, the lines in cascading water, a person's tattoos, tiny insects, the way someone walks. All these details can help an audience get a better feel for people and places. [In this example](#), you'll see the way tight shots of bark, moss and leaves bring a story about a park to life.

CASE STUDY

In recent years, Storytellers for Good worked with the Chicago based nonprofit [Back on My Feet](#), a nonprofit dedicated to ending homelessness, to create this film:

LINK: <https://vimeo.com/38675251>

Here's a simplified snapshot of their video planning process:

Pre-Shoot Questions:

1. Who is your audience?
New donors at an annual fundraiser.
2. What, above all, do you want your audience to understand?
Back on My Feet coaches homeless people to run. Through this coaching, they empower the homeless and formerly homeless and provide them with life skills to move forward.
3. What do you want them to do?
Donate to expand local programs.
4. What else is out there?
A video about the founder, but no compelling stories about the participants.

Craft a Compelling Message

Rather than go with the mission statement "Back on My Feet combats homelessness through the power of running, community support and essential employment and housing resources," we focused on what was most important for the audience to understand. The compelling, more universal message is that Back on My Feet provides second chances in life through running. We showed this message (instead of telling it) throughout the story. Our central character Isaac summed it up by saying:

"If you don't open up your horizons, you just stay in a box. You aren't going to be nothing but the size of a box. I choose to get out of the box. The box won't define me."

Let Characters Lead

We had a number of participants and organizational leaders to choose from in this story. Back on My Feet wanted to show diversity in the types of people served so we went with three who came to the nonprofit from very different circumstances and showed them all getting a second chance.

Remember Structure

Rather than starting this story in a linear way with the participants' backstories and then the race, we felt that opening the story with the race would be a powerful hook right off the top. We go into backstories from there. This way, the whole time the viewer is watching they are wondering if the runners are going to make it. The anticipation makes for a more powerful ending when they do.

Aim for the Heart

Of all the runners, Isaac's story pulled at our heart strings the most. So, rather than give equal time to all three participants, we focused more on his story than the others. We used his compelling backstory and tearful sound bite toward the beginning of the story, his inspiring quote about getting out of the box in the middle and, rather than show all three men crossing the finish line, focused on Isaac as he was the most excited at the end of the race.

- **Natural Sounds.** Pay attention to the sounds relevant to the story you're trying to tell. The crickets chirping, the sounds of hammers or traffic. Make sure to take time to capture these with good audio equipment. The sounds of a place help transport an audience there.

In this example from [Planting Justice](#), you'll see emotional building blocks at play. The story starts in a natural environment where we meet two young men building vegetable gardens. The emotional building blocks of the story, however, come from a much deeper story. Notice how the story is built around them as well as the tight shots and natural sounds that bring it alive.

Link: <https://vimeo.com/47147523>

Remember humor is also an important part of creating an emotional experience for your audience. If you can make people laugh they are just as likely to remember the story as if you made them cry. Check out this creative spoof called [Nature Rx](#). Note that the story does contain content (bleeped and covered) that could offend some audiences. As you are planning your video, take a hard look at the language, images and what may be suggested (even inadvertently). The key is to be confident that your audience won't be offended by your video and turn away.

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bf5TgVRGND4>

YOUR CHECKLIST TO GET STARTED:

- Have you identified your audience, what you're asking them to do, and the key point about your work you want to convey?

- Have you crafted a compelling universal message?

- Have you identified 1–3 characters whose stories align with that message?

- Do you have a beginning, middle and end?

- Have you identified the emotional building blocks of your story?
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Avoid These Common Mistakes

1. **Too Many Talking Heads.** When we involve too many people in our videos, audiences end up with a lot of information, but no real story and no one to care about. It's difficult to elicit emotion when there is no focal point to the story. Talking heads can also leave audiences feeling like they are being lectured to.
2. **Too Much Jargon.** Those of us familiar with a subject can often, unknowingly, confuse or alienate our audiences by using words they don't understand. If you're using conservation terminology like "riparian buffer," "baselines" or "viewshed," make sure to define what each means or describe them more simply. Terms like "scale," "biodiversity" and "metrics" are usually understandable to most audiences; however, we can use other words to sound more conversational. Choose your language so a child would understand you – simple language will allow your message to come through loud and clear.
3. **No Barriers.** As change makers, we so often want to tell our audiences about the impact we've had. But we forget to describe the obstacles in our way and the story is left feeling flat. As evidenced by any Hollywood thriller, the more barriers your characters face and the greater the tension, the more your audiences will stay engaged.
4. **Taking Too Much Credit.** Too often, our storytelling sounds like this: "someone was struggling, and we came in to save the day." The truth is often that the person had a certain amount of internal resources and personal strength that allowed them to make a positive transition. So the client is, in fact, the hero of the story. The nonprofit or agency is a supporting character. Stories told this way come across as more authentic and less arrogant.
5. **Fact Overload.** Video's greatest power is in giving an emotional experience of your work. When you overload a video with statistics, program details or other information, it can zap the emotion right out of your stories. Tell people-oriented stories and inspire your audience to read more about your programs or other technical details on your website. Print is a much more effective medium for these types of details as it gives audiences a chance to absorb them at their own pace.
6. **No Call to Action.** Videos are most successful when used as part of a campaign that is motivated by an action step. Whether you want people to donate or volunteer make sure to highlight that task at the end of the video. The most effective calls to action

include a specific task, time frame and tangible outcome that will result from the audience's actions. If you don't have a specific call to action, make sure to leave your audiences with a powerful thought or sound bite at the end that will stay with them.

7. **The Sad Story.** Research shows the vast majority of viral content shared on social media has a positive spin. The “end of the world” story is no longer sticking. Researcher [Jonathan Berger](#) has found that sad stories are least likely to motivate people to take action. Even if your story has sad elements, frame it with a sense of hope and possibility instead of leaving your audiences feeling down or disempowered. People want and need to feel that their actions will make a difference.

Building a Culture of Storytelling

In order to continue to bring to the surface the most compelling stories from your organization, you'll need to start making storytelling part of your routine. This will not only help generate ongoing stories but keep you connected to why you do what you do. Here are some ideas on how to build a culture of storytelling:

- Start staff meetings with a story from the field.
- Hold a monthly happy hour to celebrate stories from that month.
- Start a story bank, where you can start organizing stories based on type (ex: client stories, staff stories, volunteer stories) and/or format (video, print or other medium).
- Invite staff to make regular contributions to the story bank, social media, newsletters or other outlets.
- Send out a survey to your partners and collaborate on stories.



There are many ways to foster a culture of storytelling such as publishing a newsletter or magazine like Saving Land.

Planning Your Video

Identify Your Story

After identifying the audience, key message and call to action, you can select the type of story to tell. There are many approaches to telling a story. Below are the two most common approaches.

The questions below will help you create a video brief, a short paragraph outlining the story you are planning to tell and how you will tell it. Doing so in advance will save you time and money.

The Impact Story

The impact story is the most common story told where we get to meet one or a few people and understand how their lives are impacted by your work. As you begin to plan this type of story, you will need to consider:

- Who is the central character(s)?
- What is the arc of their story—the beginning, middle and end?
- Who is willing and available to participate?
- What talking points do you have?
- What settings can help tell their story? (e.g., home, school, workplace)
- What activity could help tell their story? (e.g., working, playing a sport, art project or other hobby)

The Vision Story

The vision story reveals why your organization exists and what type of world you are trying to create. This type of video can be more challenging to produce because this world may not exist yet. So you will need to consider:

- What does your ideal world look like? What will it take to create this world?
- What are the obstacles to creating your world?
- What creative approaches can you use to give your audience a sense for it? (e.g., graphics or animations)

Here's an example of a popular vision story from [Girl Effect](#) that uses animation to talk about what's possible in a world that gives girls in developing countries more opportunities.

Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WlvmE4_KMNw

Video Length

The general answer to how long to make your video is “as short as possible.” [Research](#) shows that you lose viewers every 30 seconds. Two minutes is an ideal length for viewing but it can be hard to tell a deeper story that quickly. When determining length, you need to consider both the content and audience.

If you can successfully hook viewers from the beginning and keep them engaged throughout, video length is less relevant. There are viral videos that run well over two minutes. Also, if you have a captive or otherwise dedicated audience, at a fundraising event for example, videos can run longer. Generally anything over five minutes will have less of a chance to be watched from start to finish, watched again or shared.

Develop a Communication Plan

Video is most powerfully utilized as part of a larger campaign. People aren't just going to stumble upon your video, unless you push it out in some way. In developing your communications strategy, you need to remember the audience you want to reach and consider the following:

- Where will you release your video? You want to make sure your video has the longest life possible. Instead of just posting on your website and YouTube, consider other channels for distribution including Facebook, Twitter, TV, community screenings, film festivals, etc.
- What bloggers will you reach out to? People who write about your field and have preexisting relationships with an audience can be your most powerful allies. Start building these relationships in advance of your video's release.
- How can you enlist the help of your partners to spread the word? Each of your supporters has their own network of supporters who can become your spokespeople. Inspire them to help you reach new people.
- What is the best time to release the video? Timing your video release with a relevant anniversary, holiday, conference or topic in the news can give it greater visibility and attract more media support.

Distributing and Promoting Your Video

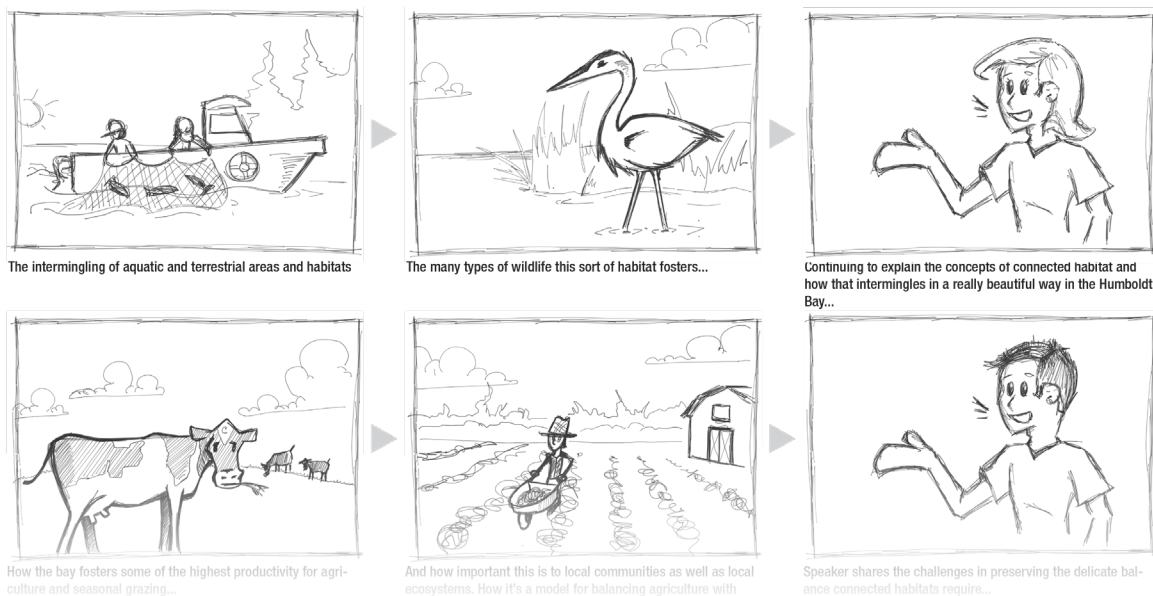
If you don't have the budget to produce videos on an ongoing basis, it's important to think carefully about promotion in the short- and long-term. Here are some ideas on how to maximize your video's impact:

- **Put Your Video on Your Webpage.** Viewers will stay an average of two minutes longer on webpages with integrated video. When videos are placed on homepages, gift conversion rates can increase by more than 100 percent.

- **Promote Your Video While Making It.** Generate buzz before your video release by posting a picture of a character featured, a powerful sound bite from an interview or a behind-the-scenes update while making the video.
- **Make Your Event Shine.** A video can allow your audience to experience your work in ways speeches and slideshows cannot. Make sure to follow up with a video link in a post-event in email. Let attendees know how successful the event was, invite them to watch the video again and donate if they haven't already.
- **Use Your Video in Emails.** [The Relevancy Group](#) found that “using video in emails can boost monthly revenue by 40 percent.” Using video in email drives engagement, conversion and revenue. Use Google’s [URL shortener](#) or [Bitly.com](#) to shorten the web address of your video.
- **Have Your Video Ready for In-Person Encounters.** Have your video ready to go on a tablet/ phone/laptop to use in a prospect meeting, presentation or casual run-in when appropriate. You can also screen the video at your next all-staff, volunteer and board meetings and reengage your strongest supporters and advocates.
- **Make Donating Quick and Easy.** Wherever you decide to place your video, make sure there is a donate button nearby where you directly and clearly ask for money.

Storyboards and Scripts

Producers of high budget films will sometimes hire artists to sketch out scenes or storyboards and write detailed scripts for each character. This approach can be expensive and may leave less room for the unplanned. When filming your video, it is important to have a plan and be open to the story unfolding differently than that plan.



Storyboard about the Freshwater Farms Reserve for the accredited Northcoast Regional Land Trust (CA) .

Credit: D.J. Glisson, II (Firefly Imageworks)

One approach is to create a simple script like the one below. The left side lists specific shots you want to make sure you get; while the right presents talking points you want your interviewees to cover. As you move through the shoot day you can check off necessary shots and talking points.

The script below is a very simplified version of the short video created for Greenbelt Alliance.

VIDEO/SHOT LIST	AUDIO/TALKING POINTS
ACT 1 SET UP	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opening graphic • AI picking fruit on the farm • Farm land video 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AI talks about the importance of farming, why it matters to the state
ACT 2 CONFLICT	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wide shots of farm video • AI's commercial kitchen • Workers making pies in commercial kitchen 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jeremy talks about importance of protecting farmers with policy • AI talks about challenges with building infrastructure
ACT 3 RESOLUTION	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commercial kitchen video • More farm video 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AI talks about the importance of regulation and pressures on farm land • AI talks about power of partnership with Greenbelt Alliance



Filming a stream (b-roll) in Denver, Colorado. Photo credit: USFWS

Budget

Costs for video vary widely depending on the location of the video, complexity of the video shoot, length of the video, number of shoot days and equipment required to film it. Working with a professional on a short video can range from a few thousand to tens of thousands of dollars per video depending on all these factors.

Here is a simple budget with the itemized tasks and costs:

Producer (creative approach/coordination/interviewing)	
Videographer (including camera, lighting and sound equipment)	\$10,000
Two shoot days (6 hours each) plus editing (including music, graphics) for roughly 3–4 minute video	
Crew Roundtrip Travel Time to Shoot	\$1,000
Crew Hotel and Meals on the Road	TBD
TOTAL	\$11,000+travel costs

Before talking to potential videographers, decide what you're willing to spend. As you create your budget, consider your return on investment. If a \$10,000 video helps you raise \$150,000, then it could more than pay for itself. If you have a modest budget, look for [grant](#) opportunities or outside funding from corporate or other sponsors. Some nonprofits have also successfully crowdfunded a film on platforms like [Kickstarter](#) or [Indiegogo](#).

Equipment

Whether you're planning to take on a video project yourself or hire a professional, you want to make sure you have access to the right equipment. While you don't need to spend a lot, the following pieces of equipment are essential. Check out the Resources section at the end of this guide for some suggestions on where to find this equipment:

- **Tripod.** There is nothing that says “amateur video” more than shaky video. It is also hard to pay attention to what someone is saying when the video is not stable. Whether you're conducting an interview or getting shots of a landscape, make sure your camera is steady.
- **Slider.** Commonly a very simple rail where the camera can move directionally offering fluid and precise camera movements. It can be a tripod attachment or work independently.
- **Lavalier Microphone.** This is a simple microphone that can be clipped on the person speaking to allow their voice to come through loud and clear. Do not rely on the camera microphone for interviews. It will sound hollow and pick up background noises that can distract from hearing the speaker. When the audio is hard to hear, the video loses its impact.
- **Headphones.** Monitoring the audio that is being recorded by your microphone is important as some background noises can be picked up better by a microphone than our hearing.

- **High Definition (HD) Camera.** Most cameras these days, including smart phones, are well equipped with an HD camera but you'll want to double-check this. HD quality video will allow your film to be enjoyed on a big screen as well as on a computer or smart phone. Without HD quality the image may appear pixilated on larger screens.

- A. HD Camera and Tripod
- B. HD Camera, Slider, and Tripod
- C. Lavalier Microphone
- D. Headphones



Photo credit: D.J. Glisson, II
(Firefly Imageworks)

There are many factors to consider when selecting the camera:

- Resolution refers to the number of pixels that make up a single frame of video. The higher the resolution, the clearer the image. A common resolution for nonprofit films is FULL HD 1080p. While some cameras will allow you to shoot up to 4K 2060p, unless you are planning to show the film on a giant screen, that resolution is not necessary, and the video files can take up a significant amount of storage space. To learn more about resolution check out this [video](#) by Videomaker.
- Frame rate refers to the number of still images taken each second to create a sense of motion. Depending on the camera, this setting can be directly related to the resolution. Cameras with higher frame rates allow for better quality when doing slow motion shots. A frame rate of 24 fps will be adequate for most videos. To learn more about frame rates check out Videomaker's [video](#).

YOUR PLANNING CHECKLIST:

- Are you telling an impact or vision story?

- Does the video you're planning to shoot have compelling visuals packed with motion and emotion?

- What is the ideal length of your video?

- Do you have a communication plan around where and when you will release the video?

- Do you have your shot list and talking points prepared?

- Have you outlined a budget?

- Do you have all the equipment you need for a high quality production?

- What measurements will you use to determine your video's success?

Producing Your Video

As you begin production, you want to make sure you have the right people and resources for the job. There are many things to consider. You can do it yourself, hire a professional or enlist the help of a nonprofit video production agency or local college students in a communications program. Here are some considerations to make before deciding to hire a professional or produce a video on your own.

Considerations When Hiring a Professional Videographer

Advantages of working with a professional:

- **Equipment.** Professionals will come with an array of high quality video and sound equipment to make your story shine.
- **Story Consulting.** Professionals will have vast experience with helping you construct a story that works for video.
- **Time Saving.** Given that most filmmakers use only 10 percent of what is shot, a professional can expedite the time-consuming process of editing the footage into a powerful piece of watchable length.

Disadvantages of working with a professional:

- **Cost.** Professional video production can be expensive and may consume a large part of your marketing budget.
- **Familiarity with Interview Subjects.** As someone who may interact with the interviewee on a regular basis, you may have a more natural rapport with them.
- **Editorial Control.** Editorial control is a collaboration between you and the professional instead of you calling all the shots.

Many organizations choose to hire a professional for their high-stakes fundraising video and employ in-house staff to produce others. Here are some ideas for other types of video that can be more easily produced on your own:

- **Testimonials.** Interview clients, staff or volunteers about the impact of your organization.
- **Thank-You Messages.** Create personalized or generic thank-you messages from clients, staff or volunteers to send to donors.

- **Campaigns.** Source content from your fans by asking them to make their own videos about your work.

Selecting and Managing a Videographer

If you decide to go ahead and work with a professional, consider the following before making your choice:

- **Check Out Their Existing Work.** Ask them to share examples of their work, especially examples with a similar approach to your video.
- **Ask About Their Vision.** While most professionals won't plan your story out entirely before you decide to hire them, ask about the approach they would take to your story and see if it resonates. If their approach does not resonate, it is okay to look for another videographer.
- **Seek Out Personal Testimonials and Online Reviews.** Yelp! is a great resource for checking out honest customer reviews; however, not all videographers are set up there. Get recommendations from colleagues or ask a videographer for references from other clients they've worked with.
- **Meet Them in Person or on the Phone or Video Conference.** There is no better way to get a sense of how a videographer or producer will resonate with your clients than to spend some time with them and see how they resonate with you. Are they likable, easy to talk to, sensitive, clear? All of these are important qualities to assess. And ask for references.
- **Be Clear About Your Expectations.** List specific shot types, angles you'd like in advance. This direction is especially important if you plan to edit the footage yourself or take it to a separate editor not involved in the shoot.

Setting Expectations

Before hiring a professional, make sure expectations are clearly outlined in a signed contract. The contract should cover:

- Total project cost plus the amount of a deposit required before the first video shooting day.
- Project milestones and delivery deadlines; recourse for missing deadlines.
- Number of changes the client can make as part of the agreed upon price.
- Cost of additional edits if the client requests changes beyond those agreed upon.
- Any relevant copyright, licensing or distribution details; for example, the contract should be structured as a work for hire, so the organization owns the copyright to the video and not the videographer.

Selecting Characters

The best speakers for your video will be the ones who exhibit the following traits:

- **Genuine.** Sincerity is a hard quality to describe, but the camera has a way of showing it. The speaker must be open to sharing emotions. Your speakers should be able to speak genuinely, conversationally and, if necessary, be vulnerable.
- **Outgoing.** The camera has a way of muting people such that, if your energy levels are naturally low, they come across even lower on camera. You'll want to find people whose energy levels are high and who are outgoing.
- **Articulate.** Someone can have a great story but, if they are very shy on camera, or have a hard time speaking clearly, they may not be the best choice (although this issue can be remedied with subtitles). Choose speakers to whom story and conversation come very naturally.

Working with Characters:

Here are some ways you can ensure that your interview goes well on the day of the video shoot:

- **Build Trust.** If you can, spend some time with the person you will be interviewing in advance and get to know them outside the story. If you will be asking them to share something vulnerable about themselves, share something vulnerable about yourself first to build trust. Also, remind them that it's your job to make them look good.
- **Purpose Conversation.** People may be hesitant to share their most personal stories. We need to be sensitive to this and remind our interviewees about the purpose of the film. When people are reminded that they are sharing their story for a worthy cause, they are more likely to open up.
- **Comfortable Environment.** Rather than invite your subjects to be interviewed in your office or other unfamiliar environment, ask them where they would feel most comfortable. If you can capture them in their home or doing an art project or other hobby relevant to the story while interviewing them, this will put them at ease. For conservation related stories, you will want to consider shooting outdoors.
- **A Conversation Versus Interview.** Remind your subjects that you are asking to have a conversation with them and not an interview. While you can have your talking points handy, the experience will feel more conversational for you both if you are not writing down everything they say in front of them. To put them at ease, you can also remind your interview subjects that they can repeat an answer as many times as they need to.
- **Clothing.** Remind your subjects in advance to avoid wearing too much white, busy patterns, or a logo shirt. Bright, solid colors come across best on camera.

Conducting an Interview

- **Be Prepared.** Do your research on your subject in advance, and be clear about what responses you need from them. Experts differ on whether to provide questions in advance. Some believe it helps interviewees be more prepared. Others feel it can result in rehearsed answers. Regardless of whether you let your interviewee see the questions, make sure you have a clear list of talking points prepared in advance.
- **Start with Easy Questions.** Start with questions that put people at ease and are easy to answer. Where are you from? Tell me more about your work. Where have you traveled? Once they are relaxed, start with asking them their name and title or role (Example: resident of Happy Valley for 50 years, fifth-generation farmer, mother of three, volunteer for Happy Valley Land Trust, etc.). Doing so will also help you keep track of all your interviews.
- **Ask Them to Speak in Full Sentences.** When you edit your video, your questions as the interviewer will likely not be heard. As such you'll need your interviewee to put their answers in context. Instead of answering a question about why they do the work they do with "because I wanted to influence children to pay more attention to the natural resources in their community," have them put it in context: "I started [nonprofit name] because I wanted to influence children to pay more attention to the natural resources in their community."
- **Ask One Question at a Time.** Make your questions clear, direct and only one at a time. Generally the longer the question, the shorter and less clear the answer.
- **Begin Questions with "Describe, Explain or Tell."** These words invite interviewees to give descriptive answers versus more generic ones. You can also ask them to get more detailed than they might naturally. For example: "Tell me what something looked like, sounded like,



Interviewing a Coastal Program biologist for a video by the accredited Great Land Trust (AK).

Photo credit: C. Eng (USFWS)

- **Start with Emotion.** Stories are intricately linked with people’s emotions. As you ask questions like “Tell me about the moment you were angriest” or “most excited,” “most frustrated,” “most surprised,” you will invoke powerful stories along with them.
- **Let There Be Space.** As interviewers, our instinct may be to jump from one question to the next. Instead, let there be space between questions. When someone is seemingly finished answering a question, wait a few seconds (at least seven seconds) before jumping onto the next one. Deeper answers may result from these pauses and allow us to be more present with our interviewees and ask important follow-up questions.
- **Be Flexible.** An interviewee’s answer may lead to additional questions. Don’t be afraid to be spontaneous with where you take the interview.

YOUR PRODUCTION CHECKLIST #1

- Have you decided to hire a professional or use internal staff?

- Have you done thorough research on the videographer you’re working with?

- Have you set clear expectations with this videographer in a contract in advance?

- Have you identified characters who are genuine, outgoing, articulate and lively?

- Have you prepared for the interview by making a connection with the subject, considered the best environment for them to tell their story, reminding them of the purpose of the video?

Selecting Backgrounds

When choosing backgrounds for your video, consider which location will best help tell the story you are trying to tell. When possible avoid using plain walls and conference rooms as backdrops. Consider instead backdrops that work best for the story: a natural landscape for an environmental spokesperson, a set of family portraits for someone telling a family story, a stack of books for a scholar. Find (or build) a location that highlights your character and moves the story forward.

Shooting Considerations

When shooting a video, make sure you have an array of shots for every landscape, person or object you are filming. This will give you a choice of shots and perspectives when editing your video. It will also give the story more movement versus having only long static shots.

For each person or place you are filming make sure to get a wide shot, a medium shot and very tight shots. If you were taking a picture of a person, a wide shot could allow you to see them in their living room chair. A medium shot could be a portrait of their face. A tight shot could be their hands resting in their lap.



Tight Shot



Medium Shot



Wide Shot



Horizontal Orientation



Portrait Orientation

Sound Considerations

When choosing a location for filming make sure to find places that are nearly soundproof. While using natural outdoor environments can make for beautiful pictures, they can also be full of distracting sounds. The sounds of birds, construction or traffic can not only interrupt an interview but can make it hard to get a clean sound recording for your video. Try to find environments that minimize these ambient noises. If you shoot outdoors, be ready to stop and restart as needed to deal with sound interruptions. Using a windscreen on a microphone is also essential when shooting outdoors to ensure wind noises don't ruin your interview.

Background Music

Music can add to the emotional experience of your story. Without it, videos usually fall flat. As sites like YouTube and Vimeo have become increasingly vigilant in cracking down on unlicensed popular music, it is more important than ever to find royalty-free music for your videos. Most sites allow you to search by mood, artist, genre and most popular tracks and range from \$30–\$100.

Check out the Resources section at the end of this guide for some suggestions on where to find this music. The general rule about music is that you want it to enhance and not distract from what is being said. Avoid music with lyrics or harsh tones and make sure the volume is low enough that it doesn't compete with the interviewee.

Photo Releases

A standard photo release is a permission slip of sorts allowing you to take someone's picture and use it for marketing and fundraising purposes. Your attorney should do a final review of this form.

These forms should, at a minimum, include:

- The name of the person you are filming and their contact information. Note: if a subject is under 18 years old, a legal parent or guardian will need to sign on their behalf.
- Your organization's name
- The date
- An authorization of image use free of cost indefinitely or in perpetuity
- An agreement that images can be repurposed by your organization
- An agreement that the images become property of your organization

Check out the Resources section at the end of this guide for a sample release form.

YOUR PRODUCTION CHECKLIST #2

- Have you determined the best background for your interviewee's story?

- Do you have a plan to get wide, medium and tight shots of all the people and places you'll film?

- Have you identified a nearly soundproof environment for your interviews?

- Have you thought about what mood and type of music you want to use?

- Do you have photo releases handy to bring for your interviewees to sign?

Editing

Editing your film project can prove the most fun or frustrating part of your journey. This is where you get to bring all the puzzle pieces together. If you're a beginner, you may consider starting by transcribing your interviews so you can see everything you have to work with in advance. The following three guidelines will then help you sort through your content:

- **Remember Your Emotional Building Blocks.** Earlier you were asked to identify the most emotionally compelling aspects of your video in the form of sound bites, tight shots and natural sounds. Most of these building blocks will be sound bites that you can clearly identify once your interviews have been transcribed. When you can identify the top three to four, you can then build the rest of the story around those.
- **Start with the A-roll.** In video editing, the term "A-roll" refers to the interview part of your video. "B-roll" refers to the video used to illustrate the story. In your first edit, focus on

getting the A-roll down to the length you want the video to be. From there you can more easily add the B-roll and music.

- **Focus on Stripping Away Versus Adding.** The author Antoine de Saint Exupery beautifully sums up the best way to approach the editing process: *“An artist knows he has achieved perfection not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.”* In editing you need to be ruthless about cutting to allow the essence of the story to have maximum impact. When it comes to difficult choices, ask yourself: Does the footage support my primary messages?



Editing a video about the conservation partnership between the accredited Great Land Trust (AK) and Eklutna, Inc.
Credit: D.J. Glisson, II (Firefly Imageworks)

Resources

Storytelling Worksheet

Identifying Your Audience Worksheet

Building Your Script

Sample Release Form

Additional Resources

STORYTELLING WORKSHEET

1. Who is your audience? Be as specific as possible.
2. What are you asking them to do? (e.g., donate, volunteer, raise awareness)
3. What is the message of your story? (What point about your work are you trying to convey?)

For an Impact Story

1. Who is the protagonist(s) (no more than three)?
2. What is the inciting incident OR what do they want?
3. What obstacles get in their way?
4. What is the resolution of the story?
5. What locations will help you tell this story?

For a Vision Story

1. Describe the vision of the world you want to create and how you will bring it to life with story. Include a compelling beginning, middle and end.
2. Write a list of the most emotionally compelling details of your story (e.g., sound bites, character or sensory details, other pictures or video shots), then HIGHLIGHT the emotional building blocks with an asterisk.

IDENTIFYING YOUR AUDIENCE WORKSHEET

Why this audience?

1. How can this audience advance your work?
2. Why is your work important to this audience?

What do you know about this audience?

1. How/where does this audience get its information? (Is video the best way to reach this audience?)
2. Who are trusted messengers for this audience?
3. What does this audience believe about your organization and its work?
4. What is important to this audience? (Or, what does this audience most value?)
5. What benefits does your work provide to this audience?
6. How does your work benefit/support/advance what this audience cares most about?

What needs to change?

1. What do you want this audience to do?
2. What do you want this audience to believe?
3. What do you want this audience to feel?

BUILDING YOUR SCRIPT

VIDEO/SHOT LIST	AUDIO/TALKING POINTS
ACT 1 SETUP	
ACT 2 CONFLICT	
ACT 3 RESOLUTION	

SAMPLE RELEASE FORM

Date _____

I hereby give the [org. name], its representatives and employees permission to take photos and video of me in the course of my participation in [org. name] functions. I understand these photos and video taken by the [org. name], or shared directly by me, may be used across various printed and digital materials, including but not limited to display in/on [org. name]'s magazine, the [org. name]'s website, the [org. name]'s social media channels, and other internal and external materials. I agree the [org. name] may use photographs of me with or without my name listed and for any lawful purpose related to [org. name] business activities. I understand that participants 17 or younger cannot give permission without parental signature.

I ask the following conditions be honored regarding use of my image (e.g., how my name should appear in any caption, etc.):

I understand that while the [org. name] will strive to abide by any conditions I have requested, I accept that mistakes sometimes happen. I understand the [org. name] will strive to correct any errors as promptly as possible (when and where possible) once the error is discovered.

Subject's signature _____

Subject's name _____

If needed, parental signature _____

If needed, parental name _____

Contact email (optional) _____

Contact phone (optional) _____

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Books

- [Believe Me: A Storytelling Manifesto for Change-Makers and Innovators](#), Michael Margolis (a free download).
- [A Changemaker's Eight-Step Guide to Storytelling](#), Ashoka Changemakers (a free download).
- [Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community](#), 4th edition, Joe Lambert. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- [Don't Be Such a Scientist](#), Randy Olson. Washington, DC: Island Press, 2009.
- [How to Shoot Video That Doesn't Suck](#), Steve Stockman. New York: Workman Publishing Company, 2011.
- [Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die](#), Chip Heath and Dan Heath. New York: Random House, 2007.
- [Resonate: Present Visual Stories That Transform Audiences](#), Nancy Duarte. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2010.
- [The Story Factor: Secrets of Influence from the Art of Storytelling](#), 2nd ed. Annette Simmons. New York: Basic Books, 2006.
- [Storytelling as Best Practice: How Stories Strengthen Your Organization, Engage Your Audience and Advance Your Mission](#), Andy Goodman. Los Angeles: Goodman Center, 2008.
- [Storytelling for Grantseekers: A Guide to Creative Nonprofit Fundraising](#), 2nd ed., Cheryl A. Clarke. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2009.
- [Winning the Story Wars: Why Those Who Tell \(and Live\) the Best Stories Will Rule the Future](#), Jonah Sachs. Brighton, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012.

Online Resources

- [D.I.Y. Tell Your Story](#), TriFilm. TriFilm provides creative, entertainment and production services for organizations around the world.
- [The Goodman Center](#). Founded to help good causes persuade, present, propose and recruit more effectively, the Goodman Center offers training and free resources on storytelling.
- [See3](#). See3 provides strategy, video and web services to nonprofits and social causes.

Video Resources

- [The Storytelling Non-Profit](#). The Storytelling Non-Profit helps organizations articulate their impact to donors using narrative techniques to generate greater personal interest and accountability. The site has a blog and other free resources.
- [Vimeo Video School](#). The online video-sharing site has a number of free resources, from tutorials on where to place the camera to storytelling to camera buying.

YouTube Nonprofit Program. The online video-sharing site has a number of resources for nonprofits, including donation cards to accompany the video you post and a free outreach toolkit with ideas on how to maximize the fundraising potential of your video.

Reports

Into Focus: Benchmarks for Nonprofit Video and a Guide for Creators, See3.

Stories Worth Telling: A Guide to Strategic and Sustainable Nonprofit Storytelling, Meyer Foundation and Georgetown University School of Continuing Studies.

Royalty Free Music

www.audiojungle.net

www.marmosetmusic.com

www.pond5.com

www.premiumbeat.com

www.themusicbed.com

Equipment Sites

Desktop Documentaries, www.desktop-documentaries.com/

Videomaker, www.videomaker.com/

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cara Jones is a multiple Emmy Award winning reporter, producer and speaker with vast experience in using video to tell compelling, inspiring human-interest stories. She has more than a decade of experience in broadcast journalism and has reported for network affiliates in Southwest Florida, Boston and the San Francisco Bay Area. Cara started telling inspiring stories as a way to balance out the tragedy-focused ones she was assigned in the news industry. The perspective and personal transformation she experienced while creating those stories inspired her to start [Storytellers for Good](#) in 2009. She, and a talented team of producers and videographers, have since been creating short films that move and inspire as well as raise awareness and support for world-changing people and organizations. Cara leads regular storytelling workshops and webinars, blogs for the Huffington Post, and has shared her expertise at conferences including SXSW, NTEN and The Goodwill Industries National Conference. Cara is a graduate of Princeton University with a degree in public policy. She has solo-backpacked around the world, teaches yoga and recently learned to surf while creating a short movie on India's first surfer girl.