

Five Components of an Effective (education-related) Story

1. Conveys a message.

While stories make your institution's marketing materials more interesting, unique and readable, ultimately their purpose is to convey a message about your college, university or independent school. Good stories bring your key messages to life. For example, if you claim that your institution is forward-thinking, incorporating technology into all aspects of the learning environment, your admissions materials should support this claim by featuring a teacher who uses blogs in her English class, or a student who composes his own music in the school's MIDI production lab.

2. Involves people.

People are the lifeblood of your institution, so it stands to reason that they should be the lifeblood of your stories, too. The best marketing materials forge connections, and the strongest connections aren't between people and place—they're between people and people. Think about it this way: If you had to choose between reading a list of programs and reading a story about one person's experience in a program of interest, which would you select? People respond to personal stories, and these stories reveal more about your institution than a list ever could.

3. Concise and to-the-point.

It's no secret that while people enjoy a good story, their attention spans are short—and getting shorter by the minute. Keep your stories or profiles concise and easily digestible. For those who scan rather than read, pull out or bold-face key points within the story. And be sure to edit; even if you think your story or profile is perfect as is, ask yourself if every single word you've used is necessary. Then cut, and cut some more.

4. Compelling.

As stated above, the purpose of your story is to convey a message. That being said, if the story you choose to tell is boring, no one's going to read it, let alone understand its message. So choose stories that reveal something unexpected; profile a student who's overcome adversity, or a professor who's using innovative lessons to truly make a difference in the lives of her students. Reveal the how and the why through tangible, specific details and genuine voices.

5. Well-written.

This may go without saying, but the best stories are well-written stories. Beyond good grammar and eloquently constructed sentences (which are immensely important), write your stories in a style that suits your institution. If your school is more formal or conservative, make sure the tone of your stories reflects this; if your university prides itself on its quirky, one-of-a-kind student body, infuse this quirkiness into your writing. And of course, proofread and edit what you've written, or let others proofread, edit and offer input. Reading the material out loud will also help you catch errors you may have missed, and will ensure that your stories flow—and engage readers.