HOW TO SUBMIT A TRANSFORMING LIVES STORY

Writing tips and guidance

Basic criteria

- 300-500 words
- Must contain a title, subhead, pull-quote, and photo (jpeg format) with caption and credit
- Must contain human angle and beneficiary quotes
- Make sure everything in the submission checklist, located later in this document, is fulfilled before you submit. Submissions that do not satisfy the criteria will be returned unedited.

What kinds of stories are we looking for?

- Stories that show broad-scale sustainable development projects, (no one-offs, and nothing that is not being or cannot be scaled). [While you should zoom in on an individual beneficiary to highlight our work, the greater project must impact more than this small group of people.]
- Stories that highlight new, cutting-edge development innovations; and/or
- Stories that highlight the USAID Forward reform agenda in action (empowering local groups, science, technology and innovation).
- All stories should point to results.

Writing tips: how to tell our story for transforming lives

The formula is simple: use powerful statistics; communicate progress; frame your story around USAID's larger mission, not just a specific program; and bring the story to life with a personal narrative.

The best short stories typically include both a human interest lead that illustrates how a project has improved people's lives or made a difference in the host country, and results to back up our claim to success.

You can do this by giving some background on how things were before:

For example:

> *"Fifteen-year-old John Smith can't remember the last time he went to bed on a full stomach. In urban Newport, Rhode Island, where he and his 3 brothers share a one-bedroom pantry, mutant cockroaches had raided his kitchen cabinets each morning for as long as he remembers. But things have changed since USAID's pest extermination and empowerment squad came to his community. In fact, the bug raids have seen a 99 percent drop off in Newport from over 1,000 to just 20 in the three months since USAID moved into town."*

So if you start with a human-interest bang—a colorful description of an individual or family (or a quote), you should later go back and tie it into a larger USAID objective, i.e. health, education or food security.

> *"The project is part of a larger USAID-backed initiative that empowers native Newportians to regain access to both breakfast and peace of mind through new technology, personal hygiene, education and marketing expertise."*

Notice, there are no acronyms and no technical speak.

Then of course, expound on why this project/program is important/why your audience should care [Is it making the world a safer place? Is it creating markets abroad? is it boosting the United States' standing in the world?]. Point to how many people it has helped and the measurable results. Sprinkle in a beneficiary quote or two and you've got a story.

The most effective stories focus on examples of international assistance that meet and highlight the following:

- Individuals empowered to help themselves
- Sustainable change rather than one-off successes
- Permanent "leave behinds" created, such as new infrastructure or skills that have a lasting impact
- Moral and ethical imperatives are a central part of the motivation for supporting assistance.

Storytelling dos and don'ts

- Do use powerful statistics that show a large, specifically defined change; show the change over a specific period of time; and are achieved at a low cost per unit.
- Don't use statistics that present percentages or numbers with no sense of context or scale.
- Don't lead with $$ amounts. Telling how many vaccinations were provided or how many lives were saved is a much more effective metric than how much was spent.
- Do tell stories that showcase a sustainable change.
- Don't tell stories that could represent a one-off success or that aren't connected to a larger narrative or solution.
- Do create emotional/personal connections that bring viewers into the scene.

A few other pointers

Think big picture. Health, education, women and girls. Creating stable societies and future trading partners. Try to avoid framing the stories solely around specific USAID programs, but rather tie to USAID's bigger mission—bringing sustainable change to the developing world and empowering people to help themselves!

Keep it jargon-free. Translate technical jargon such as "capacity building" to "training" or other words that everyone understands, and try to break down development concepts in the same way. These stories are written for the average reader—for your mother and father, a member of Congress, the man in the street—as well as for fellow development experts.

Avoid acronyms: If you can describe it in real words, do so on first reference. Acronyms can be used later, but should be done so sparingly.

Use quotes from beneficiaries. Since these are personal narratives, this seems self-explanatory, but many submissions still lack quotes!

Most importantly, have fun writing! An author's enthusiasm shows through in their work, so don't be shy about flaunting the good work USAID is doing around the world.

External submissions

Stories can originate outside the Agency and be submitted by external partners. However, please note that, while the partner will be mentioned as implementing the project, it should be referred to as a USAID project. Stories must be submitted through your USAID communications contact at either the mission (the development outreach and communications specialist, or DOC).

Submission checklist

- Is your story written like a newspaper/magazine article, and not an academic paper or a report?
- Does your story use plain language, not technical or "aid speak?"
- So this: "Farmers in developing countries often lack the technical resources, human capacity, and financial backing to respond to agricultural development challenges."
- Becomes: "Farmers in developing countries often lack the money, tools and skills to succeed."
- Does your story include some 'humanity?' (Is your story written in a way that will make a general audience care about your topic or is it just a rundown of facts? Note: Best way to do this is through powerful biographical descriptions of beneficiaries, and good quotes.)
- Does your story focus on the IMPACT of our work on the ground (and not on HOW USAID works, our internal processes or other "inside baseball" topics)?
- Does your story include contextual information on the country and topic you are writing about? (Assume your audience is not familiar with the local history, geography, political or socio-economic situation.)
- Does your story include at least one of those real people, and contain all necessary information about them (full names, ages, town names, etc.)?
- Does your story use real quotes from these beneficiaries?
- Do your quotes sound like people REALLY said them? (People don't speak like robots!
- Does your story note the real, measurable results of the project you are featuring?
- Do you zoom out to the "big picture?" In other words, do you situate the project you are writing about within the context of USAID's overall mission and goals in that sector and in that country?
- Does your story include all other basic details of the action as it unfolds (town/city names, distances traveled, dollar amounts, timelines)?
- Is your story between 300 and 500 words?
- Have you included a high-resolution photo with caption and credit with your story?
- Does your story include a "grabbing" title, subhead and pull-quote?