

A STORY THAT RINGS TRUE:

HOW TO CRAFT AND TELL COMPELLING FOOD BANK STORIES



We all want to be great advocates for the Food Bank, and one of the best ways we can do that is by crafting and telling compelling Food Bank stories. Here's how.

The Basics

Craft your story about a neighbor in advance using this Framework: **Need → Food → Thrive**

Tell your story naturally in real-life situations by **leading in**, gently and directly.

Crafting Your Story

To tell a story well and naturally, it helps to **craft** the story in advance. Follow these four steps to prepare for and craft your story: Feelings, Face, Facts, Framework.

1. Find Your Feelings

"It is only when you open your veins and bleed onto the page a little that you establish contact with your reader." —Paul Gallico, *Confessions of a Story Writer*

What's true of writing is true of telling: To move others, you must first be moved yourself.

Appropriate self-disclosure—sharing your own experiences, feelings, and motivations—will ground your story and make it "ring true" emotionally.

But before you can share your feelings with others, you have to get to know them for yourself. Here are some prompts to help you surface how you feel about the work of the Food Bank:

- When you think about all our neighbors who face food insecurity, how do you feel?
- What motivated you to join the Board in the first place?
- How does the work of the Food Bank connect to your own life story?

2. Focus on a Face

"The main character of your story should be your client, not your organization." —Christopher Davenport, Nonprofit Storytelling for Board Members

We're all neighbors. Our work at the Food Bank is neighbor-centered, and our storytelling can be, too.

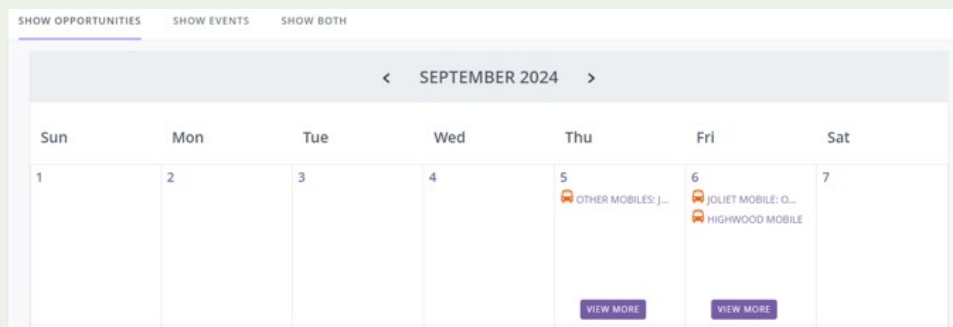
Focusing on one person or family makes your story simple, understandable, and impactful. Talk about the neighbor by name (using their first name only):

- If you've had personal interaction with a neighbor, you can talk about that specific person.
- You can share the stories of neighbors from our [Annual Reports](#) or [videos](#).

Volunteering at a Distribution

If you haven't had the chance to interact with our neighbors, [volunteering at a distribution](#) is a great way to get to know the people who we're helping to thrive.

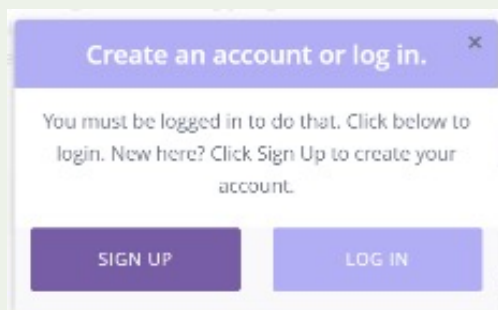
Check our [volunteer calendar](#) for Mobile Market distributions



Click an opportunity to see more details and pick a date that works for you. Click **respond individually** to sign up!



Log in to our volunteer platform and it will walk you through the rest of the steps to complete sign-up.



3. Learn Your Facts

“By picking your strongest facts and arranging them for maximum impact, you’ll be able to tell a great story.” – Vanessa Chase Lockshin, *The Storytelling Non-Profit*

Facts help build a bridge from the emotional impact of one neighbor's story to the scale of what we do to serve neighbors throughout Northern Illinois. You don't need to overwhelm your listeners with facts; just use one or two that “zoom out” and convey how much the Food Bank does. A few examples:

- We distribute over 78 million meals every year.
- Over 20,000 volunteers give their time to the Food Bank each year.
- Every \$1 donated to the Food Bank helps provide \$8 worth of groceries.
- We are serving over 500,000 neighbors every month (as of summer 2024).

Learn more at SolveHungerToday.org

4. Use a Framework for Your Purpose

“The best structure supports the story you want to tell and allows all the parts and elements to flow together seamlessly, without confusing the listener. It should feel organic and authentic, never forced or prescriptive.”—Meg Bowles, et al., *How to Tell a Story*

Once you know your own feelings, the neighbor you want to talk about, and a good fact or two, it's time to put your story together. It can be helpful to use a simple storytelling framework. At the Food Bank, our vision is for everyone in Northern Illinois to have the food they need to thrive. We can rearrange the key words in our vision to get a storytelling framework: **Need → Food → Thrive**

- **Need:** What need does the neighbor face?
- **Food:** How did the neighbor take action to get food through the Food Bank?
- **Thrive:** What difference is the Food Bank making in the neighbor's life now?

This is also good point at which to share a relevant Food Bank fact.

This three-point structure can help you organize your story, but you can tell it in a way that flows naturally; it's about connecting with your listeners, not following a script.

- **Call to Action:** If your story is being used to “make an ask,” the fourth point in your structure is the ask itself. This could be inviting someone to attend an event with you, volunteer, or make a donation.

Even if your story doesn't have a specific call to action, it can be helpful to think about the purpose of your story. What do you want your listener to know, feel, or do as a result of your story?

Side Note: Asset-Framing and Strengths-Based Messaging

Even though one of our Framework points is “Need,” we want to use **strengths-based messaging**, not “need-based messaging.” This doesn't mean we can't or shouldn't talk about needs; it means we focus on the assets that neighbors themselves bring to their experiences. Strategist Lindsay Mullen explains:

“With a strength-based approach to messaging, you don't frame needs as weaknesses. So you wouldn't say ‘hungry kids are incapable of learning,’ instead you might say, ‘Every child needs a nutritious meal to start the school day.’” (“Four Myths About Strengths-based Messaging”)

Strengths-Based Messaging is part of a framework known as Asset-Framing, developed by author and entrepreneur [Trabian Shorters](#).

Framing → Communication → Messaging

- Asset-Framing is a **cognitive framework** that defines communities by their aspirations and contribution, rather than their challenges and deficits.
- Philanthropic **communication**, whether intentional or not, has conveyed a negative message towards the people that an organization is saying they want to help. Examples of Need-Based Language: **“At-Risk” “Low-Income” “High Poverty” “High Crime”** In the Food Banking context: **“Hungry People” “The Needy”**
- Strengths-Based Messaging emphasizes the strengths, opportunities and power of an individual, group or community. It represents people positively, in a way that feels true and empowering to them (i.e. how they would want to be represented). Examples of Strengths-Based Messaging: **“We Are All Neighbors” “A dad whose family faces food insecurity” “A healthcare tech who wants her community to thrive”**

An Example of Story Crafting

These are preparation steps, not the exact words of the story I'll tell. It might take me a while to figure out the most compelling way to put it together, which I'll work on in Step 4.

1. Find Your Feelings

I live in Kane County, and I want my own kids to thrive in our community. When I see the summer Meals on the Move program in our public parks—the same ones I go to with my family—I know my kids' classmates will find the energy they need to play this summer and study this fall. It makes me feel proud of my Food Bank and my neighborhood.

2. Focus on a Face

Noel is a second-grader who we met at one of our Backpack Program sites during the school year. His mom, Danielle, learned about the program by reading about it in a community newsletter. With the high cost of childcare, Danielle can only work part-time (at her son's school) while her kids are in school. Her husband is a landscaper, but with the seasonal nature of his work, when demand declines, he picks up extra work clearing snow and ice during the winter months. Noel brings food home in a backpack on Fridays. Danielle says she's relieved knowing that the family will have food for the kids over the weekend. Noel says, "The food makes me happy!"

3. Learn Your Facts

Last fiscal year (corresponding to the 2023-2024 school year), we distributed over 690,000 meals through our Backpack Program. Across all our programs and locations, we helped provide 82.3 million meals.

4. Use a Framework

Looking at everything I've thought about so far, here's how I'll arrange my story:

- **Need:** Noel needs nutritious food to thrive seven days a week! His mom Danielle faces normal challenges: The rising cost of childcare and unpredictable changes at work for her husband.
- **Food:** Danielle took the initiative to inquire about the Backpack Program, which Northern Illinois Food Bank helps run at Noel's school.
- **Thrive:** Danielle is relieved and Noel is happy about the food they have at home on the weekends. The Food Bank provides more than 690,000 meals for neighbors like them through our Backpack Program each year. I'm proud to help serve an organization that's doing so much for our community.

Telling Your Story

To tell your story in real life, find natural ways to segue into talking about the Food Bank.

Lead In—Gently and Directly

There are lots of ways to phrase a "lead-in," something that turns the conversation naturally to the Food Bank. You don't want to be forced or brash, but you do want to be direct. Here are some examples.

- **"I think you might know . . ."**
"I think you might know that I'm on the Board of Northern Illinois Food Bank. I was wondering if I could tell you more about what we do."
- **"Did you know . . ."**
"Did you know that 1 out of 10 neighbors in Northern Illinois faces food insecurity?"
- **"That reminds me . . ."**
Many topics might bring the Food Bank to mind for you: economic changes, the job market, political issues, and more. As you're discussing these with a friend: "That reminds me, I was hoping to tell you a bit more about how Northern Illinois Food Bank serves our community."

Build Rapport through Shared Values

In all our relationships, rapport can arise through shared experiences—and through shared values. Everyone you know needs food to thrive, so everyone you know has a point for empathy with our neighbors. Appeal to these shared values as you tell your story. "We all know what it's like to try to focus on an empty stomach. Imagine what that's like for families making tough choices about paying the bills or putting food on the table."

Aim at Your Audience

Tailor the way you tell your story to the specific audience you're talking to.

- **Business Colleagues:** Focus on **impact**.
Business professionals often appreciate metrics. For example, you could draw an analogy between leveraged buying power and how we leverage our food industry partnerships. "Every \$1 donated helps provide \$8-worth of groceries. An 8:1 ratio makes me confident that when I give, my impact in the community is maximized."

- **Family and Friends:** Focus on **your story**.

Why did you decide to join the Board? You can afford to be more vulnerable with the people you're closest to. If you have personal experience with food insecurity, this might be an appropriate audience to share that part of your story with. "When I was a teenager, I knew what it was like to hate summer break because it meant less food. I'm so glad our Meals on the Move program helps kids thrive all summer long."

- **Parents:** Focus on children.

"Did you know that 1 in 9 children in Northern Illinois faces food insecurity? When I think about the challenges parents in our communities are facing, I'm so grateful for how the Food Bank empowers them to provide for their kids' needs."

Side Note: Elevator Pitch

Sometimes, you only have a few seconds to tell a story. The **Need → Food → Thrive** framework still works for an elevator pitch. Just condense the basics into one or two sentences. Practice telling the simplest version of your story you can, and see if you can clock it at 20 seconds or less.

An Example of Story Telling

Look back at our story about Noel and Danielle in "Story Crafting". Here's how we might tell that story in a real-life scenario. The storytelling pieces we've covered above are labeled **[in brackets]** and **highlighted**.

Board Member Jenna attends a networking event and bumps into her former colleague Dave.

Dave: It's so good to see you! What have you been up to in your new role?

Jenna: I've really been enjoying directing our marketing team. It feels like the right next step for me. Plus, **[Feelings]** I'm **excited** that I recently joined the Board of Northern Illinois Food Bank.

Dave: No way! I always thought your insights would be assets in the non-profit setting, too. So—Northern Illinois; what area does that cover?

Jenna: We're in 13 counties throughout Northern Illinois; everything besides Cook. **[Lead-In]** That reminds me, **[Build Rapport]** you know how we did that project about skilling up for job opportunities?

Dave: Yes, of course!

Jenna: Well, since joining the Food Bank Board, one way I've been thinking about career development is the foundation that child nutrition gives for those later opportunities.

Dave: How so?

Jenna: **[Need]** Well, when kids get the food they need to grow and thrive, it has positive repercussions for the rest of their life. **It makes me think of Noel**, a second-grader at one of the schools where the Food Bank helps run our Backpack program. Noel's mom Danielle took the initiative to learn about the Backpack Program and get her family signed up. **[Food]** Now, Noel brings groceries home in a backpack on Fridays, and his family has food for the kids over the weekend. **[Thrive]** I got to watch a video interview with Danielle, who says she's relieved knowing that her kids will have the food they need. Plus, she's been letting other neighbors know about the Backpack Program! **[Fact/ Impact]** We provide almost 700,000 meals through just that program each year.

Dave: That's amazing.