

Visual storytelling guide for health care professionals taking climate action



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Grounded in gratitude

At [Health Care Without Harm](#) and [Practice Greenhealth](#), we recognize the interconnections between our own health and the health of our planet and our personal connections to the places where we work and play. We are grateful for the lands, waterways, and forests that surround the areas where we live and where the stories of our lives take shape.

In over 25 years of work to connect with individuals, institutions, communities, and industries, we have realized the power of story to shift behaviors and compel action that protects our health and our future. It began by telling our [Do No Harm](#) story of the journey that led us to realize the power within the health sector to drive action on health, resilience, and climate change and continues with your stories.

We created this guide to help you see yourself as part of the larger ecosystem, to use the tools to bring out the stories you carry, and also to reflect on the stories of those around you.

We hope that by weaving together impactful stories of individuals and diverse communities working in health care, light will be shed on initiatives helping patients, improving systems, and advancing the movement for health equity and climate justice.

Each story you share connects to the larger narrative of health care taking action to protect our health and our future.

It is our sincere desire that our work will accelerate continued healing, amplify narratives that need to be heard, and contribute to strong initiatives for climate justice. We invite you to join us in sharing your story today.

An aerial photograph of a canyon with layered rock formations in shades of orange, red, and brown. A turquoise river flows through the canyon. The word "WHY" is overlaid in large white letters.

WHY

"Numbers numb, but stories stick."

—Howard Frumkin



Every health care organization has storytellers

Speaking up for climate justice

As health care workers, every day we work toward healthy people living in equitable and resilient communities on a thriving planet. As health care workers, both on the front lines and behind the scenes, we each play a part of a bigger story.

From reducing the environmental impact of operating rooms to providing nourishing meals in the cafeteria, or to the energy managers keeping our hospitals and sites running around the clock, each physician, nurse, chef, receptionist, and custodian has a unique perspective to share. Whether on the front lines or behind the scenes, your story can contribute to building connections that help others to understand how we can collectively work toward a healthier planet for healthier people.



Many supervisors, leadership teams, and executive boards depend on stories to move projects forward and to increase funding opportunities, making storytelling an important tool for communicating the facts and experiences that shape your health care organization.



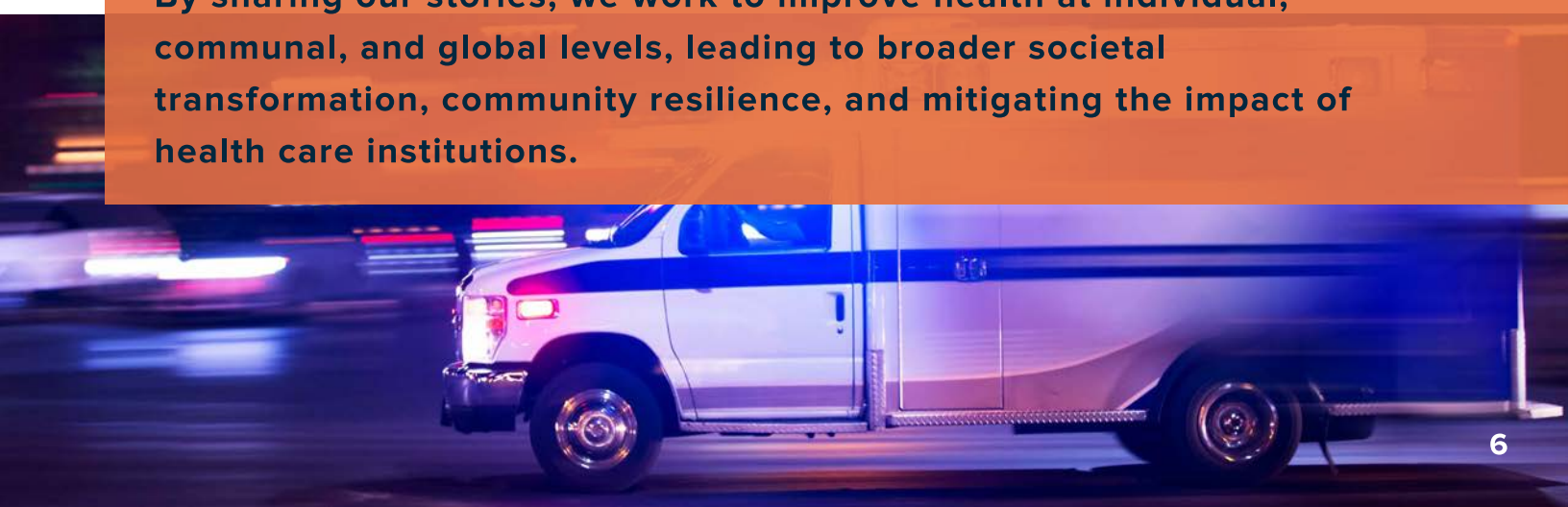
Narratives expand our empathy and shape the way we think about the world. Stories can help us envision how we are contributing to a changing planet and the responsibility we have to improve our stewardship practices.

When we tell our stories, we invite audiences to think about their connections to climate. Stories can open up space for people to consider how to use their voices, perspectives, and positions within their communities to create positive change.

Stories also shape the way we think about people — along with their cultural backgrounds, languages, ethnicities, physical abilities, sexual orientations, geographic locations, social and economic statuses, levels of education, and inherent privileges or lack thereof.

Climate change affects the health of our communities in every place on Earth. These challenges require diverse solutions and immediate actions that cannot be solved by government policy alone.

By sharing our stories, we work to improve health at individual, communal, and global levels, leading to broader societal transformation, community resilience, and mitigating the impact of health care institutions.



A thousand words

The power of visuals in storytelling

Sometimes words fall short.

Sometimes an image can resonate with the viewer in an instant, breaking through barriers like language and areas of expertise or interest.

A photo can do more than just capture a story or a moment. It can make someone feel seen. A video can make someone feel heard. A graphic can transform a complex idea into a captivating statement.

This is particularly important in the field of sustainability and health care where data may feel overwhelming, and academic writing may feel cold to certain audiences.

In addition to equipping you with the tools and inspiration to write your story, this guide includes steps and tips to make your story come alive with photos, videos, and graphics to ensure your voice is heard and remembered.



Check out the TEDx Talk "[Sustainability—Visualized](#)" for real world examples of sustainability data transformed into powerful visuals.

An abstract painting with a textured surface. The top left corner features a large, rounded shape in shades of orange and yellow. The rest of the canvas is dominated by various shades of brown, tan, and muted blue, with visible brushstrokes and some darker, more expressive marks scattered throughout.

HOW

"I only feel angry when I see waste. When I see people throwing away things we could use."

—Mother Teresa



What you say matters. How you say it matters.

How we tell stories can impact how audiences perceive the individuals and communities we talk about, and it's important that we consider the potential impacts of the narratives we choose to tell. As storytellers, we need to think about the narratives we highlight, and whom these stories are serving. Applying this lens to your story and its accompanying visuals ensures you are practicing what is known as "ethical storytelling."

As you develop your story, take a moment to consider the following questions:

- **Whom do you help by telling this story? Whom might you hurt?**
- **What are the power dynamics in your story?**
- **Whose perspective is highlighted?**
- **Are there voices that often get left out of stories which you could include?**
- **Do you have consent from the story subjects to share this story?**
- **How does the story represent your health care organization or community?**



If you're interested in learning more about ethical storytelling, check out [7 principles of ethical storytelling](#) from Our Climate Voices.

Get inspired

1

Whether it is pharmaceutical waste contaminating our waterways, anesthetic gas emissions, or environmental health services workers being exposed to harmful chemicals, it is evident that many facets of our health care systems need to change, and we need changemakers to tell those stories.



As you begin to think about the story you want to tell and how you want to tell it, explore similar stories from the field that grab your attention. What stories in the past have inspired you? What stories do you remember?



Stories to watch:

- [Health voices for climate action](#)
- [Nurses Climate Challenge](#)
- [Do No Harm](#)



Stories to listen to:

- [Nurses for Healthy Environments](#)
- [Harvard Chan: This week in health](#)
- [Global Environmental Health chats](#)



Stories to read:

- [Driving down emissions through fleet strategy](#)
- [For hospitals, 'plant-forward' means big sales and a cooler planet](#)
- [Healing patients and planet with 1 cost-saving anesthesia adjustment](#)
- [Nurse inspires students to address climate change and health equity](#)
- [Operating room nurses repurpose blue wrap for those in need](#)
- [Physician profiles: Taking action to promote climate-smart health care](#)
- [Nurse Climate Champion profiles](#)

2

Connect to the bigger picture

Take a moment to think about how your personal narrative fits within a universal story.

While you begin brainstorming your story, start by drawing connections between your story and similar efforts elsewhere.

For example, if you are taking steps to eliminate plastic waste at your site, how is your work part of a bigger movement to improve how waste is handled worldwide?

If you are advocating for renewable energy in the design and construction process at your hospital, how do these efforts compare to other institutions?

Make space for your audience to reflect on how the success of your story is amplified when other health care professionals take on similar missions to tackle the same universal challenges.




Check out the CleanMed Talk "[Finding your voice in the climate story](#)" for inspiration.



Consider your audience

3



Determine who you are writing for and how you want them to respond.

Learn about your target audience. What are their values? Where do they live? What is their age range? Are you aware of their cultural background? Do they work in the medical field or elsewhere?

Considering the demographics and values of your audience will not only make your story more accessible, but it will also increase the impact of what you share.

How do you want your audience to respond? Are you hoping to inspire people to act? Do you want to increase awareness about a complex issue? Are you hoping for a change in perspective?

Establishing the purpose of your story will help you to frame what information you choose to share as you craft your narrative.



Contact the communications team at your workplace and find out which sharing platforms are best suited to your audience — a newsletter, social media platform, or other internal and external channels. Knowing where and how you want to share your story will help you determine how long or what format it should be and what types of visual elements to explore.

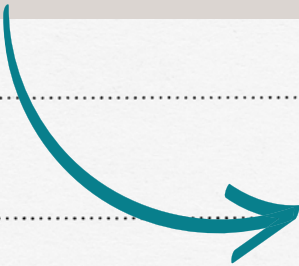
4

Write your story

Start your first draft.

Create a brainstorm map.

Make note of the events in the story that are necessary to get your message across. Identify the key players and short descriptions of them.



Use accessible language.

Although scientific jargon may be familiar to you and your team, using complex terminology may lose some audience members who don't possess the same vocabulary. If using particular jargon is essential to telling your story, simply define the terms you're using within your story so your audience can make sense of the relevant terms.

Appeal to your audience's emotions.

While facts and data can validate your work and can certainly be included in your narrative, expressing the impact you've made by focusing on the people and places involved will help audiences better understand why your work matters.



Give your key players a voice.

By adding dialogue into your story, your audience will better connect with the people involved in your initiative. Just make sure you have permission to quote them.

Recall the response you want to get from your audience, and plan how you want to achieve this.

For example, if you want to call people to action, describe what steps people can take to support your mission.





Calm the brainstorm with narrative structure

While a story can be told in a thousand different ways, all good stories have a few common elements.

1

Setting

Where and when your story takes place. A setting can be specific or more descriptive. A well-established setting can quickly set the mood for the audience.

Example of a descriptive setting: a bustling waiting room on a frigid night

Example of specific setting: 8 p.m. on a Friday in the operating room

2

Characters

This is key in sustainability and health care stories. While statistics like "the operating room cut emissions by 76%" may appeal to certain audiences, a protagonist with a goal and a conflict to overcome command more attention and emotional investment from most audiences.

Example: Dr. Keedra was deeply disturbed when she learned that desflurane, the anesthetic gas being used in her procedures, has a global warming potential 20 times greater than its alternative gases.

3

Plot

The sequence of events that connect the audience to the protagonist and their goal. There should always be a clear goal.

Example: Dr. Keedra planned to talk with her colleagues about switching to anesthetic gases with lower global warming potential.

4

Conflict

This is what makes any story interesting. Consider it the "hook" of the story. Without it, nothing compels the audience.

Example: Dr. Keedra's conversation with her colleagues hits a wall. Some of them feel the climate crisis doesn't have anything to do with them in their line of work.



5

Theme

This is what the story is really about — the underlying meaning, typically based on the storyteller's opinion of the subject matter.

Example: Dr. Keedra knows as trusted leaders, physicians have a unique opportunity to advance health care sustainability and lower the environmental impact of health care to protect the health of their patients.

6

Narrative arc

A good plot doesn't necessarily have to be told in chronological order. But the vast majority of plots have four essential elements regardless of when they appear throughout the story:

Setup: The world in which the protagonist exists prior to the conflict. Ex: Showing Dr. Keedra's life and experience in the operating room before revealing the conflict of the conversation with her colleagues.


Rising tension: The obstacles the protagonist must overcome. Typically each obstacle is more difficult and with higher stakes than the previous. Ex: Dr. Keedra working up the courage to talk to colleagues, then having the conversation, being rejected, then working up the courage again to have a follow-up conversation.

Climax: The highest tension point. The most decisive turning point for the protagonist. Ex: Dr. Keedra has the second conversation with colleagues.

Resolution: The conclusion of the conflict. The protagonist doesn't always necessarily overcome the conflict, but may accept it, learn from it, or sometimes be defeated by it (but that's definitely not you). Either way, it's where the journey ends. Ex: The colleagues are moved by Dr. Keedra's follow-up conversation with them and commit to switching anesthetics.



Continue mastering the art and arc of storytelling with these [free online storytelling classes](#).



Now that you've drafted your story, add visual elements to capture your audience's attention and add impact.

Show them the key players and story settings through photography, give your colleagues a voice through video, and explain difficult concepts with infographics that are central to your work.

"Visual storytelling utilizes both language and art to pass on the essence of who we are."

—Debbie Millman

5

Incorporate photography

Enhance your story with memorable imagery.

1

Ask your communications department if there is access to a professional camera or lighting equipment. If not, don't worry! Pick up your smartphone or tablet.

2

Find a well-lit location in the environment where your story takes place. For example, if your story happened in your hospital's cafeteria, explore possible backgrounds in that area.

3

When you've found a location you like, have the person or team you'd like to capture stand or sit within the frame. Make sure all faces are better lit than the background to avoid shadows.

4

If there are props that help to tell the story, place them in the background, or in the hands of the people in the shot.

5

Take a variety of photos. Having landscape and portrait options, as well as candid and posed, will give you more flexibility to choose from when you're putting your story together.



Photos with people attract more attention than photos of interior or exterior spaces without them.

Capture video

You might find that your story is better suited to a video. If so, practice how you tell your story to draw your audience into the events that shaped it.

1 Take a moment to jot down the main points of the story you want to tell. Memorize your main points, but not the exact words. This will make your story sound natural rather than rehearsed.

2 Consider how you want your audience to feel when they hear your story, and adjust your tone, word emphasis, and facial expressions accordingly.

3 Mark your climax. Build up to the main point in your story and use simple, natural gestures to emphasize the most important moments you want to get across.

4 Practice your story a few times out loud. Make sure you're not speaking too quickly or too slowly, and that you are delivering your words with clarity and crisp enunciation.

5 Invite someone else into the room and have them listen to your story. Ask them how it made them feel and what stood out for them. If they're responding to your story the way you hoped, you're ready to record.

6



If you're preparing for an elevator pitch, consider the same talking tips, but aim to keep your story to 20-30 seconds.



Lights, camera, action



Pick up your smartphone, tablet, camera, or video recorder.



Locate a quiet and nicely lit spot. Ensure your face is better lit than your background. If you don't have access to professional lighting, sit facing a window so the natural light brightens your complexion. Try to avoid having any windows behind you.



Eliminate any background noise. If possible, close any doors to minimize disruptive sounds. Silence any nearby electronic devices.



Prop up your camera using a tripod, and position in landscape mode. If you don't have access to a tripod, you can use a stack of books on top of a desk to steady your camera.



Place yourself in the center of the shot. You can stand or sit, but make sure the camera is focusing on your head and shoulders rather than your full body.



When you're ready, look just beyond the camera and hit record. Tell your story. You can always re-record your video until you feel confident in sharing it.



The [Impact Field Guide & Toolkit](#) is a free online resource designed to help anyone working with film make an even greater impact.

Include icons and infographics

7

Your story might include a complex idea or system that is hard to understand – consider including icons or infographics to visually explain the concept.

Connect with a graphic designer directly or search for an infographic-maker site that suits your needs.



If you choose to create your own infographic, make a list of key aspects of the complex idea you are trying to explain with visuals. Summarize them into a few words. Keep it simple.



Select 3-4 relevant icons that represent your key words.



If you have data, include a graph or chart that is easy to read.



Use icons and infographics in social media posts to spark interest from new audiences.

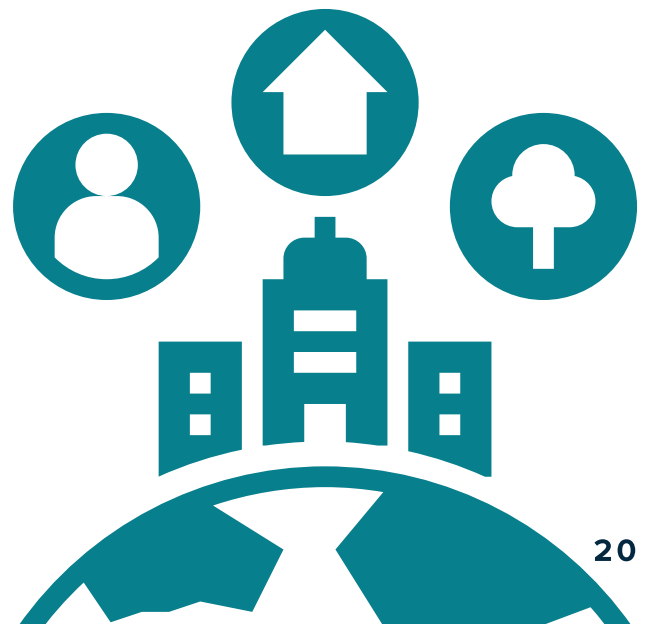
Infographic =
Information + graphics

An infographic gives an easy-to-understand overview of a complex idea or system by using imagery, charts, and minimal text.



Check out these sites:

- [Canva](#)
- [Venngage](#)
- [PiktoChart](#)



8

Share your story

Let's get your story out there.



Adjust the length and visual content of your story to suit multiple channels. For example, if you've written a blog post, consider pulling out one or two engaging and surprising phrases to highlight your story in a social media post as well.



Make sure you have written consent to use any photos, interviews, or video and audio recordings that are featured in your story.



Contact the communications team at your workplace and find out which outlets you can use to publish your story. It might be a good fit for a newsletter, social media platform, or other internal and external channels.



Amplify your story directly through social media platforms, online forums, and other networks where your target audience can be reached.



Health Care Without Harm would love to help you share your story.

To reach a wider network, submit your story to:

stories@hcwh.org

Storytelling examples

Health care professionals and sustainability leaders share how storytelling helps them take climate action.



Stories over data

**Jessica LeClair, University of Wisconsin-Madison
clinical instructor**

Jessica LeClair said when she talks about how the environment impacts health, she shares stories and experiences, not just facts and figures. “I can pull together all the charts and data and information that I want, but it's not nearly as interesting to policy decision-makers as hearing someone's personal experience or story,” she said.

LeClair added that she sometimes uses visuals, like photos, to illustrate the stories she shares with government officials and policymakers. She said photos are an even more powerful tool in this setting if they were taken by the person who is telling the story.



TED Talk-style presentations

**Rachelle Wenger, CommonSpirit Health system vice president
for public policy and advocacy engagement**

Rachelle Wenger gave a TED Talk-style presentation at CleanMed. “I was able to combine my personal story, the things I care about, and what I do as an advocate in making the call to action to others,” she said.

Wenger said it was meaningful to be able to share personal stories with the audience. “I was surprised at the end of it to see people standing and clapping. It was just an overwhelming experience to hear my peers’ comment on what my journey meant to them,” she said.

Read about her presentation at CleanMed [here](#).



Podcast with purpose

**Beth Schenk, Providence executive director
of environmental stewardship**

What if you could inspire someone to get involved in transforming health care while they're commuting to work? Beth Schenk knows how.

Schenk hosts a podcast series for the Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments. "I love podcasts because they're mobile," she said. "You can take them on hikes or on your bike or in the garden or in the car or wherever. And they're more in-depth conversations."

Schenk said listening to nurses share their stories and experiences on the podcast inspires others to take action. "The whole purpose of this podcast is to amplify the work that nurses are doing related to the environment," she said.

Nurses have long been a trusted voice for all communities, and this podcast reaches beyond nurses and health care workers, inspiring others to address climate change. You can access podcast episodes through the Alliance of Nurses for Health Environments [website](#).



Pro tip: When interviewing someone on a podcast, ask them open-ended questions that start with why, how, when, who, where, and what.



Celebrating, educating, amplifying **Shanda Demorest, public health nurse and** **Practice Greenhealth sustainability strategy manager**

The Nurses Climate Challenge highlights nurses who work to mitigate climate change through health care practices and strive to educate others about the environment.

“We’re helping people share their stories and giving them a platform where they feel some pride,” Shanda Demorest said.

Demorest said for each profile, she looks to tell the person’s story through a health care lens – this includes how they became interested in nursing and their first experience with climate work. “Even if the person reading this isn’t a nurse or a part of the health care profession community, it’s interesting to hear those personal stories about what compels someone to become a nurse because of the nature of that work,” she said.

You can read profiles from the Nurses Climate Challenge [here](#).



Adjusting for audience **Sara Wohlford, Carilion Clinic** **efficiency and sustainability manager**

At Carilion Clinic, Sarah Wohlford said she uses elements of storytelling to discuss supply waste production. Wohlford said she works to appeal to frontline staff, unit directors, and the CEO when presenting on topics like waste generation.

“It’s the same project, but it’s five different stories,” she said. “And the way that you have to tell it is identifying what is the hook for that particular group.”

Wohlford said for clinical frontline staff, the hook might be about workflow and efficiency, whereas a presentation for the CEO might focus more on how much money can be saved. “Really what I’m trying to be more mindful of is continuing to remind them of the bigger picture,” she said.



Connecting personal narratives to climate initiatives

**Lisa Del Buono, Citizens' Climate Lobby Michigan
state liaison coordinator**

Lisa Del Buono uses personal stories in her presentations. She tells a story about a friend who has asthma that is “really difficult to control.” Del Buono said her friend lives in an area where the air quality is typically good, but there are a few days in the middle of the summer where the air quality is poor following a festival that brings in a lot of traffic.

“We get a couple bad air quality days and she can't come to work,” Del Buono said. “I utilize that story to show how quickly people can get sick because of air quality. Then, I transition that to how quickly you can see benefits. As soon as the cars went away, as soon as there is a decrease in traffic, ER visits go down. So I should use that to really illustrate it, right?”

Del Buono said her friend’s story clearly demonstrates how moving away from fossil fuel-based transportation would improve air quality and result in almost instant health benefits. “I use it to emphasize the immediateness. I think people appreciate that,” she said.



Pro tip: When using a personal anecdote, focus on the aspects of your story that connect to specific emotions and emphasize why the topic you're discussing matters.

About us



Health Care Without Harm seeks to transform health care worldwide so the sector reduces its environmental footprint and becomes a leader in the global movement for environmental health and justice.



Founded in 2005, the Doc Society is committed to enabling great documentary films and connecting them to audiences globally.



The Skoll Foundation catalyzes transformational social change by investing in, connecting, and championing social entrepreneurs and other social innovators who together advance bold and equitable solutions to the world's most pressing problems.



Across eight decades, the Ford Foundation's mission has been to reduce poverty and injustice, strengthen democratic values, promote international cooperation, and advance human achievement.