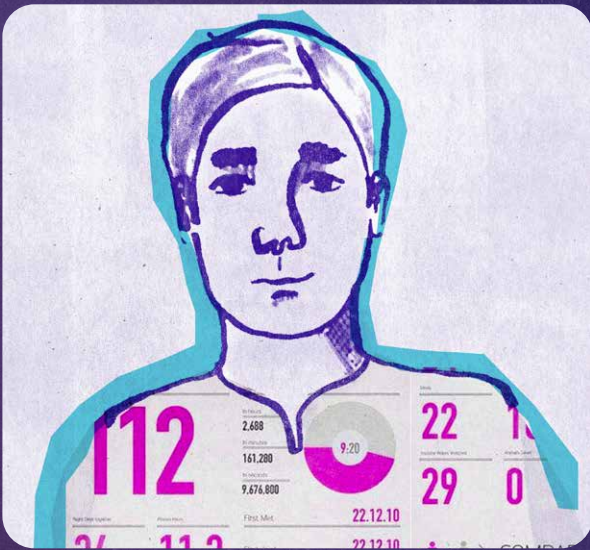


# Make Impact with Your Impact Report

Five elements to consider for impact and annual reports that are read, remembered, and trusted.

**K/P** *Creative Strategy*

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# 1 Data

Data is how you show credibility and progress. But it's not just about showing the numbers. When presented well, with context, comparisons, and clear visualization, data helps readers quickly grasp and trust your impact.

## Contextualize your data

- ❌ **DON'T:** "We sequestered 1,200 metric tons of carbon."
- ✅ **DO:** "The carbon we reduced is equivalent to taking 260 cars off the road for a year."

A single data point is meaningless without context. Break it down so your viewer can understand. Show change over time (compare the data to last year, or since founding). Give a sense of the need (what is the scale of the problem?). For abstract data like carbon, relate it to objects or situations your audience encounters daily.

## Less is more

Pick the strongest data point that connects to your theory of change. Just because you collected it doesn't mean readers need to see it. Put compliance data in an appendix or online.

## Paint a picture with it

Text can paint a picture in people's mind's of something human and memorable. Better yet, visualize when possible. A colorful chart grabs attention and helps skimmers grasp patterns fast.

- ❌ **DON'T:** "2,973 students served."
- ✅ **DO:** "2,973 trail lunches enjoyed by students"

## Stories make data memorable



Research has shown that while statistics have stronger immediate impact on beliefs, stories have stronger impact after a delay. **People are twice as accurate at remembering stories compared to raw statistics.** The impact of statistics on beliefs faded by 73% over one day, while stories faded by only 32%.

Source: Graeber, T., Roth, C., & Zimmermann, F. (2024). "Stories, Statistics, and Memory." *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 139(4), 2181–2225.



## 2 Story

Stories are essential for all audiences because humans understand the world through narrative. If you want people to FEEL your impact, tell specific stories about real people. Even a quote or image can tell a story - this is what makes people care.

### Center their power, not your program

- ❌ **DON'T:** "Our program helped Casey overcome her challenges and succeed."
- ✅ **DO:** "When Black women come together, magical things happen. We just created the space for it."

When organizations position themselves as the hero ("we helped," "we transformed," "we empowered") they erase the the people doing the actual work of change. Your role is to remove barriers and create conditions, not to rescue or fix.

### Think outside the case study

You don't need a full narrative feature to tell a story. A powerful quote, an image caption, or a 30-second audio clip are all formats that can tell a story. Don't let the perfect story-collection process stop you from capturing real voices in whatever format fits your capacity.

- ❌ **DON'T:** Skip storytelling entirely because you don't have time for a full case study.
- ✅ **DO:** Use whatever you have. A single powerful quote, a 30-second audio clip, or an image caption that tells a micro-story.

### Make it human, not grant-speak

- ❌ **DON'T:** "XYZ is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit serving formerly incarcerated individuals through evidence-based job training programming."
- ✅ **DO:** "Three months into the welding program, James landed his first job offer."

If you start a story with an organization as the subject you've already lost the reader. Make people the subject of your sentences, not programs.

### Stories need stakes



Research shows that stories with rising tension and emotional stakes are remembered, while "flat" narratives without dramatic arc fail to generate empathy or any lasting behavioral change.

Frame a story with "What was at stake? What changed? What is now possible?"

Source: [Zak P.J. \(2015\) "Why inspiring stories make us react: the neuroscience of narrative." Cerebrum.](#)



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## Big Picture

Impact reports are read by people who don't live inside your organization. They probably know you, but it may have been a while since they've thought about your particular approach to solving a problem. Big Picture is about making your work clear so readers understand not just what you did, but why it matters and why your approach makes sense.

### Name the problem you exist to solve

Don't assume readers know why your work is necessary. State the problem with enough specificity that the stakes are clear: include scale, local context, or systemic causes when relevant.

- ✗ DON'T:** "We address the affordable housing crisis."
- ✓ DO:** "Conventional lenders won't finance affordable housing below 5% returns. We deploy patient capital that makes these deals work."

### Explain your theory of change

Show the logic connecting your activities to outcomes. You may think they know, but remind them... a lot.

- ✗ DON'T:** "Our mentorship program transforms lives and creates lasting change for at-risk youth."
- ✓ DO:** "We recruit peer mentors from participants' own neighborhoods because shared experience builds trust. This is what makes young people willing to engage and stay in the program."

### Provide context

Readers may not know your city's policy landscape, the history that created this problem, or why certain approaches failed before. When context shapes your strategy, name it briefly.

- ✗ DON'T:** "We focus on preservation as part of our mission."
- ✓ DO:** "Because Chicago's inclusionary zoning only applies to new construction, preservation financing is essential to maintaining existing buildings."

**Impact investors and sophisticated funders need to understand the market failure or systemic barrier you're addressing, not just the outcomes you're achieving.**



## 4 Integration

Reports are more compelling when Story, Data, and Big Picture work together to paint a complete picture. Rather than separating these elements into different sections, integration means weaving them throughout so that each part of your report shows the problem, the evidence, and the human reality together.

### Weave Story, Data, and Big Picture together in each section

Don't save all your data for an "Impact by the Numbers" section, or put context only in the CEO letter. Each program area or project highlight should include the problem/context, what happened, and evidence it's working.

- ❌ **DON'T:** CEO letter with mission context, then programs section listing activities, then "Impact by the Numbers" page with 20 data points.
- ✅ **DO:** Each program section opens with the problem it addresses, shows outcomes data, and includes a story illustrating what those numbers mean for real people.

### Pair data with narrative

Numbers without context make eyes glaze over. Every significant data point should be connected to either a story that illustrates it or narrative that explains what it means.

- ❌ **DON'T:** "867 affordable housing units financed."
- ✅ **DO:** "We financed 867 affordable units this year. Each one represents a family like Maria's, who spent two years on a waitlist before getting keys to her home."

### Make sections self-sufficient

Assume readers will be landing anywhere in your report. Each section should have just enough context that someone encountering it mid-report can orient themselves. Don't assume they read your intro.

- ❌ **DON'T:** "This year we deployed \$2.3M in small business lending across 45 companies."
- ✅ **DO:** "Banks rarely lend to businesses in rural areas they classify as high-risk. Our \$2.3M in small business loans helped 45 companies expand, including the bakery where Keisha now employs 12 people from her neighborhood."

### You have 47 seconds



The amount of time the average person can spend on a screen has decreased to just 47 seconds. In this environment, you need to make your point quickly and make it interesting.

Source: [Holcombe, M., Osipova, N. V., Mankarious, S., Nakajima, K., & Baker, T. \(2026, March 5\). You'll likely move on in 47 seconds. Can I hold your attention a little longer? CNN.](#)



## 5 Presentation

In a well-designed report, someone can get your main message in 2 minutes of skimming, then decide where to dig deeper. Visual design isn't decoration, it's how you guide readers through your impact. Good presentation respects people's time by making key points easy to grasp and the report inviting to explore.

### Create entry points for skimmers

Identify the most important takeaway from each section and make it prominent. Pull quotes, callout stats, descriptive headers, and strong captions should tell your story on their own, without requiring someone to read full paragraphs.

- ✗ **DON'T:** Long paragraphs of body text with generic headers like "Our Work".
- ✓ **DO:** Ask yourself: if someone only reads the headlines, pull quotes, and captions, would they get the point? Make sure those elements carry your key message.

### Use visual hierarchy

Make it immediately clear where readers should look first, second, and third using size, color, placement, or white space. Create distinct levels so nothing competes for equal attention.

- ✗ **DON'T:** Make everything the same visual weight.
- ✓ **DO:** Use dramatic size differences. Create 2-3 distinct visual levels (hero message, secondary points, supporting details).

### Don't forget white space

What space doesn't mean the color white, literally. It means breathing room for your most important content, whether that is space or photography. Dense text walls and cluttered layouts make it hard for people to access.

- ✗ **DON'T:** Walls of text with tiny margins. Generic stock photos with no captions. Cluttered layouts where everything competes for attention.
- ✓ **DO:** Generous white space and strong photography with purposeful captions. Clean layouts where each element has room to breathe.

### Visuals boost memory, not just attention



**Participants who viewed infographics remembered significantly more information than those viewing text alone.** When information is presented both visually and in text, memory is stronger because the brain can access it through either system.

Source: [Whyte, G. \(2020\). "The impact of presentation format on recall of information, attitudes and intention to change behaviour." University of Strathclyde.](#)

# Ready to make your impact report work harder?

Whether you're starting from scratch or refining an existing report, we help nonprofits, foundations, and impact investors create reports that are read, remembered, and trusted.

**LET'S TALK ABOUT YOUR NEXT REPORT**

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