

Asap

Local Food
Strong Farms
Healthy Communities

Storytelling Toolkit

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Why Storytelling Matters



“My parents tell a story about me being two months old, lying in a crib in the corner, while they were handling tobacco. So I guess you could say I’ve been a tobacco farmer most of my life.”

- Pam Zimmerman



Good stories evoke an emotional response, create imagery, and build

connections with their audiences. A couple of sentences can create a sense of place, capture a region's heritage, and draw the listener in to hear more. Authentic stories and opportunities to engage with them are what differentiate local food and farms.

Pam Zimmerman and her family operate a U-pick berry farm in Madison County, but their farm story goes much deeper than offering raspberry picking with beautiful mountain views. Like many farms in Madison County their story starts with tobacco, a crop that offered stability for family farms and brought community together until the late 90's. It was a combination of factors that lead to the loss of tobacco as a profitable crop—the ending of government price subsidies, increased need for chemicals to combat disease and the lack of field labor available. Looking for new options for their farm the Zimmermans took a risk in shifting their farm to U-pick. Would customers drive the long winding roads to find their farm? It is their leap of faith into a new farm enterprise, seeking to sustain a new generation on the farm, that captures the risks and challenges farmers face. It is their commitment to sustaining their family farm that offers new ways to build community.

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Connect with Customers

Stories influence how we decide. Our decisions and actions are often based more on emotional reactions than rational thought. Stories are an opportunity to connect with consumers through emotion and/or humor, establishing your farm in their memories while building a sense of connection and inspiring ongoing commitment. When customers connect with you through stories, they become invested in your success.

Sharing the stories of your farm is a way to engage new or potential customers, but it's also a way to build and maintain connections with your existing ones. **Businesses generally make 80 percent of their sales to 20 percent of their customers.** That 20 percent are the people you have successfully engaged in your story.

Share your Value

Storytelling also gives you the chance to **distinguish your farm business** from the food choices typically available to customers and make connections with their core values. Whether you highlight your choice of growing practices, family legacy on the farm, or reasons for farming in the first place, sharing your story is a way to communicate the values your customers support. These values differentiate your products and build customer commitment.

Research shows that many customers care deeply about supporting local and sustainable agriculture. For example, **56 percent of respondents** to a 2016 survey by *The Packer*, a produce trade magazine, said they felt strongly about keeping their food dollars within their own communities. ASAP's own research finds that three-quarters of buyers are willing to pay more for local food. According to the Hartman Group, a marketing think tank, **food has become a cultural product**, and local food is a way for consumers to connect with their regional culture.

Progressive Grocer, an industry trade publication, found that modern customers look for product attributes important to their lifestyles and beliefs—elements such as produce origins, freshness, and health qualities. Understanding the values that drive customers to seek out your products is critical to both finding new customers and building loyal ones. **But to capture this value, you have to sell your story alongside your products.**

Change the Food System

By sharing the story of your own farm business, you contribute to **changing the larger narrative about what the food system should look like.** The values you care about, such as land stewardship, food safety and nutrition, and opportunities for future generations, come through when you talk about your work. When consumers connect with these stories, they start caring about those values as well, increasing demand for local, sustainable food as the “new normal”—and that rising tide benefits everyone.



Aimee Ellingsen, co-owner of CAKE Websites and More, didn't remember the name of the farm from which she'd just bought a basket of fresh vegetables. She wasn't quite sure if she even correctly recalled the names of the friendly farmers behind the market stand. But she knew she wanted to be a repeat customer and learn more about their farm, all because of a short conversation.

"The first time I bought veggies from Julie and Carl Mansfield of Mountain Harvest Organics, they told me they supported their 'farming habit' by doing computer programming in the offseason," says Aimee. "I thought, 'Wow, these people really love farming if they choose to sacrifice all the money they could make programming to grow beautiful veggies.' Ten years later, I am still a regular customer of theirs."

Many customers don't know that farmers often work off-farm jobs to make their financial numbers work. While the romantic ideal of leaving an office job to operate a farm is enticing, there's often a lot more to a farmer's life. Being part of the tech world herself, Aimee formed an immediate connection with Julie and Carl's story. Their narrative made Mountain Harvest Organics stand out from other businesses in Aimee's mind, and it gave her an emotional reason to learn more about their farm and continue supporting the farmers at market.

As Aimee's experience shows, customers are drawn to compelling, relatable stories that spark their interest.

Hero



"The reason that we grow the way we do is so I can open my front door and my kids can go out and eat anything they want. Small farmers live where they're growing, and we're going to be here. We want to pass this land onto our kids."

- Anna Littman, Ivy Creek Farm



"I can get up on these hills and sit down and wonder what my grandfathers and mothers and great-grandfathers and mothers and great-greats on back were seeing when they were working on this farm. You can't beat the lifestyle, and you can't beat the heritage, and you can't beat the training."

- Doug Harrill, Harrill Hill Farm



"We've been able to pass down education and wisdom generation to generation. It instills a great work ethic in the kids," she said. "Children get to see what their parents do. Young farmers will struggle financially, and the kids get see that. It helps them value the importance of money right now,"

- Tony Nesbitt, Cane Creek Valley Farm

Crafting your Farm Story

What makes a good story? How can you tell your story in an authentic and engaging way? The following section walks you through **the process of developing a strong narrative**. You'll identify the basic elements of your story, see examples of how to put those elements together, and learn some best practices for sharing your results.

The Building Blocks of Stories

Your farm story is made from the same elements as the stories you see every day in magazine articles, books, and movies. Like those narratives, yours has **characters, a setting in space and time, and a plot arc from beginning to end**. ASAP's storytelling template on page 8 can help you recognize these foundational elements in the history of your business. Consider following along with that document as you read through the next section. The story of Hickory Nut Gap Farm will be used as an example to illustrate each of the parts on the template.

The Hero

Every story has a protagonist—the explorer who crosses oceans, the dog who finds the way home, the doctor who finds the cure. This **central character is focus of the story's action** and moves the plot along. In a farm story, this hero is often you as the farmer, but you can also take a wider focus. If you run a tight-knit family operation, you might want to present your entire family as heroes, or you may personify your farm itself if the land has a particularly interesting history. In any case, the reader wants to know **who you are** and what your connection is with your farm.

In the case of Hickory Nut Gap Farm, the heroes are Jamie and Amy Ager. Jamie is a fourth-generation farmer at Hickory Nut Gap, while Amy comes from a farming background in Kentucky. The two met during their studies at Warren Wilson College, got married, and decided to work together to revitalize Jamie's family farm.



JAMIE + AMY AGER

It all began in chemistry class with Jamie who claimed needing help with his homework, uh hem, and Amy, the detail oriented student who understood the expectations of the professor. A study group thus formed and so did the relationship between the two owners of Hickory Nut Gap Farm and Hickory Nut Gap Meats, 15 years ago at Warren Wilson College in Swannanoa, NC.

Read more at hickorynutgapfarm.com/our_story/jamie_amy_ager/

The Vision

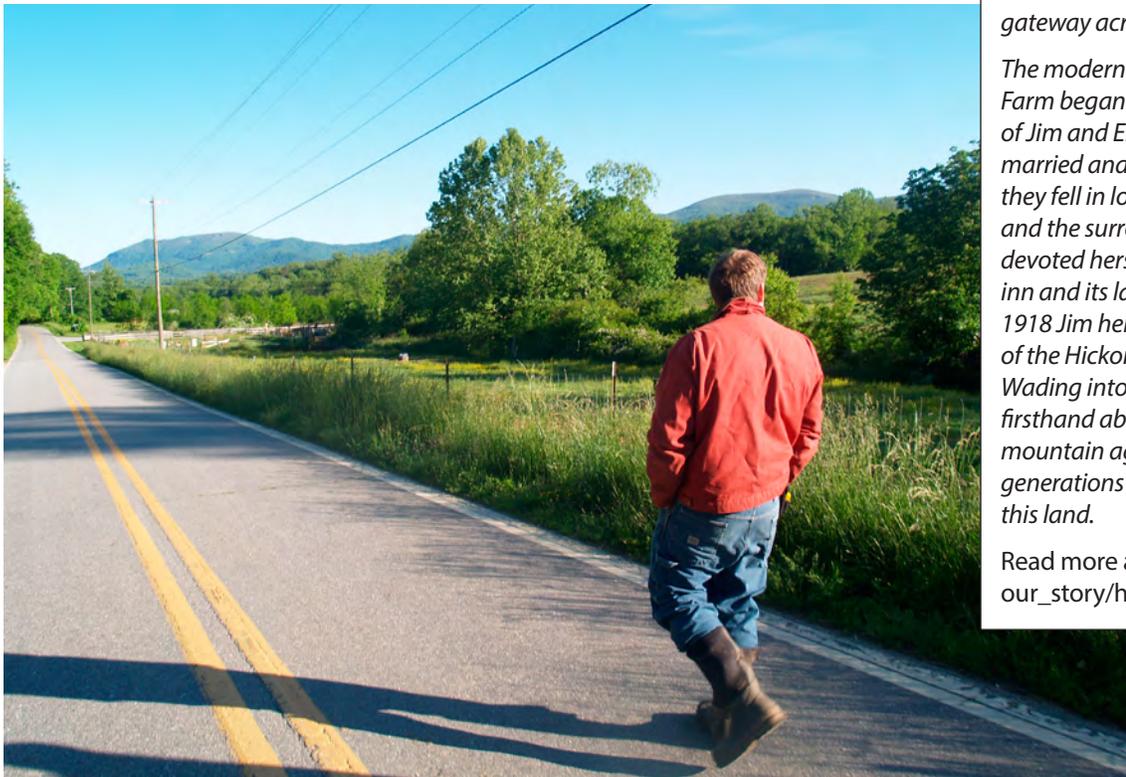
The hero of a story is driven by his or her goal, whether that be discovering a new continent, finding the way home, or curing a disease. **In a farm story, this goal often involves your personal values.** For example, you may be farming to preserve your family farm, build a sustainable business, do something more personally meaningful than your first career, or create a lifestyle for your children.

Hickory Nut Gap's vision stemmed from the grassfed beef production system Jamie and Amy Ager learned as students at Warren Wilson College. Jamie was particularly inspired by Joel Salatin and his innovative approach to raising ecologically sustainable, high-quality meat products. The two wanted to produce better beef in a way that was better for the environment.

The Barrier

Opposing the main character in every story is a barrier, something that stands between the hero and his or her goal. In fiction, that barrier is often a villain—think Darth Vader in Star Wars or Maleficent in Sleeping Beauty. **But in a farm story, the barrier is more often a situation than a person.** Any farming challenge can be a barrier, including land access, lack of markets, severe weather events, or loss of crops or animals. Obstacles can also be personal, such as illness or injury, the loss of a family member, the need to balance farming with parenthood, or the challenge of learning a new skill.

With Jamie and Amy Ager, one of the biggest barriers was the lack of a market for Hickory Nut Gap's premium grassfed beef. They knew that they wanted to sell a quality, responsible product, but when they began running the farm in 2000, large-scale demand for their products didn't exist in Western North Carolina.



HISTORY OF HICKORY NUT GAP FARM

Hickory Nut Gap—where the highway crosses the Buncombe and Henderson County line, and the rain settles on the Continental Divide, tracking east towards the Atlantic or west to the Gulf—has always been an important gateway across the Blue Ridge.

The modern history of Hickory Nut Gap Farm began in 1916, with the arrival of Jim and Elizabeth McClure. Newly married and still on their honeymoon, they fell in love with the old Sherrill's Inn and the surrounding farm. Elizabeth devoted herself to restoring the old inn and its landscaping. On April 30th, 1918 Jim held the first official meeting of the Hickory Nut Gap Farm Company. Wading into farm work, Jim learned firsthand about the many difficulties of mountain agriculture. We are now five generations of McClure descendants on this land.

Read more at hickorynutgapfarm.com/our_story/history/

Vision



"What's incredible about being able to save even a few varieties a year is that you're really tapping into this global pulse among farmers of heritage, of seed preservation. Genetic preservation happens all over the world and is woven into the fabric of rural farming communities."

- Holly Whitesides, Against the Grain Farm



At Flourish Flower Farm in Candler, Niki Irving bends down to harvest more flowers. As she fills her bucket, she talks about what she wants the bouquets mean to the people who receive them. "I think it feeds people in a different way," Niki says. "Obviously, everyone has to eat, but flowers just kind of feed your soul."



Stephanie Boxberger of Stoney Hollow Farm in Graham County, North Carolina, welcomes the public to her farm six days a week. It's a u-pick farm where visitors can pick their own berries, peaches, plums, and vegetables like snow peas. "We just enjoy showing people how and where things are growing," Stephanie says. "We love to see families come out and spend time together doing an activity that everyone can enjoy."

The Resolution

Over the course of the story, **the hero acts to remove or overcome the barrier that blocks his or her vision.** An aspiring chef, for example, might train for years at top restaurants; a scientist could conduct research on a disease; and an explorer could climb a mountain. As a farmer, your resolution could include banding together with family, raising funds for land, waking up before the dawn to care for livestock, or partnering with chefs to create consistent demand for your products.

Jamie and Amy Ager spent the early years of Hickory Nut Gap putting in long hours at farmers markets, educating customers and chefs to raise awareness about their production methods. They also engaged Jamie's family in the discussion about placing the farm under a conservation easement, which supported their vision for the land while also allowing them to plan their business for the long term.



The Moral

Why does this story matter? Good narratives **give the audience something to take away into everyday life;** think "slow and steady wins the race" from the fable of the tortoise and the hare. The moral of a farm story might be the value of community support, preserving agricultural heritage and farmland, or supporting sustainable growing practices. This conclusion tells the audience again that your values are important and worthwhile.

For Hickory Nut Gap, the moral is that hard work and persistence do pay off. By building relationships with customers and other buyers, Jamie and Amy Ager created a market for their products. They were able to greatly expand their operation and become one of the region's leading suppliers of grassfed beef, all while staying true to their ideals of environmental and animal welfare.

Putting it All Together

There are often many smaller stories that make up your overarching farm story. Take some time to experiment with different angles or perspectives, knowing that your story is ever-changing and doesn't have to be the same for every audience. Once you've established the basics of your farm story, you need to **combine those elements into a cohesive whole.** Each story is unique, and writing your narrative requires a personal touch. However, a few common guidelines can make your writing more powerful and engaging for your audience.

Keep people at the focus

Even if you choose to make your farm the hero of your story, make sure you tell the tale through the people who have lived and worked on the land.

Humans are inherently social, and it's easier to empathize and connect with another person than with animals or objects. Provide physical description where appropriate so your audience can better imagine the action, and include names for as many characters as you can.

Make the goals clear

Characters don't take on life until they've expressed their desires—their reasons for being in the story. Introduce those goals, such as owning your own land or getting your product on market shelves, as soon as you can so your audience can begin connecting with the plot.

Establish the setting

Offer your audience connection and context by giving details about when and where your story takes place. This is especially important for local farm stories: **the setting is literally your audience's backyard**, so they are more likely to understand and relate with the narrative. The setting can also include a point in time, perhaps beginning with your great-grandparents or the widespread selloff of family farms in the 1980s.

Use your own voice

This is your farm story—own it! **Write in the type of language you normally speak in**, and consider including direct quotes from key characters (including yourself). Your audience will appreciate authenticity more than flowery language.

Offer a visual

Give concrete examples wherever possible to illustrate your story. To relate how excited your customers were for your return to a farmers market, for example, **don't just say they were excited**—tell your audience about the wide smiles, the lengthy line, and the "Sold Out" sign you had to put up before the end of the day.

Prepare different versions

You may not always have time or space to tell your full farm story. Be mindful of those limitations and **have shorter versions of your narrative at the ready**. By focusing on the key points, you can make the most out of a thirty-second discussion at the farmers market, a social media post, or a character-limited profile in the *Local Food Guide*. You can also offer short stories that illustrate particular values, describing how you warmed a weak baby calf by your woodstove, for example, would show your commitment to healthy, humanely raised animals.



After hearing about the long reentry intervals (how long until it is safe to reenter an orchard after spraying) for some agricultural chemicals, Gary McCurry of Fox Gap Farm decided to explore certified organic practices for his apples. "I want my grandchildren to be able to play in these orchards," Gary says.



About 15 years ago, Dawn and Bobby Creasman stopped selling apples to processors and started selling directly to consumers. They planted about a dozen new apple varieties, not knowing which ones would be popular with the public. It can take three to five years for apple trees to mature before their first harvest, so choosing the wrong variety one spring can mean years of headaches.



Sara Jane and Jamie Davis of A Way of Life Farm lost their entire tomato crop after they applied organic that had been contaminated with herbicides. "With a small farm like ours, there's not just another empty field to till up somewhere and plant," says Sara Jane. Fortunately, Jamie and I are both known to be stubborn. We're certainly not going anywhere, and our farm will make it through this."

Write your farm story

- A good story is not a random series of events
- Make it clear—no “extra” information in your basic story
- A good farm story has a plot—hero, challenge/obstacle, action, purpose, resolution, meaning

Who is the Hero of your story (you, your family, your farm)?

What did you have to do/overcome to be able to farm/own land/support yourself/make this decision?

Why do you want to do this? What happened to make you want to do this thing?

How did you overcome your barrier? How did your vision emerge?

What difference are you making? Why does what you do matter? What makes you different?

Now pull it all together!

Sharing Your Farm Story

Once you have crafted and developed your farm story, there are a number of ways to tell it. From short blurbs on social media to lengthy articles in the press, each medium requires a different approach. The section below discusses a few common avenues for communication and ways to think about incorporating your story into them.

Print Materials

Printing your own materials, such as flyers, **brochures and rack cards**, can be a good way to spread your farm's story in places where you wouldn't otherwise have a presence. These pieces can go on community bulletin boards or brochure displays to be a persistent reminder of you and your farm.

Due to the limited space of these materials, you need to **compress your story to its key elements** for your readers. Focus on your vision, the values that distinguish your farm from others, and give a bit of detail about your history to establish your credibility. **Bullet points** are often useful for quickly getting that information across to busy readers. Your goal is not to share your entire story, but instead to spark interest that will lead people to seek out more details.

Earned Media

"Earned media" refers to the **stories, articles, and interviews** about your business that appear as content in news sources. These mentions are extremely valuable—they carry the authority of a trusted media source and give you the chance to tell your story in more detail. News organizations are always looking for compelling stories, so a strong narrative is a great first step for gaining media coverage.

Press Kit

The media is a deadline-driven industry, so once a reporter contacts you, you should respond as quickly as possible. A press kit is a **prepared collection of resources about your farm** that you can send reporters to give them useful background information. The easier you can make their job, the more likely they will include you in their piece and call on you in the future as a source.

Press kits often include a fact sheet about your business, a short biography of the lead farmer, a collection of previous media mentions, and low-resolution images. A fact sheet is usually a simple list of key information such as contact details, farm size, and products offered. The biography, however, is a great place to **describe the central character of your story**. In roughly one page, provide background on who you are, why you farm, and what obstacles you've overcome. You'll generate the human interest on which many journalists thrive.

The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition provides [excellent templates and advice](#) for assembling a press kit. Check out their website for guidance on fact sheets, biographies, and much more.



Press Releases

You should announce important news about your farm by sending a press release to contacts throughout the media. New partnerships with restaurants, novel product offerings, farm tour dates, community projects—**anything about your farm that's relevant to the outside world** is fair game. ASAP's [press release template](#) provides an example of what a release should look like.

In general, press releases should be short (no longer than one page). Address the most important aspects of your news—the **who, what, when, where, why, and how**—in the first paragraph. Follow up with a bit of additional context and a quote from someone with a role in the news, then conclude with a brief summary of your farm.

That concluding paragraph is the best place to share your larger farm story. Again, due to the limited space, you'll need to include just the key elements of your story, particularly your vision and values. If possible, **consider using numbers to quantify your farm's impact**: statistics such as sales numbers, weight of produce, or restaurants served can help the media understand the relevance of your business.

Making News

You don't need to wait for something big to happen to your farm—make the news yourself! **Developing unique events** gives the media a compelling reason to cover your business. Consider hosting an open house or field day (such as ASAP's Farm Tour), running a contest to name new livestock or capture farm photos, or host a concert or art event (such as [Barnaroo on Franny's Farm](#) in Leicester).

You can also provide expert commentary on food and farming issues. Newspapers in particular will often publish **letters to the editor and op-ed pieces** from community members, especially on hot topics such as organic farming and land use. These pieces give you the chance to state your farm's values and tie your story in with current trends. An op-ed about market access, for example, could connect a barrier in your personal story with others in the area.



For Immediate Release

Lookin Glass Creamery

Media Contact: Jennifer Perkins

Phone/Email:

Web: www.ashevillecheese.com

Social Media Handle: @ashevillecheese

Photo's available by request.

Date: May 1, 2017

Looking Glass Creamery, owned by Jennifer & Andy Perkins, is expanding production and building a new facility with underground cheese aging caves in the agricultural heart of Polk County, NC. Their existing facility located in Fairview, NC will also be renovated to offer more retail and food service options and improved parking. The new cheesemaking operation will add to the burgeoning agricultural economy in Polk County and fit well alongside the numerous vineyards, five wineries, diversified vegetable operations, and livestock farms already thriving in the area. The new facility will be located on the historic Harmon Dairy, a second generation cow dairy run by brothers, Doug and Alan Harmon.

... Dawn Jordan, Director of the Polk County Office of Agricultural Economic Development, believes that the new cheesemaking facility is a perfect complement to the growing number of agritourism offerings in Polk. "The expansion of Looking Glass Creamery and the preservation of Harmon Dairy is exactly the type of agricultural operation we are looking to support in Polk County. Preserving our verdant farmland through value added processes, while supporting small family operations, represents the character and place making set forth by Polk County in its 20/20 Vision Plan adopted in 2010."

... Dairy is a 226 acre farm originally purchased in three parcels by Doug & Alan's brothers placed the farm, as a whole, under an agricultural... it could never be subdivided and would... were committed

Social Media

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat—“social media” is the collective term for these websites and applications. Unlike traditional media, where a single author or organization talks to a passive audience, social media serves as a place for **public conversations between many users**. ASAP’s [Social Media Guide](#) provides a comprehensive overview of how farm businesses can best take advantage of these platforms.

The most important thing to remember about social media is that **your farm shares the same space as your customers’ friends**. Whatever you do must compete with the daily activities and interests of those personal networks. Instead of simply promoting your business, your goal on social media should be to **build a community and participate in conversations**.

What to Post

Remember why people want to connect with your farm. Your customers are looking for authenticity, transparency, and the stories behind where their food comes from. Because social media should be updated frequently, it’s an excellent place to **share unfolding stories**, such as your season-long efforts to grow a new crop or raise new buildings. You don’t need to give all of the information at once—spread it out over time to keep your audience engaged and give them a chance to comment on the news.

Keep it Visual

Social media posts with pictures generally create far more interest than those without. That makes social media a particularly good avenue for **stories grounded in concrete details**—think raising baby livestock, harvesting baskets of new produce, or putting up hoop houses for seasonal extension. ASAP’s [Photography Guide](#) provides basic advice on getting good images from your farm, but consider investing in professional help if you lack the time or vision to do so yourself.

Conclusion

Know that practice makes perfect when it comes to sharing your farm story. Over time, you’ll develop a version that’s true to you and your farm. Try sharing your story with customers at your tailgate market booth or on a farm tour, tell it to your friends, or run it by ASAP. The more you share your story, the more it will evolve into something that feels right for you and resonates with your community.

A good story draws people into your world. It’s your chance to spread the passion that brought you to farming, recognize the obstacles you’ve faced, and celebrate the successes you’ve made along the way. When customers truly connect with your story, they’ll want to hear it continue into the future. You can create strong emotional commitments to the success of your farm business and the entire local food movement.





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CAKE websites and More

Daniel Walton
ASAP Fellow

And the farmers who shared
their stories

Find Additional Resources at

asapconnections.org

[Press Kit Template](#)

[Press Release Template](#)

[Social Media Guide](#)

[Marketing Your Farm](#)

[Photography Tips for the Farm](#)

ASAP's mission is to help local farms thrive, link farmers to markets and supporters, and build healthy communities through connections to local food.

Our vision is one of strong farms, thriving local food economies, and healthy communities where farming is valued as central to our heritage and our future.