

CHICAGO CULTURAL ALLIANCE

# MEETING THE MOMENT



# CRAFTING A COMMON NARRATIVE

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**NONPROFIT  
SANITY**

# AGENDA

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01 What is a Common Narrative?

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02 Why this matters

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03 How do I use it?

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04 The ingredients of a Common Narrative

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# WHAT IS A COMMON NARRATIVE?

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**A “common narrative” is the story of your organization and the work you do, along with other information frequently requested in grant applications.**

## Goals:

- Draft a narrative that keeps your org’s story consistent, wherever you need it.
- Save time in writing when submitting applications, drafting donor appeals, updating a website, and more.
- Keep favorite language and frequently requested information easily accessible.
- Help delegate tasks when submitting multiple grants at the same time.



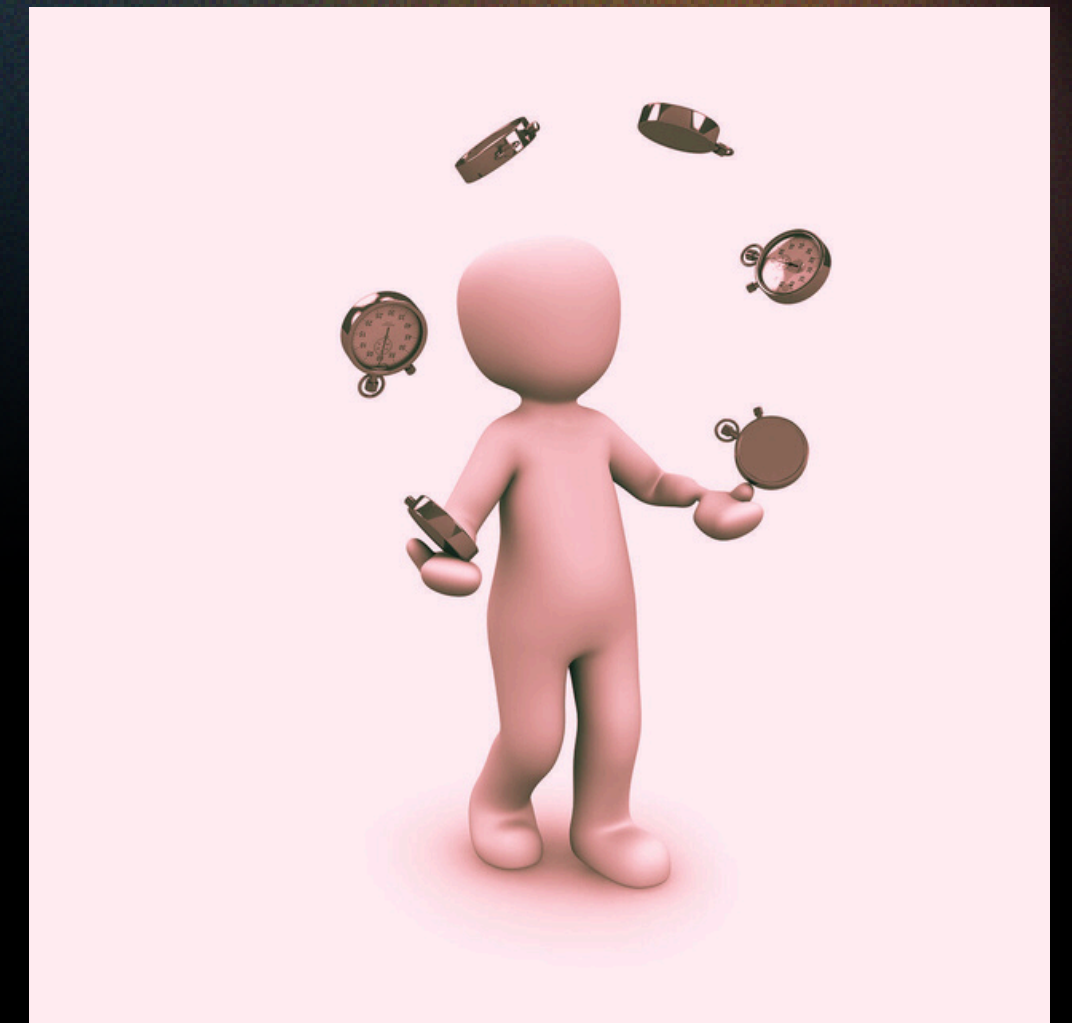
# WHY THIS MATTERS

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## **Share your story consistently & efficiently.**

- Create a narrative that can be used anywhere you need it.
- Share it with your board so they speak the same language.
- Save time: funders require a wide range of information. Keep it easy to find.
- Avoid searching through old applications for that paragraph you really loved.



# HOW DO I USE IT?

**It's a road map and a work in progress.**

- Keep frequently requested information together (org history, budget, links to key documents, etc).
- Time is limited. Use a common narrative to delegate work to others.
- Avoid funding gaps by looking at all of your programs together when submitting applications.



# HOW DO I USE IT?

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**Use what you need to finalize an application based on each funder's guidelines.**



- Don't copy and paste. Always read the funder guidelines.
- Tailor the language for each funder, if needed.
- If you don't understand a question, don't hesitate to contact the funder.
- Add to the Common Narrative if your funders start asking new questions.

# THE INGREDIENTS OF A COMMON NARRATIVE


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- Key organization details
  - Tax ID, UEI, congressional district, websites, etc.
  - Leadership & Staff
- Narratives
  - Mission, org overview, program descriptions
- Financial information
  - Budgets, tax returns, etc.
- Impact, Feedback.
  - Quotes, informal or formal, surveys, etc.
- Links to key documents, work samples, media



# SAMPLE TEMPLATE

## Dandelion Arts Festival (SAMPLE)



Overview, Mission, Background | Programs | Financial Info | Impact, Community Engagement, and Measurements

### Overview, Mission, Background

**How to Use this Narrative**

This "Common Narrative" is a tool to organize your story consistently, wherever you might need it: grant applications, websites, donor appeals, and more. Every time you need to share your story, from grant application to donor letter, it should be tailored for that specific audience. Still, an actively maintained Common Narrative ensures that you share your strongest story consistently. It also provides an easy spot to keep commonly requested information, from an EIN or a congressional district to a favorite media link or description of a popular program.

**Mission Statement**

What is the board-approved mission statement?

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Website	EIN / Tax ID
-	xx-xxxxxxx

**Org Background**

- Why does the organization exist? What purpose does it serve? When / where / who started the organization? What is the overarching goal of the organization?

**BOARD**

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**Key Staff**

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### Programs

**Programs - Overview**

- What is a high-level view of the organization's programs as a whole? Usually 1-3 paragraphs that give a snapshot of the programs and how they work together or complement each other.

**Program A - Title**

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**Program A**

- What is the purpose of this program? What is the goal (the vision and hope)? What do you do (the basics)? Who does this program serve? Be sure to answer how this work and goal connects to your mission.

**Program B - Title**

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**Program B**

**Program C - Title**

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**Program C**

### Financial Info

FYE (MM/DD)	Est Annual Budget (Org)
-	-

**Financial Narrative / Notes**

- This is a place to briefly describe any unusual or unexpected circumstances. Sometimes, 1-3 sentences on overall fundraising may be useful.

### Impact, Community Engagement, and Measurements

**The Need Addressed**

What is the need or problem that our work solves?

- Write something beyond general statements. What specific needs does the community face that you address?

**Community Engagement**

How do we engage the community in leadership, staff, programs, and planning?

- How is the community **engaged** as board / staff / volunteers? in planning programs and events? in identifying solutions to community needs? in hiring contractors to conduct programs?

**The Population Served**

Who benefits from our work, both directly and indirectly?



# SAMPLE TEMPLATE

- **Who?** What region? What demographic(s)? Describe more than statistics. Use human-centered stories (this may overlap with feedback quotes from the community).

Est. # Served Directly (Total)

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#### Our Impact

What impact do we make, both generally and specifically?

- **Informal & formal impact** - it doesn't have to be a scientific survey. Impact can be quality of life to a community, as well as impact on a specific person. This is more than the measurements: it's the results of your work.

#### Measurements

Identify how impact is measured, whether qualitatively or quantitatively. (You can also include this in the previous section on Impact)

- **Quantitative & qualitative.** How do you measure the quality of programs? This can be subjective feedback from participants. What quantities does you measure? This can be attendance, number of exhibits, number of artisans hired, number of cultural artifacts preserved and shared with the public, number of researchers using your archives, etc.

#### Favorite Quotes & Descriptions

What are some of our favorite things folks have said about our work?

- Sometimes the best quotes come from moments when you ask for informal, impromptu feedback at an event.

#### Work Samples & Media Coverage

Keep a current work sample and selected media coverage on the organization's work.

##### Selected Media Coverage

Link a few key articles or other media coverage here. Generally keep to coverage within the last 5 years.

##### Work Samples

Funders like the NEA will ask for a file of work samples. This can be a simple one pager or something more lengthy. Keep a copy for easy access.

No attachments

#### Alternative Disciplines, Research, and Strategy

These sections may be relevant to some funders and not others. Use as needed.

#### Narratives for Other Disciplines (Humanities, etc)

Draft narratives for other secondary disciplines relevant to the work, like humanities, community development, etc.

#### Relevant Research & Data

Include any data or other research that is relevant to the population served, need, or anything else.

#### Organization Needs

What does the organization need?

#### Strategy

What is the organization's current strategy, whether a formal strategic plan or informal approach to its work?

#### Miscellaneous Items

Keep other information needed for grant applications easily accessible.

Social Media Links

UEI / SAM

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Congressional District

Other Key Numbers, Notes, and Info

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Misc Notes and Drafts

Organization Logo

No attachments



# KEY HIGHLIGHTS – NARRATIVES

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- Mission statement.
  - Provide the mission as approved by the board.
  - Keep any explanation with the Org narrative.
- Organization narrative.
  - Give an overview and why you exist.
  - Detailed history can be helpful, but isn't always required. Consider keeping that separate.
- Program narrative.
  - Provide an overall birds' eye view.
  - Each program should have its own description.



# KEY HIGHLIGHTS – FINANCIAL

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- Budgets
  - Current & previous FYE org budget (this is not the 990)
  - Relevant program budget
- Financial documents
  - Most recent 990 (consider saving on your website)
  - Statement of Activities (aka “Profit & Loss Statement”)
  - Balance Sheet
- Other
  - Tax ID, UEI, SAM
  - Keep your Illinois registrations up to date



# KEY HIGHLIGHTS – MISC

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- Work Samples
  - Usually no more than 5 or 10 pages; keep it simple
  - What highlights help show your organization's story?
  - What are you particularly proud of?
  - Update this annually
- Measurements & Impact
  - It doesn't have to be a detailed survey
  - Even informal feedback can be useful to show impact



# TIPS

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- HUMANIZE THE STORY
  - Avoid sounding too detached from the work.
  - What personal stories help describe programs?
  - Quote specific feedback, don't just summarize.
  - Connect it to the audiences behind your work, not just statistics and numbers.
- What would not happen if your work stopped?
- Update at least once/year - add / remove what you need



# CONTACT

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