



HOW STORYTELLING HELPS SCIENCE TRAVEL FURTHER

A practical guide for African scientists and innovators

Lessons from Speak Up Africa: African Voices of Science • African Women in Digital Health •
Young Innovators Award

**Evidence becomes influence when people can see themselves
in the story.**

Yaye Sophiétou Diop | Speak Up Africa



WHY IT MATTERS

Good science can still fail to travel

The gap is often not evidence — it is understanding, relevance, trust and a clear path to action.

01



COMPLEXITY

Technical language can make strong evidence feel distant.

02



RELEVANCE

People ask: “What does this mean for me or my priorities?”

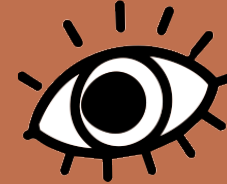
03



TRUST

Facts are filtered through history, identity and who delivers the message.

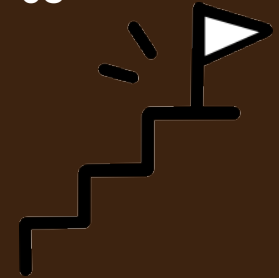
04



ATTENTION

Your evidence competes with simpler, faster and more emotional narratives.

05



ACTION

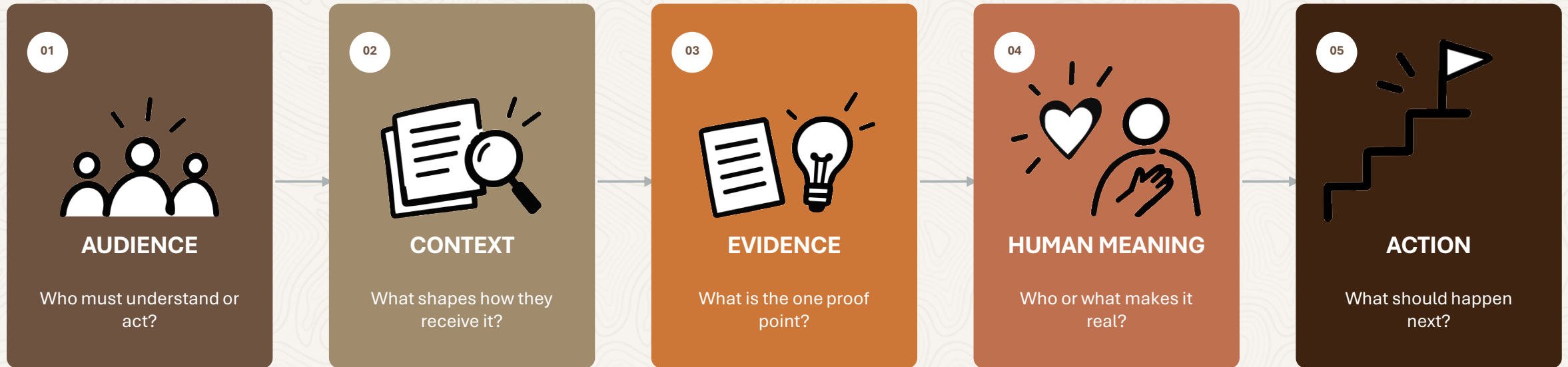
Without a clear ask, audiences may understand — but still do nothing.

Storytelling does not replace evidence. It helps evidence become understood, trusted, remembered — and acted on.

THE CORE IDEA

Science travels when five things come together

Think of storytelling as a pathway to impact — not as the decoration added after the research is finished.



A useful shorthand:

Empathy + Relevance + Evidence + Action

The story is audience-centred, but the evidence stays rigorous.

Adapted from the African Leaders Training in Francophone West Africa (Joy Inc.): audience-centric storytelling and localized communication.

BEFORE YOU SPEAK

Five questions every scientist should answer

A story becomes much easier to build once you stop starting with “What do I want to say?”

1

WHO?

Exactly who needs to hear this?

Policymaker, funder, journalist, community, peer scientist...

2

WHY THEM?

What do they care about?

Budget, feasibility, public value, equity, risk, urgency, human impact...

3

ONE IDEA

What must they remember?

If they retain only one sentence, what should it be?

4

MAKE IT REAL

What human or local evidence illustrates it?

One person, one place, one decision, one consequence.

5

THE ASK

What should happen next?

Fund, test, adopt, partner, change a policy, share, investigate...

Practical rule: do not start with your methodology. Start with the audience and the decision you want to influence.

ONE EVIDENCE BASE, DIFFERENT STORIES

Tailor the message to the audience - not the facts

Different audiences process the same evidence differently. The framing changes; the integrity of the science does not.

POLICYMAKERS



They need

Policy relevance • scale • feasibility • urgency

Frame it as

“Here is the evidence, the implication for your priority, and the decision needed.”

FUNDERS / PARTNERS



They need

Impact potential • credibility • scalability • risk

Frame it as

“Here is the unmet need, why this approach can work, and what partnership unlocks.”

MEDIA



They need

A clear angle • timeliness • credible voice • human relevance

Frame it as

“Here is what is new, why it matters now, and the person or place that makes it real.”

COMMUNITIES



They need

Meaning • trust • local relevance • practical consequence

Frame it as

“Here is what this means for people like us, in our context, and what we can do next.”

CONTEXT FIRST

Localization is not translation

A message can be scientifically correct and still fail if it ignores history, identity, language, trust and local realities.

DO

- Listen before speaking — understand concerns and the local conversation.
- Use local language, metaphors and examples where they add meaning.
- Make statistics personal: connect the number to a person, place or consequence.
- Let local scientists and communities be visible, credible voices.
- Acknowledge both progress and challenges — transparency builds trust.

AVOID

- ✗ Assuming “Africa” is one audience or one cultural context.
- ✗ Leading only with institutional language, acronyms and technical jargon.
- ✗ Imposing an external narrative before understanding local priorities.
- ✗ Over-relying on statistics without a human or lived dimension.
- ✗ Waiting for a crisis or misinformation before communicating.

Trust is earned through clarity, consistency, credible messengers and presence - not by asking people to trust the science.

Adapted from Joy Inc.: cultural sensitivity, local voices, simple language, trust-building and context-first communication.

From expert to trusted public voice

The objective is not to turn scientists into communicators — but to help them translate expertise into policy influence without losing scientific rigor.

THE CHALLENGE

Excellent science does not automatically become influence.

Scientists may have strong evidence, but the policy window is short, the audience is non-technical and the ask is often unclear.

Media engagement

Policy communication

Advocacy

WHAT WE PRACTICE

01

Translate

Turn technical findings into a message a policymaker can understand in under a minute.

02

Position

Help the scientist speak as a credible African voice of expertise — not only as a project representative.

03

Connect

Link evidence to a live policy priority, decision or financing question.

04

Ask

End with a clear next step: convene, fund, adopt, investigate, include, commit.

Example from AVOS: a policy brief or technical finding is paired with the scientist's own voice, a policy implication and a specific advocacy ask.

SUA EXAMPLE 2 — AFRICAN WOMEN IN DIGITAL HEALTH

Stories make structural barriers visible

Data can show a gender gap. A person's journey can show how that gap is experienced — and what becomes possible when barriers are removed.

3 mentees started PhDs

2 were promoted

1 solution scaled with MTN funding

1 innovator won funding for an AI tool

THE DATA TELLS US

Women face barriers in access to networks, mentorship, visibility and opportunity.

THE STORY SHOWS US

What changes when a woman gets the right platform, connection, mentorship or support at the right moment.

Practical lesson: pair the statistic with a journey - then connect that journey back to the structural issue and the policy or investment implication.

SUA EXAMPLE 3 — YOUNG INNOVATORS

A strong innovation still needs a strong narrative

For innovators, storytelling is part of investment readiness, partnership-building, public engagement and policy influence.

BEFORE

“We developed a digital platform using AI and predictive analytics to improve service delivery.”

AFTER

“Health teams are losing time because they cannot see where demand is rising. Our platform turns routine data into an early warning — so teams can act before services are overwhelmed.”

01

PROBLEM

What urgent need are you solving?

02

SOLUTION

What is genuinely different?

03

PROOF

What evidence shows it works?

04

HUMAN IMPACT

Whose life or work changes?

05

ASK

What support unlocks the next step?

The goal is not to “sell” the science. It is to make the value of the science visible to the person who can help move it forward.

PRACTICAL TOOL

The 60-second science story

A scientist should be able to explain the significance of the work without starting with the title of the study, the methodology or the acronym.

01

THE HOOK

Start with the problem or consequence

“Across ___, people/teams are facing...”

02

THE INSIGHT

State what the evidence shows

“Our research found that...”

03

WHY IT MATTERS

Connect the finding to a priority

“This matters because...”

04

MAKE IT REAL

Use one human/local illustration

“For someone like ___, this means...”

05

THE ASK

End with the next decision

“The next step is...”

One audience • One core message • One proof point • One human meaning • One clear ask

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

Three rules for science storytelling that leads to impact

The goal is not to simply make visibility. The goal is better movement from evidence to decision.

01

Start before the research ends

Build the pathway to audiences and decisions from the beginning — not as a communications afterthought.

02

Let the expert own the narrative

Scientists and innovators should be visible as credible African voices of expertise, not only as project beneficiaries.

03

Pair evidence with human meaning

Data answers “what is happening.” Story helps people understand “why it matters” and “what should happen next.”

When African science is understood, trusted and connected to people’s priorities, it travels further - into institutions, funding and decisions.

SUCCESS STORY 1 — AFRICA YOUNG INNOVATORS FOR HEALTH

PharmaRun - storytelling turned a product into a health-equity story

The innovation was strong; the story made the problem, value and ambition easier for people to understand and support.



PharmaRun | Visual illustration — replace with preferred SUA/LinkedIn photo if needed

THE STORY

People often had to visit several pharmacies to find essential medicines. PharmaRun anchored its message in that everyday frustration rather than in platform features alone.

THE STORYTELLING MOVE

The founders framed the innovation around access, affordability and the human cost of fragmented medicine supply — a story funders, partners and health leaders could immediately relate to.

WHAT IT UNLOCKED

PharmaRun won first prize in the 2023 Africa Young Innovators for Health Award and went on to use high-level platforms, including Geneva Digital Health Day, to pitch its vision of equitable access to medicines.

KEY LESSON • Start with the problem people feel - then show how the science or innovation changes it.

SUCCESS STORY 2 — AFRICAN VOICES OF SCIENCE

Genomics - storytelling helped turn connection into a \$3.5M partnership

A complex scientific issue became a concrete story about better data, better care and African scientific leadership.



AVoS genomics partnership launch | WHSRM 2026, Nairobi

THE STORY

African populations remain underrepresented in genomic data, even though that evidence increasingly shapes prevention, diagnosis, treatment and research priorities.

THE STORYTELLING MOVE

AVoS helped its champions frame genomics around patient relevance, African-owned data, local infrastructure and health sovereignty — while aligning messages across convenings, media and advocacy.

WHAT IT UNLOCKED

Dr Robert Karanja and Prof. David Téa Okou first connected through AVoS. Their collaboration matured into a \$3.5M South–South genomics partnership, launched at WHSRM 2026, with sequencing infrastructure and a delivery roadmap.

KEY LESSON • Storytelling does not replace the science; it aligns people around why the science matters.

SUCCESS STORY 3 — AFRICAN WOMEN IN DIGITAL HEALTH

Wanjiru Kigathi / SautiLume - lived stories became the design logic

Here, storytelling did more than communicate the innovation: listening to lived experience helped shape the solution itself.



SautiLume / inclusive digital health | Visual illustration —
replace with preferred official photo if needed

THE STORY

Blind and visually impaired young people described barriers to private, accessible information on sexual and reproductive health, body literacy, consent, mental health and safety.

THE STORYTELLING MOVE

Wanjiru centred those lived experiences in the narrative: not 'a digital tool for disability', but a story about privacy, dignity, autonomy and the right to understand one's own body.

WHAT IT UNLOCKED

That framing helped make the innovation tangible and positioned inclusion as a design requirement. Through AWiDH, storytelling also strengthened women leaders' visibility and participation in high-level digital-health conversations.

KEY LESSON • Listen before you communicate. The story can reveal the problem — and help design a better solution.

CLOSING

The science is the foundation. Storytelling helps it travel.

Across PharmaRun, AVoS and AWiDH, the pattern is the same: evidence becomes more influential when people can understand its meaning and see their role in what happens next.

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|----|-----------------|--|
| 01 | LISTEN | Start with people, context and the real problem. |
| 02 | SIMPLIFY | Make the science clear without weakening it. |
| 03 | HUMANIZE | Connect evidence to a lived reality or consequence. |
| 04 | ADAPT | Frame the story for the audience you need to move. |
| 05 | ASK | End with the decision, partnership or action you need. |

FROM EVIDENCE TO ACTION

UNDERSTOOD



TRUSTED



REMEMBERED



ACTED ON

**Storytelling is not an add-on to impact.
It is part of the pathway to impact.**

Your research already has a story. The question is: can the people who need it see why it matters - and what they should do next?