

Winning Edge #40 – The Scrooge Story Strategy

This is Trevor Bragdon with Commonwealth Partners' *The Winning Edge*: Tips to help conservatives persuade and win.



In 1842, a 29-year-old Charles Dickens toured the mills of Lowell, Massachusetts. The precision machinery impressed him, but what stood out was the workers. The workers received better treatment compared to the harsh conditions back in England. The workers in Lowell were paid more and treated with dignity—something rarely seen in the factories and mines of Victorian England. Dickens couldn't shake the question: Why couldn't his own country do better?

On his return to England, the question haunted him. Then, as he read an 1,800-page report on child labor conditions, the reality of the abuse and exploitation leapt off the page. He visited factories and mines where children worked long hours in brutal conditions. Yet, despite the horrors he witnessed, most people didn't seem to care. Poverty and suffering were seen as inevitable.

Dickens wanted to change this mindset. He planned to write a pamphlet loaded with facts and arguments, hoping to sway public opinion. But then, he realized something important: people aren't moved by statistics—they're moved by stories.

So, instead of drafting a pamphlet, Dickens leaned into what he did best: writing stories that connect emotionally. Over two intense months, he crafted a tale about a stingy businessman visited by three spirits: the ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Yet to Come. These spirits forced Ebenezer Scrooge to confront the consequences of his actions—on himself and others—and, most importantly, offered him a path to redemption.

The result was *A Christmas Carol*. The book wasn't just a literary success—it changed the public's view of employers, workers, and even Christmas itself. Within months of its publication, Parliament passed the Factory Act, which set limits on child labor and improved working conditions. The story also sparked a cultural shift, popularizing the idea of generosity at Christmas and cementing traditions like family gatherings and holiday feasts. Dickens didn't just write a story—he changed minds.

The Power of Story in Politics

As lawmakers or candidates, you face the same challenges Dickens did. Your instinct might be to pile on facts, data, and logic. But here's the truth: facts alone rarely win. People make decisions emotionally first, then rationalize them with facts.

The Scrooge Story Strategy

Dickens used a simple yet powerful three-part framework: Look back, look down, and look forward.

1. **Look Back:** Show people where we've been and what's possible. The Ghost of Christmas Past made Scrooge reflect on better times, creating nostalgia and hope.
2. **Look Down:** Highlight current challenges and urgency. The Ghost of Christmas Present showed what was being missed or lost right now.
3. **Look Forward:** Paint a picture of what's possible—and what's at stake. The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come revealed both threat and opportunity.

Putting It Into Practice

Let's say you're championing school choice. Instead of leading with statistics about school quality or graduation rates:

- **Look Back:** Start with the story of a student trapped in a failing school—one where their potential is stifled by bureaucracy or lack of resources. Talk about how it wasn't always this way, making clear this isn't an unsolvable problem.
- **Look Down:** Next, highlight the present: focus on the families stuck on waiting lists, the parents frustrated by limited options, and the students whose talents are being wasted because they don't have access to better schools.
- **Look Forward:** Finally, paint a vivid picture of the future: a world where every family, regardless of income or ZIP code, can choose the best education for their child. Show what's possible when opportunity is unlocked—and what's at risk if the status quo continues.

Action Steps

To change minds through storytelling, start by identifying what emotionally moves people about your issue, and collect powerful stories from your district that illustrate both successes and challenges. Create a compelling vision specific to your community, showing clear benefits for local families while connecting to values voters already hold.

Finally, practice telling these stories until they flow naturally, keeping them under two minutes and focused on real experiences that will resonate with others. Remember, the best stories come from real experiences in your district. When you hear a story that moves you, it will likely move others too.

Bottom Line

Like Dickens, your goal isn't to shame or blame but to show people how they can be part of something better. When you want to change minds, start with a story. Show them how to reflect, reconsider, and move toward a better future. Because if a Scrooge can change, so can the voters and colleagues you need to persuade.