



Definition of Genre

Any institution—whether it is a government organization, non-profit, or for-profit—mobilizes a body of people to achieve a specific set of goals. When formulated precisely into words, these goals become a mission statement. The basic structure of a mission statement contains the following information:

- WHO the organization is (e.g., name, type of agency)
- WHAT it does
- For WHOM it does these things (possibly defined by a community or geographical area)
- HOW the WHAT is accomplished

Beyond simply communicating purpose, mission statements also express the motivation behind this purpose. The principles that motivate and guide an organization's actions ground its overall message and as such are an important part of the mission statement.

Uses of the Mission Statement

The length of a mission statement often reflects how the organization hopes it will function. Some organizations prefer to post a brief mission statement, of only one to two sentences in length, so it can be more easily memorized and repeated. Other organizations use the mission statement as an opportunity to articulate critical information about their purposes and goals to investors and the general public; these statements may be a paragraph or a full page in length. Often, a short tagline or motto is written with longer statements to summarize the mission in a succinct and catchy way. Regardless of length, a mission statement should always work to inspire action. It should send a message to existing or prospective supporters compelling them to buy, donate, vote, etc.

As a part of an organization's outward presentation, the mission statement is an essential public relations tool. It educates members of the community about the organization's cause and serves as a beacon to attract new people and resources. A for-profit business may find it difficult to attract investors if it lacks a well-constructed mission statement. The IRS requires a clear statement of purpose before it grants tax exemptions to non-profits.

In addition to communicating outwardly, a mission statement works reflexively to improve its organization in a number of ways. Specifically, a strong mission statement can: create a sense of shared meaning among coworkers; unify a body of people with diverse talents and opinions; clarify criteria for new initiatives; set priorities for the use of limited resources; motivate staff, board members, or volunteers; and strengthen an image or brand.

Questions to Ask When Brainstorming a Mission Statement

The following questions will help you think through the critical questions a mission statement may address; they will create a rich ground from which you can develop a more polished mission statement.

- What are the underlying principles or beliefs guiding your organization? How will you put them into practice? You can think of these principles as core “values” if it makes the question easier to answer.
- Is there a problem or condition you are trying to change? What is it?
- What is the ultimate result of your work, product, or service? How is the world or community going to be different because of it?
- Who are the beneficiaries of your work, product, or services?
- What makes your organization unique from other, similar organizations?
- What would the world or community look like if your organization did not exist? While you don’t want to wield threats or write a negative mission statement, this question can produce important insights about the purpose of your work.
- How are you going to accomplish your purpose? What specific activities will you DO to achieve your end?
- For what will this organization be remembered?
- Should your mission statement be a paragraph long? Or, do you prefer to deliver a succinct yet comprehensive message in one or two sentences?
- Why did you join or start this organization?

Actions to Take to Begin the Writing Process

- Identify your guiding principles. Thinking about the principles that guide your organization will provide you with a more specific sense of purpose and direction.
- Work together. Bring in as many perspectives from your community as possible. While meeting in person is the best way to spark collaborative ideas, you can also send surveys or make phone calls to your board, staff, and volunteers. Ask people what they think about your goal or what they might need from your organization.
- Treat the questions in the “Questions to Ask” section above as brainstorming prompts; be open to intuitive responses and associations, and say “no” later. Keep track of what strikes you and your colleagues as particularly powerful. If it is helpful, you can organize your responses in a chart under the following columns: Who, What, for Whom, How, Why, and Where. The What, How, and Why columns should burst with content!
- Look at the mission statements of successful organizations you like or that share your goal.
- Work slowly, and revise in stages. Allow enough time for each person involved to give feedback on each stage of revisions.
- Get outside perspectives from people unfamiliar with your organization (like a Writing Studio tutor!) in order to identify and eliminate field-specific jargon.

Writing the Mission Statement

- When talking about what your organization does, try to use strong action verbs that indicate change (e.g., increase, decrease, prevent, eliminate, inspire).
- Avoid the passive voice. Writing in the active voice is especially crucial in a mission statement.
- Focus on the people you are serving rather than on the organization itself.
- Emphasize outcomes and results.
- Avoid using technical language, clichés, and generalizations.

- If you have opted for a brief statement over a longer one, consider creating a mission package that includes two additional documents: a Statement of Principles and a Vision Statement. For either statement length, you should craft a tagline or motto that restates your mission statement or core beliefs in a memorable way.

Other Useful Sources

<http://sbinfocanada.about.com/od/businessplanning/g/visionstatement.htm>

<http://topnonprofits.com/examples/vision-statements>

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/johnkotter/2013/10/14/the-reason-most-company-vision-statements-arent-effective/>