

How to Start a Storytelling Guild

from VASA – The Virginia Storytelling Alliance

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What is a storytelling guild?

A guild is an association of people with similar interests or pursuits. The word comes from the medieval period when craftsmen or merchants began associations that enabled them to have greater influence and visibility in their communities. A guild is not quite a union or a professional association or a social club.

A storytelling guild is a group of people in a given community who are interested in storytelling – for telling, listening, and promoting to folks who are new to the craft.

Why might a storytelling guild be fun or important in my community?

If you are interested in storytelling, a storytelling guild will be a good way to get the word out about storytelling in your area. You can invite people to attend a guild meeting. You can advertise. You can hold events. You can get organizational support and encouragement from VASA.

What are the rules for a storytelling guild?

There are no rules! Well, maybe one – Have fun!

Each guild is different. Some guilds meet regularly; some meet when a few key people are around. Some guilds have requirements such as you have to be ready to tell a story; other guilds invite people who only want to listen. Some guilds have a structure to their gatherings; others are more casual. Some guilds are designed to help tellers improve stories by giving structured feedback; others are simply opportunities to tell stories to appreciative audiences. You and the other people in the guild get to decide. Most guilds have organizers but no 'leaders'.

Some tips to starting a storytelling guild?

Before the guild gathering:

- You may want to give the guild a name. Some names we have seen are: The Story Girls, Sips & Stories, Stories with Friends, Story Circle, the Story Guild of [your town/county/neighborhood], Story Swap,
- Find some others who are interested in storytelling. Ask them to join you in a storytelling gathering. The more the merrier, but it's ok to start small and grow. Even with just one or two other people, you will get started, have fun together, and learn and grow in exciting ways.
- Decide on a date and time for you guild meeting. Pick a day and time when you will have about 1.5 to 2 hours to spend together.

- Decide on a place. Some guilds meet in the public library (which is generally free). Some meet in the living rooms of participants. Others meet in Sunday school classrooms.
- Distribute the notice/invitation. Tell a little bit about what people should expect. Consider paper notices – in your local newspaper’s calendar of events or as a ‘poster’ in your public library or post office. Consider electronic notices on Facebook, Evite or Eventbrite (which is free if you are not charging for the event).
- If you want, give some advice to the people who may attend, such as:
 - Give encouragement: “Don’t bring anything except an open mind – we’ll do interesting things together when our guild meets.” OR “Our lives are made up of stories – come tell one of yours!” Be open and creative in your invitation.
 - Give a reminder of how to build a story: “Bring a story. Make sure your story has a beginning, a middle, and an end.” [It is amazing how many people just start talking with no purpose/end to their words!]
 - Give a theme: “This time we’ll be telling stories about fathers – the ones you had/have, the ones you wanted, the ones someone else had, etc. Come tell your father stories.” [Themes work well to help focus people on developing their stories.]
 - Give some guidelines: “Bring a story that is between 5-7 minutes long.” [5-7 minutes is a good length to get people going and not too long to intimidate new tellers.]
 - Invite ‘draft’ or unfinished stories: If it works in your guild, encourage people to come and tell half-done stories – the rest of you can give feedback/feedforward. Many of us need help at many points along the way of our story-crafting journey.
- Prepare for the guild gathering.
 - Have a story ready to tell yourself. It doesn’t need to be perfect.
 - Have some story prompts ready in case no one is ready to tell a story. VASA produces a list, if you would like some suggestions.
 - Set up the chairs in a comfortable way – preferably not behind tables or desks!

During the guild gathering:

- Welcome everyone. Remind them of the purpose of the gathering.
- Invite someone tell a story. Be ready to go first if no one else wants to.
- Decide if tellers will stand or tell from their chairs – or is it up to the teller. [Standing provides good practice for telling stories publically. We also speak different when we stand then when we sit – sometime we are automatically more organized in our words.]
- Respond to the story. In some guilds, responding means just clapping. In other guilds, people like to ask questions about the content of the story. In still other guilds, listeners help the tellers improve their stories through comments offered in a constructive manner.
 - How you decide to respond may depend on the group or even on the individual teller (who may want more or less feedback/feedforward – ask!). Be gentle. Storytelling is for everyone, though not everyone is at the same

place, with similar skill levels, or has the same goals. Everyone improves by telling in front of others and by receiving constructive feedback about the story itself and about how it was delivered.

- There are several helpful ways to give constructive feedback/feedforward. VASA conducted a workshop on this topic. Two example forms can be found on the VASA website.
- Figure out how to choose the next teller – by volunteer, by choice of the previous teller, by passing a talking stick, by drawing names from a hat?
- When everyone who wants to tell has had a chance to tell, thank everyone for coming. Tell them what will happen next – the date of the next guild gathering, upcoming performances in the area, etc.
- In some guilds, at the end of the gathering, those present are asked to comment on how the meeting might be improved next time. Those comments are taken into account when organizing the next gathering.
- Make sure to collect contact information for the participants to invite them to the next guild meeting or to notify them of other community storytelling events.

After the guild gathering:

- Take notes about what worked and what didn't so you can improve for the next time.
- Post a note (in paper or electronically) for people who did not attend about what fun you had. Invite them to the next gathering and tell them what other storytelling events are happening soon.