

NES STORYTELLING STARTER KIT

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How to Become a Storyteller by Flora Joy

Every professional storyteller once asked this same question. Even if you are considering becoming a "just-for-fun" storyteller, you are likely filled with some anxieties, apprehensions, and lots of questions about the process. "How do I begin?" "Will folks laugh at me?" "How do I book my first gig?" "When do I charge?" And the list of questions goes on and on. All of today's "pros" reached the point of professional status in a different manner—and all of them jumped many hurdles. We can offer a series of suggestions for how to begin the process, and you may explore them according to your own interests and needs. Do keep in mind that they are intentionally generic, but you can "get there" with a combination of these hints and your own knowledge and experience.

WHAT IS MY FIRST STEP?

Find a story that you feel you will TRULY WANT to tell. If you aren't "sold" on the story, it will "show" when you tell it. Your body language will reflect how much you like (or dislike) the story.

WHERE DO I FIND MY FIRST STORY?

There are several places. Consider the following:

(1) There are many volumes of story collections in the 398.2 sections of practically all libraries. Most librarians are very eager to assist you in selecting some anthologies that might fit your interests. Also ask your librarian to show you some popular children's books as possibilities. Be aware of the fact that you may find yourself reading dozens (or even hundreds) of stories before one reaches out and "grabs" you.

(2) Look in your own life for any possible personal stories you might want to craft. Be careful, however, because many new tellers tend to make these personal stories much too loooooonnnnnnggggg for most audiences. If the stories you tell will likely be ones that you create about your own life, listen to the personal stories designed by the professionals and see how they have made them appealing to listeners (but don't replicate their stories).

(3) Examine your own story collections. Even stories you loved as a child may prove interesting possibilities.

(4) Explore the storytelling material in public domain. These will not need later permissions for you to use them in your storytelling programs.

(5) Listen to story recordings done by the professionals—BUT don't "borrow" their stories. They've put in countless hours to craft and deliver these stories to perfection, and if you find one you absolutely MUST learn, then FIRST contact the teller for permission. Honor the answer you receive. This same principle applies to any copyrighted story.

AFTER I FIND THIS STORY, THEN HOW DO I LEARN IT?

NES STORYTELLING STARTER KIT

There are several methods used by the pros. Probably the most common is as follows: Read the story over MANY times until the story's "voice" becomes very familiar. Then practice with the first part of the story until it feels right coming from YOUR voice. Continue with each section of the story until you've reached its end.

WHAT ABOUT MEMORIZING THE STORY?

This can get you into DEEP trouble—although it is the method several tellers use. Consider trying to put the story in your own natural language so that if you ever get "stuck," you can continue with your own conversational patterns. If you are depending upon strict memorization, something can cause you to "lose track," then you are in a bind with your listeners. Do keep in mind, however, that literary material should remain true to the original language. Also, a very few authors will not agree for their stories to be told unless it is "word for word." If either of these applies to you, then decide whether or not you should select a different story to learn.

WHEN WILL I BE READY TO TELL MY FIRST STORY?

This depends upon how adventuresome you are. Many storytelling workshop leaders suggest that you "tell the story to the wall" several dozen times before you have a "real audience." Others suggest that you begin with a very SMALL audience and admit that your story is a work in progress (so they won't expect perfection).

BUT I'M NERVOUS! WILL THE AUDIENCE LAUGH AT ME?

We will give you an emphatic "NO." They WON'T laugh at you. Audiences are on YOUR SIDE. They WANT you to succeed. They wouldn't be there in attendance if they didn't want to hear some good stories. However, you WILL have BUTTERFLIES, and you will likely feel lots of apprehensions about your performance. Please know that this feeling is "human," and even the professionals who have been telling for YEARS have these same butterflies. JUST ACT CONFIDENT and by so doing, you'll give the audience the feeling that you are in control. Even if you KNOW that your knees are shaking, the audience WON'T know it (unless you "announce" it).

NOW I'M READY. WHAT'S NEXT?

Find listeners who will serve as an audience for your initial storytelling practice. In a non-apologetic manner, tell these listeners that it is your first performance and that you are honored they will be your audience. (This sets up a positive mindset for them.) After your story, you might ask these listeners what they liked about your story and encourage them to discuss your performance with you. When you are ready, ask them for suggestions that might improve your story delivery. This type of feedback should wait until YOU are ready for it. It's OK just to "tell" the story a few times without anyone's opinion. Many areas across the nation have local storytelling guilds that are designed specifically for the purpose of helping tellers fine-tune their performances. Check with us at the National Storytelling Network to see if one is near you.

THEN WHAT?

After you have performed for a few small and comfortable groups, challenge yourself by finding a larger audience. This could be a local school, a neighborhood scout troop, or a group of people in your community that would appreciate hearing your stories. Before you tell in these more challenging situations, review the feedback you received from your smaller groups, and practice, practice, practice, and practice some more.

NES STORYTELLING STARTER KIT

OK, I'VE WORN OUT MY "ONE" STORY....

Find some new stories that appeal to you. Keep reading... and reading... and reading. Have fun in this new story selection process, but keep in mind that you may have to drop some stories from your repertoire because you wound up being uncomfortable for some reason when you told them.

NOW I'M READY TO CHARGE! HOW DO I DETERMINE A PRICE?

Across the country the fees vary with region and storytelling expertise. Call some tellers who live near you and ask about the going rates. If you're NEW to the field, you might not be able to ask as much as those who have been professional for awhile. When asked about your fees, consider responding with, "My standard price is (\$XX), but I'm negotiable. How does my suggested price fit your current budget?"

NOW WHAT?

Tell, tell, tell, tell, and tell some more. It's the repeated experiences of telling that allow you to tweak and refine both your storytelling content and delivery.

Those of us at NSN and LANESwish you a long and happy experience with your storytelling. Let us know how we can be of assistance to you.