

# GUIDELINES FOR STORY GROUPS

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During the revival of storytelling among mothers a hundred years ago, they formed story groups for the purpose of practicing and polishing the art. Although we don't have specific details of exactly what they did in those meetings, we have access to the 'manuals' left behind that were written by the gifted and master storytellers of their day. The ideas that have come together for this little guidebook have been generated from their writings as well as practical suggestions resulting from personal experience in the recent formation of Story Groups. We welcome additional suggestions from you as you form your own groups that we are happy to pass along.

## 1: Invite others to join your group.

A story group can be as small as 5 or 6 people. You may want to keep the size of the group to under 20 members so that each member has a chance to regularly practice in front of the group. Larger sized groups tend to be a bit more intimidating to some people. Public speaking has regularly been listed as the #1 fear of people, so building a safe, accepting atmosphere is critical to the success of the group. If your group grows to be too large, you may consider breaking into smaller sized groups that can periodically meet together as a large group for special occasions.

How to find members:

- Invite close friends and family members
- Post flyers in local libraries and bookstores
- Invite members of your church, work or school group
- Dovetail a mother's playgroup with a story group
- Branch off from a book club

Our group is a wonderful mix of ages and backgrounds. We have young married couples with brand new babies as well as grandparents. We have members with lots of children and those with no children. Some come with spouses. Some come without. They come with a variety of life experiences and stories to share. If you have the chance, don't limit the make-up of your group to one age bracket or circumstance.

## 2: Establish easy communication with group members.

You will save yourself a lot of headaches and time if you set up a private group online for group members to communicate with each other. You can post meeting times and places as well as assignments, words of encouragement, and any other items of business pertaining to the group. The most popular group membership sites are Yahoo, Facebook and Group Spaces.

## 3: Order materials for your first meeting.

We recommend ordering enough copies of *Restoring the Art of Storytelling in the Home* for each member of the group to hand out at your first meeting. (Please allow two weeks for delivery.) One of the biggest obstacles to storytelling is having a story to tell. In this manual, you will find over a hundred stories that are either ready to tell or close to it that were adapted and recommended by the storytellers a hundred years ago. These stories serve as a perfect tutorial in learning to tell stories. For the most part, they are classical stories that originated as oral stories. By ordering for your group in one shipment, you will save a lot of money on shipping. If you order more than five copies, you will save \$1.00 per copy. Order at [librariesofhope.com](http://librariesofhope.com).

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## 4: Where to meet.

If your group isn't too large and you know the members of your group, meeting in a home is a practical solution. But it's not the only place. And sometimes it's nice not having to worry about getting the house cleaned up for guests. Other places to consider that are free of charge or require only a small fee:

- public library meeting room—Friday evenings are usually open
- church
- small bookstore
- some restaurants offer a private room with meal purchase
- some music stores have a recital room that may be available during the day
- classrooms at schools after school hours
- community centers
- club houses
- a retirement center may allow use of a room in exchange for sharing stories with or including their residents

## 5: Hold your first meeting.

The first meeting is meant to serve as an introduction and to allow members to 'warm up' to each other. Items that should be covered at this first meeting are:

- allow each member to introduce himself/herself
- establish your leadership base. You need someone to be in charge, but that position can be rotated as often as needed. You can elect a president or story group leader or whatever you want to call it. This person makes sure the meeting place is arranged for, assignments are made, and notifications are placed in the online group message center or that individual emails are sent out.
- determine a set day and time when future meetings will be held such as the first or last Friday of the month, etc. Consistency is key to success. Some groups may want to meet weekly; others bi-monthly or monthly.
- pass out individual copies of the manuals to everyone.
- take turns reading the Guidelines for Storytelling on pp. 20-24 in the manual as a group.
- ask everyone to choose, prepare and tell one story from the manual *before* the next meeting. The story needs to be told out loud but not necessarily in front of someone else. Encourage them to keep the basic steps in mind they have just reviewed. When they come to the next meeting, everyone will have a chance to share how that first storytelling experience went. It's important to establish a comfortable environment to share experiences and this is a non-threatening first step.

## 6: Second Meeting format.

If the room you are meeting in allows you to put your chairs in a circle, this is a very inclusive layout. The president calls the meeting to order and invites each member to share their storytelling experience. Some experiences will be very positive and inspiring to other members. Other experiences will let group members see that they are not alone in the problems they may have encountered. But it gives every member a chance to share and starts building the supportive rapport to build upon in future meetings.

After everyone has shared, the president will outline the format for all future meetings (see below). Allow members to volunteer for assignments. Some members will feel safe to share stories from the beginning. It may take others time to warm up and gain confidence. By offering different levels of participation, less confident members can safely involve themselves.

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## 7: General Meeting Format for Future Meetings.

**Call to order:** Ask for volunteers each meeting to take charge of the meeting. That person is responsible for keeping things flowing. The more chances members have to actively participate, the more they will feel a vital part of the group.

**Recitation of a memorized poem:** At first you may think this is a little odd. We don't recite poetry very often anymore. But it's a wonderful exercise for the mind to memorize something and is a priceless treasure throughout life. Reciting a poem provides a safer avenue for someone to 'perform' in front of the group than starting out by telling a story.

**Storytelling Moment:** This is a two to five minute sharing of an idea about storytelling the member has gleaned from personal study. A number of resources are found at [librariesofhope.com](http://librariesofhope.com) on the Storytelling page. This can be about the power of stories, a specific tip on technique or delivery, the history of storytelling, ideas for application, – any topic in connection with storytelling that will benefit the members of the group.

**Telling of Stories and Evaluation:** Allow one to two members to volunteer to present the story they are working on for the group. For the first several meetings, request that members rely on the stories in the manual. These are classic stories that have survived for a reason. It increases the chances of a successful experience. If you have a small group, one story per meeting may work best. For a larger group, if you want to give everyone plenty of chances to perform, you may want to allow time for more than one story. In the beginning, request that stories be kept under ten minutes.

As group members provide evaluation, the first comments about the story should all focus on what went right in the delivery. Making this a positive experience is crucial. Allow the storyteller to decide if he/she is ready to ask for suggestions for improvement. It may take a couple of times before they are ready to open themselves up to comments like that.

Human beings are natural born storytellers. Enjoy the journey!

**Open Discussion:** Use the remaining time for individual members to share questions, experiences or problems they are running into. Members should constantly be working on stories even when they are not assigned to deliver them in meetings. Naturally, the more stories they tell, the easier the whole process will become to them.

**Assignments:** Allow volunteers to sign up for assignments for the following meeting.

**Refreshments are optional.**

**Report on Group page or Individual Emails:** The president can make a summary of what took place at the meeting on the Group page if anyone couldn't make it as well as keep a reminder of assignments for the following month. The assignments include:  
Meeting Moderator, Storytelling Moment, Poetry Recitation, and Storyteller(s).

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## Storytelling Opportunities:

As group members polish their delivery and develop a repertoire of stories to tell, you may consider involving yourselves in the following options:

Contribute your stories to the Story Banks at [librariesofhope.com](http://librariesofhope.com).

As a culture, we rely heavily on the written word and visuals. By restoring the art of storytelling, we are restoring the ability to see life more clearly and more importantly to *feel* more deeply. Reworking stories that are now preserved in writing into an oral format is a tremendous service to civilization. Young parents, especially, are very busy and don't have time to rework stories into an oral story. As you record and contribute the stories you take time to prepare to the Story Banks, you are providing a resource where they can listen and download stories which they can turn around and retell their children. Of course, no one person can learn all the stories, so you will also be providing stories for others to enjoy and listen to, as well.

## Take your storytelling out into the community. Possible venues are:

- Library story times
- After school programs
- Scout meetings
- Homeless shelters
- Hospitals
- Programs for disadvantaged youth
- YMCA's
- Organize a storytelling festival for your community
- Invite everyone in the group to bring their children or grandchildren occasionally

Above all, enjoy yourselves. In a world that is becoming increasingly violent, vulgar and isolated, Story Groups provide a place of refreshment to soul and heart and an opportunity to connect and bond in a positive way with others.