



Quick Guide:
Using Story Circles in



Spring, 2011





Introduction

Throughout human history, we have gathered around the fire, the kitchen table, on our front porch, in town, around a laptop—wherever we come together—to share our experiences, our memories and our dreams. In sitting together sharing stories we transmit our culture, we reach out to one another, we learn and we teach, we weave the fabric of our families, our friends and our town. Story circles model this innate form of communication.

Although story circles can come in all shapes and sizes, we have found the following guidelines lead to rewarding events aimed at bringing people together:

Group Size: Groups of 6-8 people work well. It is a small enough group that everyone gets a chance to share, but not so big as to lose that sense of intimacy. In a citywide event, people put themselves (or are put) into groups of 6-8, seeking out people they do not know well. Or you can hold smaller, neighborhood meetings of this size.

Participants: To learn what your group, neighborhood or community values, whose stories need to be heard? Will you invite everyone? Will you go out and invite individuals personally? Which ones?

Location: It's important to select a spot where invitees will feel comfortable and welcome. Someone's house? A favorite informal gathering spot? A formal, neutral space in town? Outside if you plan a walking story circle (see below).

Food: Just as stories bring us together, so does food. Have a potluck or offer foods rich in connection to the place. Coffee and cookies work wonders, too!

Topics: If people do not know one another well, and the purpose of the event is to get to know one's neighbors, it might be useful to ask people to bring a story about a place or a person or an experience that illustrates what they find special about the community. An event might also be place or issue focused.

The Questions: As a group, practice coming up with and asking questions meant to invite stories that speak of deep emotion and use specific detail to express connections to your town.

Planning: Send invitations; ask for RSVPs and follow-up with phone calls to remind invitees of the event. Gather materials and set up the space. Have you invited children? If so, will someone lead activities for the younger ones? Practice story circles with your friends and family, so you feel comfortable leading a story circle. Create a guide for your facilitators to use during the event.





Story Stirrers: A Selection of Fun Exercises

- Have people bring a photo or an object that somehow illustrates a connection they have to the town, and to be ready to share the story that goes with that object.
- Give out nametags and have people write their names AND five places they associate with the Heart & Soul of the community. Share these as the opening exercise.
- Pin up a large map of the town and give each person two sticky dots. Have them stick their dots on two places they consider “story hotspots”—places that hold important stories about the community. If you have a group quite at ease with storytelling and a skilled facilitator, you could ask people to place Color A dot on a place they want to stay the same, and a Color B dot on a place they would like to change. After people tell their stories, have them imagine the same story ten years into the future. Have them tell it. Discuss what the differences tell you about planning for the future.
- In pairs, have people draw a map of the town and dot it with story hotspots. Have them share these choices and explore the connection between the physical and non-physical aspects of the stories—where does landscape and place end, and community begin?
- First Impressions: Tell the story of your first memory of your town. Tell a more recent story that connects to or reverses that first impression.
- Place a set of Pictures of your town (100 small photo cards—possible to order from Moo.com and Zazzle.com) in the center of a table and have everyone choose five. Have them create a five-image story. Everyone looks at the images stories and tells new stories prompted by the photos.
- Imagine that this story circle is preparing to write a book entitled *The Guidebook to your Town’s Heart & Soul*. Brainstorm a list of stories to include in the book. Sort them into chapters. What would they be? Share stories and talk about how the chapter headings reveal important values held about living in this community.
- Have people draw the Heart & Soul of Your Town. Arrange these drawings into a paper quilt. Have people share the stories of those drawings, or choose a drawing they did not create and tell a story prompted by that drawing, a story that gets at something they value about this place.
- Hand people blank postcards. Write a story-letter to the town about something you value about living here. Imagine the postcard reaching your town in ten years—what do you wish to tell people a decade from now? Share the stories. Send these postcards to your Heart & Soul project.
- Draw a set of postcards: *The Only Thing You Need to Know about Town*
- *A Wishbook for Your Town*: at the end of the story circle event, pass around the wishbook and have each person add a drawing, their story, or their wish for the future of the town.





Possible Formats

Simple

1. In a circle, one by one, with no interruptions or commentary or questions, each person shares a story. The quiet is important, for people will naturally wish to ask clarifying questions, or what-then questions, or to share their version of the story. We want to deepen our listening. If someone just wishes to listen, that's fine. After going around the circle once, ask those who passed if they would like to share a story now.
2. Go around the circle again, having people respond to what they heard. Everyone can ask questions, connect stories they heard to their own experiences. Enjoy one another. Encourage the group to remember specific images, details and phrases that surprised or moved them.
3. Give everyone a set of sticky notes and have them jot down details from what they heard that strike them as memorable, and illustrative of what they value about the town. One detail/quote/theme per sticky note. Post them to a large sheet of paper. Have the group arrange these into groups of themes and values and issues. Have the group decide on what they would like to share with the entire community—is there a story from the group that especially reveals something essential about the place? What values from this event would you wish to share with the larger community? Are there themes and issues you would like to see the town discuss and work on as part of planning for the future? Were there surprises? Have someone take notes to give to the Heart & Soul project coordinator, and read them back to the group, asking, “Did we capture the important threads of this story circle? Did we miss something?” Have at your ready a list of questions that help bring out the meanings from the stories, and help the storytellers add details and examples of what they mean.
4. One option is to create a word cloud at the event based on the themes posted from the sticky notes. The word cloud gives immediate visual feedback on commonalities and validates the group's input.
5. Ask the group for feedback about the gathering. Would they be willing to record their stories? Would they like to write their story down and have it published online, on a postcard, or in a newsletter? Would they like to be trained as a story circle facilitator?
6. Would they be interested in participating in a story circle that brought together people from other groups?

More Complex: A Walking Story Circle

1. Have people RSVP to your invitation by sharing the location of the story they would like to tell, or the location about which they want to hear stories.
2. Someone gathers these locations onto a Google map and onto a large map printed for the occasion. Create a list of several mini-story tours, and a map for each tour. These can be crafted in many ways: randomly, to visit the widest area, to visit a story-cluster only. It all depends on what you get in the RSVP and the number and variety of story locations offered.
3. Have people visit the map during the early moments of the gathering, noticing locations, hotspots, and empty spots. Have them look for their name on a tour sheet. If they did not RSVP but have a story, have them add a pushpin to the map, locating that story, and have them add their name to a tour group.
4. Gather the full group and explain that they have one hour for the tour—six stories, a walk, and conversation.





5. Return to the full group and share the revelations and work on harvesting values (see Simple Format).

Variations

- People bring pictures or written stories to pin to the map. These objects are photographed and entered onto the digital map.
- Each group is given a video and or still camera and audio recorder to capture the tour, especially the stories. These can be shared online. They can be put into a podcast version and housed at the library (or elsewhere) on iPods with tour maps to check out and follow. People can add their stories by recording onto the iPod if they are also given an iTalk recorder device to clip onto the iPod. Schoolchildren and families can build story tours. Lots of possibilities here. Other neighborhoods can include a tour of previous neighborhood events and compare the stories, the values, and the details, looking for common ground.
- Several stories are prepared in advance and form the backbone of a neighborhood tour. The group listens to these stories in their locations (either a storyteller awaits them there, or they bring along a recording—kids are great to involve in this by being storytellers-in-place) and the audience responds to them with their own stories. Prepared stories can be from the past (pulled from an historical society or museum), as well as those the neighborhood tells of the present AND of the future.





Sample Script: Neighborhood Meeting

1. Warm Up

- ✓ Facilitator welcomes participants, introduces project and invites people to say their name and why they decided to attend.
- ✓ Do an icebreaker. Examples:
 - If wearing nametags, could ask people to write on the tags three words that they feel describe the town and when they introduce themselves they could state those, too.
 - Could ask people to put stars on a map for where they live and/or places that are important to them in town.
- ✓ Establish Ground Rules. Could start with a common list and invite people to amend it. Examples:
 - Share “air time”; we want to hear all views; speak for yourself, not for others—use “I” statements; if you are offended; say so and say why; it’s fine to disagree, but stick to the issue; don’t make it personal. No interrupting, talking over others or whispered side conversations.

2. Explore Values

- ✓ Invite each member of the group to share a story that speaks to what they love about town (go around group w/o interruptions).
- ✓ Ask group to reflect on what they heard in the stories (what stood out to them, any surprises, commonalities, any questions that prompt additional detail).
- ✓ Ask group to identify common values from stories along with the key details that support them (e.g. characteristics, specific places). **Tip** – use sticky notes or flip charts to capture and organize information.

3. Understand Change (optional step depending on time available)

- ✓ For each common value, ask the group the following:
 - How has it changed in town? Is this the desired direction?
 - What do you think is positively or negatively affecting it?
 - What do you think would help protect or enhance it moving forward?

Alternative: Break group into pairs/threes, have each pick a theme and answer the above questions. Each group could report back and receive feedback from full group.

4. Closing

- ✓ Facilitator thanks meeting host and participants, shares how the information will be used and discusses the project’s next steps.
- ✓ Facilitator fills in a feedback form with information from the meeting. (See example on next page.)





Neighborhood Meeting Form

Facilitator _____ Host _____ Date/Time _____ # Participants ____
(attach contact sheet)

Key Value Themes & their Details:
How Have Values Changed:
What's Affecting the Values:
Ideas for Protecting/Enhancing Values:
Other Ideas/Comments:

