STORYTELLING TOOLKIT

How to use storytelling for healthy change in communities
About the Storytelling Toolkit

The Prevention Speaks Storytelling Toolkit is a result of the Communities Putting Prevention to Work (CPPW) project funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2010–2012.

The Prevention Speaks team of the Wisconsin Clearinghouse for Prevention Resources mentored 19 communities across the United States in the strategic use of stories and storytelling. The goal was to use stories to inspire healthy environmental changes for the prevention of chronic disease caused by obesity and tobacco.

These communities found storytelling to be a powerful addition to their inventory of communications tools and continue working to change the environment with the help of story. This toolkit is a summary of the techniques and methods we used over the course of those trainings.

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Why Use Story?

Stories are one of our most powerful and effective communications tools, especially for communities. A compelling story, strategically told, can change minds and inspire action.

Build/Leverage Partnerships

- Recruit partners
- Reach across sectors
- Include multiple voices/perspectives
- Build common ground and meaning
- Build trusting relationships

Strategic Communication/Making the Case

- Targeted messaging/framing
- Make statistics real
- Media advocacy/earned media
- Social media
- Identify champions and spokespeople
- Educate stakeholders

Sustainability

- Funding
- Stakeholder support
- Cross-sector partnerships
- Staff development/capacity building
- Create lasting, systemic change

Coalition Building

- Community engagement
- Coalition recruitment
- Identify and grow leaders
- Build trust and shared meaning
- Recognition/celebrate success

Program Improvement and Evaluation

- Identify community needs and assets
- Identify outcomes and impact
- Disseminate successes, approaches, lessons learned
Storytelling Toolkit

These tools will help you create a culture of storytelling and story use in a community or organization.

A Definition for Story

The word story has slightly different meanings for everyone. Prevention Speaks likes how communications researcher Annette Simmons defines story:

“Story is a reimagined experience narrated with enough detail and feeling to cause your listeners’ imaginations to experience it as real.”

We like this definition because it reminds us stories are most powerful when they put your listeners in your shoes. When listeners are prompted by details and feeling to reimagine an experience, they are engaged.
1. Intake Questions

How do you approach a community or organization about using story?

An initial meeting or call with a few lead contacts is a good way to start. The intention’s to see how your groups may already be using story, brainstorm initial ideas for more story uses, and see where additional training could help. To get you started, here are some questions we use.

1) Tell me about the work you’ve been doing in your community or organization.
2) Are you using story now? How? Remember, people define and use stories differently.)
3) How else do you think story could help your work?
4) What storytelling skills already exist in your community or organization? What skills do you want to work on?
5) Who are potential storytellers?
6) Who are potential audiences for a training?
7) What is our timeline?
8) What’s the best format for training? (Half day, day, large group with breakouts, etc.)
9) How will we know we're successful?
Story Readiness Graph

This tool helps people understand their progress in readiness to use story for communication purposes. We like to have story training participants fill it out at several points during a training. A reproducible copy is included in the Appendix.

SET FOR STORY?

How ready do you feel to use stories with your community?

Knowledge: I know how and when stories make impact.

Belief: I believe stories make an impact.

Skill: I have the tools to help my community find and use stories strategically.

Comfort: I feel confident about working with my community on stories.

1: As you begin working with story
2: After practicing a story using story elements
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Feel totally ready and on fire!

Feel ready!

Feel somewhat prepared

Could do it in a pinch

Not at all ready

1: As you begin working with story
2: After practicing a story using story elements
3: After initial story use planning

I think my community will love doing a story circle.

Thinking about story use helped me understand how we can make an impact.

Feeling a little nervous!
2. Hold a Story Circle

A story circle is an opportunity for people to come together and each relate a part of themselves by telling a story. We’ve found that story circles are an enjoyable, deeply meaningful way for members of a group to deepen relationships with each other. It also lets everyone realize that they can tell a story, and that listening to others’ stories is a valuable skill.

Story circles can be formal or informal, incorporated into a meeting or held as its own event, and called a story circle or something else. It’s a safe experience - participants won’t be judged or critiqued. And if you want it to be, it’s an opportunity to identify stories and storytellers who can further the collective goals of your group.

Learning Objectives for a Story Circle
1) Build comfort with storytelling
2) Practice story listening
3) Build group cohesion, strengthen relationships
4) Feel the power of story
5) Identify stories and storytellers

Here are some tips for holding story circles. Adapt them to fit the needs of your group.

Preparation
Decide on one to two story prompts. Use one of these examples, or make up your own.

Prompt examples
- Why do you do this work? or What has happened to you or your people to make you do this work?
- Tell us about a time when you were proud of something you or your team accomplished

Supplies
- Enough chairs for the group
- A few meaningful objects (stones, small curiosities or toys that can be handled) that the group can choose for the storyteller to hold
- Small package of tissues

Tips for creating safe space
- Minimize distractions (background conversations, cell phones, etc.)
- Be aware of possible power dynamics in the group
- Strongly consider not taking photos or audio recordings during the story circle
- Plan enough time for everyone in the circle to tell a story and receive feedback (10 minutes per person)
**Size and time**

We recommend keeping story circles between four and eight people, including the facilitator. Allow 50 minutes for four people and 90 minutes for eight people.

**Step 1: Warm Up**

Participants sit in a circle. The facilitator welcomes them, and explains the intent for the circle. The facilitator asks an easy question for everyone to answer. People can also give their name if they don't know each other.

Examples (or use your own)

- At weddings, do you dance or watch from the sidelines?
- What is your most vivid memory of the morning?
- Do you fall asleep during movies?
- Do you order chocolate or fruit for dessert when you are at a restaurant?
- What is your least favorite thing about traveling?
- What is the most amazing water you've ever drunk?

Besides putting people at ease, this warm up evokes “mini-stories” from each person. The facilitator can tell everyone.

**Step 2: Introduce Guidelines**

The facilitator introduces how the story circle will be conducted.

Once the circle has started, keep it whole (no one should leave or join unless the group decides it's OK in advance).

The group picks a closing word. It can be a word unique to the place or language, like “pau,” which means “done” in Hawaiian, or word that has meaning the group gathered, like “breathe” to a group working on smoke-free air. Or it can be fun – whatever the group decides. When a person tells a story in the circle, the storyteller will end with that word. The group repeats that word after the storyteller says it to signify having listened.

The group selects an object. While a person holds the object, he or she's the only one telling the story—all others are listeners. The object goes into the middle of the circle, is picked up by a person ready to tell a story, then goes back into the middle of the circle.
Respect other peoples' perspectives.

After saying the end word, the storyteller can say whether he or she feels comfortable with anyone in the group sharing the story outside of the story circle.

[If there is feedback] Start feedback process after each story. Participants can opt out of feedback. Feedback guidelines:

- Be a mirror (reflect your experience with the story)
- Frame your comments in a positive manner
- Talk about what pieces of the story struck an emotional chord
- Ask if there are questions. Remind participants to be active listeners.

Step 3: Start the Circle

Place the object in the center of the circle and begin. Gently remind participants who forget to use the object or the finish word. If feedback’s included, ask storytellers if they’d like it or not after they say the finish word. The facilitator should participate in the storytelling.

Step 4: Reflect

After everyone has a chance to tell their story, ask the group to reflect on the experience: What was comfortable? What was uncomfortable? What did people learn about storytelling and story listening?

Every experience shared is valid. The facilitator’s role is to be generally affirmative and keep the discussion on track.

Step 5: Close the Circle

Thank storytellers for sharing, noting that they’re already storytellers. You may choose to ask people to volunteer what they’re taking away from the experience. If someone wants to work more on their story, now’s the time to connect them to other resources.

Step 6: [Optional] Recruit Storytellers

After the circle disbands, approach people with stories that would forward your group’s work (so long as they said they were comfortable with their stories being shared). Ask them if they would be willing to repeat their story in another context for a specific, shared purpose (in a letter to the editor, on video, in a public hearing, etc.). Offer them resources so they can practice and, in some cases, be coached.
3. Practice Telling Stories

With a little practice, anyone can tell a compact version of their story to another person. Sometimes people discover they have more than one story to tell, or that they enjoy being a storyteller, so this exercise can help you discover who the “story champions” are in your community.

The Two Minute Story

Notecard exercise

Give every person in the group a 3x5 note card with the instructions to write the notes they need to tell their story out loud—phrases, symbols, names—whatever will prompt them as they tell their story to a partner. Both sides of the card can be used, but discourage writing the story as if it would be read from the card. Allow five to ten minutes for this.

Practice with a partner

When the notecards are written, have people pair up. Give instructions:

• The first person tells their story, referring to the notecard when necessary. The second person listens actively but without speaking.
• After a few minutes, there will be a prompt for the second person to give positive feedback about the story they just heard—what they liked best, what touched them.
• The process repeats with the second person as the storyteller and the first person as the listener.

Give each pair about three minutes for the story to be told, then the same amount of time for feedback. Switch roles and repeat for a total of about 15 minutes for the exercise.

Make the story better

Your goal is to tell stories that touch hearts and make people care. Stories with community impact have at least a few of these elements:

Passion—Emotion drives why something matters, what the main character wants.
Character—If it’s your story, let your personality show as you tell it—speak as you would to a friend. If you’re telling it as a member of a community, include details that show the listener what it’s like to live in that community. Create a character the audience cares about.
Conflict—What is stopping the main character from getting what she wants?
Transformation—What did the storyteller come to realize? What change did this bring about?
Pivot—How does that realization or change translate to a larger issue, value, or vision?
Action—What is the storyteller asking the listener(s) to do?
To tell a story

- Use your real voice
- Say “I” not “we”
- Show, don’t tell
- Have a hero/villain and a challenge
- End happy and point to a solution

Have people tell their story to their partner again, this time incorporating at least one or two of the six elements. Time the stories for two minutes, giving people an indicator when at the 90 second mark.

In the Appendix you’ll find a bookmark you can hand out at this time—people find it useful to help them shape their story.
4. Tell Stories Strategically

Your group is likely to find stories that speak deeply to the need and desire of many people in the community to improve the health of their environment. The stories don't take the place of data and facts to justify solutions, but used alongside quantitative information, they provide a visceral picture of context and relevance—the impact on lives—which is what people care about.

Stories can be told and shared in several ways: in person, on video (individual or community), a series of photos or other kind of art, photos with quotes, written, an audio recording...there are more.

Here's how some communities have used them.

- Sustainability after funding ends
- As a recruitment tool for new partners
- Sustainability/fundraising
- Show success/lessons learned to funders
- Engage community members
- Testimony/educational visits with elected officials
- Place on Facebook and websites to educate public and gain support for smoke-free policies
- Share with coalition members
- Use to inspire friends and family
- Remind myself that my work matters
- Share with staff/policy makers
- Show success/lessons learned
- Media interviews/newspaper articles
- Engage community members
- To take a complex issue and translate it into something personal and relatable
- To open a community dialogue
- Build commonality
- To build relationships and build capacity
- Solicit sponsors
- Change people's frame of thinking on important issues/topics
Story Use Plan

Choosing the right story and storyteller for a particular goal and audience makes a difference in how effectively the story inspires change.

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<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Story</th>
<th>Storyteller</th>
<th>Action</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What change do you want?</td>
<td>Who are you trying to inform?</td>
<td>What message or story will be most credible? Any key points?</td>
<td>Who will be the most credible messenger for this story to this audience?</td>
<td>What do you want the audience to do?</td>
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### Story Use Plan with Examples

<table>
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</tr>
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<td>More fresh produce in our school district’s meal program</td>
<td>Our school board</td>
<td>I need stable markets, like a school district, for my products – and it makes me proud that kids in the area get to eat food I grew instead of food from another state. I’m committed to working with your district’s food service coordinator to make farm to school possible</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>Support a farm to school program in your district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More fresh produce in our school district’s meal program</td>
<td>Our school board</td>
<td>We make meals with fresh produce that fit within budget, and saw a 70% increase in school lunch participation since we did. My kitchen staff loves knowing what they serve students is healthy, and hearing the kids say how much they like it</td>
<td>Neighboring district’s food service coordinator</td>
<td>Support a farm to school program in your district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More fresh produce in our school district’s meal program</td>
<td>Our school board</td>
<td>When we go to the grocery store, my kids want me to buy fresh carrots and broccoli because they tried it during a field trip to the farmers’ market, and liked it! Now we’re trying to eat more veggies at home, and I want this to be part of my kids’ school day</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Support a farm to school program in your district</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Keep this in mind: try adding a fact within the story itself only if it complements the story. Is there one “swivel head statistic” that would speak to your audience?
5. Video Launch Kit

If your community produces a video story, formally launch it with all who were involved with its creation—make it an event. Here’s an example of a launch letter (an example of a postcard is in the Appendix).

Dear [name of person],

We are excited to announce the launch of [name of community's] stories! You’ve worked hard to bring healthy changes to [name of community]; now it’s time to celebrate your success. All videos can be found at [web address].

We encourage you to celebrate your success and share your stories. Included in this packet are tools to support you:

• One DVD with all [number of stories and name of community] stories and the postcard design for reprints
• Ten story elements bookmarks
• 20 postcards to send to community members

The postcards are designed with space for you to write a personalized note to the recipient and we encourage you to make a specific ask. Here are a few examples of ways to use your stories:

• Share with coalition members, community and organization leaders to increase engagement
• Use to educate key stakeholders
• Open up community dialogue by showing your stories at a public or virtual event
• Use the stories to translate a complex issue into something personal and relatable
• Use to inspire friends and family
• Show stories as an example of lessons learned and successes
• As a tool to recruit new partners or solicit sponsors
• Share with schools, hospitals, and businesses to reach broader audiences

There are many ways you can use your stories—we encourage you to get creative and think strategically about your story use.

In addition to building local community awareness, why not share your stories globally on the internet? Posting your stories on social media sites increases the reach of your work. When you post your stories on Facebook and Twitter, please tag your partners and Prevention Speaks (#PrevSpeaks). We would love to stay connected and have a conversation with you online.

Community Commons (communitycommons.org) is another great resource to connect with organizations from around the nation and learn together. Online resources give you a chance to share your story with communities across the country, exchange information, and build collaborative relationships.

Sincerely,
Tips for Getting “Good” Stories

How do you plan to use these stories?

Here is an example from California: “Collect stories of community innovation…and share those successes with organizational leaders, community partners, policy-makers, and the media. The stories highlight concrete, on-the-ground change in the food and physical activity environments in communities, stories that can help people understand what “improving community environments” means and can inspire them to do or support this work.”

Why sharing your goal is important

Asking people to share their “stories” can seem very risky to people. It helps to share a goal that is important to them. Give them a concrete reason why it is important to share.

“Knowing that what they will be talking about will be valuable will help people to volunteer what they know.”

—from Anecdote Circle, Cognitive Edge

Don’t ask for stories

We have found in our work that asking people for stories doesn’t help and, in fact, seems to get in the way.

“Never ‘ask’ for a story. Never tell people ‘we want your stories’ or in any way refer to a story as a thing. If you do that, you will tap into a lot of misperceptions about what a ‘story’ is. You don’t want people to get the idea that you want them to perform or make things up.”

—from Anecdote Circle, Cognitive Edge

If I can’t call them stories...what can I call them?

Experiences, moments, times, anecdotes.

“Ask ‘Was there a time you felt proud’ rather than ‘what were your accomplishments.’ Always frame your introductions to natural storytelling in terms of events: times, moments, experiences, instances, things that happened, and so on.”

—from Anecdote Circle, Cognitive Edge
A few more questions from the California Storybank

- What first attracted you to doing this work? Why is it so important?
- What was the biggest surprise for you as the project got underway?
- What were/are the toughest barriers to achieving your goals?
- How has your project improved community health?
- How has participation in this program changed your own life?
- What are you most proud of?
- What do you think other communities might learn from your work?
Frequently Asked Questions

Do I have to get permission to tell someone’s story?
The rule of thumb is give credit, ask permission. Make sure you acknowledge whose story you are telling. And yes, if you are going to use someone’s personal story, especially in a public setting, it is best to get permission. You may want to consider getting a signed release form. This allows you to use a story in multiple ways. It also ensures that the person who told you the story understands how you intend to use it.

Can I change what someone has said? Or add to it?
Ideally, you will be working with a person to craft their story and you can ask for “creative license.” Or don’t use quotations marks so you are not giving the impression that you are directly quoting.

I ask people for stories but they say they don’t remember any. What do I do?
The best story prompt doesn’t use the word story at all. Try, “Tell me a time…”

What if a story isn’t very compelling?
Storyteller Lori Silverman says that most stories will require changes or “crafting” to get the “most meaning and communication potential.”

I can’t tell stories to ____ (researchers, doctors, health officers). They want data and facts and will not be convinced with out them.
It doesn’t have to be either/or…either a story or statistics. The strongest case may include both a compelling story and then data or facts to back it up.

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1Stories as Best Practice, Andy Goodman
2Wake me When the Data are Over, Lori Silverman
3Andy Goodman’s Story Telling Class
Resources

Here are just a few of the resources we used in developing the Storytelling Toolkit. There’s much more out there—please explore!

Creative Narrations: multimedia for community development [http://www.creativenarrations.net/]
The Digital Naturalist (digital storytelling) [http://www.thedigitalnaturalist.com]
Andy Goodman (communications consultant) [http://www.agoodmanonline.com]
Silverman, Lori; Partners for Progress. [www.lorisilverman.com]
WDYDWYD (why do you do what you do?) [http://www.wdydwyd.com]
Appendix

For printing on 8 1/2 inch by 11 inch paper:

- Story Readiness Graph ........................ Page 23
- Six Elements of Story Bookmark .......... Page 24
- Video Launch Postcard ...................... Page 25–26
How ready do you feel to use stories with your community?

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Six Tips for Story

Passion
Character
Conflict
Transformation
Pivot
Action

prevention Speaks.org

prevention Speaks.org

prevention Speaks.org
Great things happen when people come together...

watch

share

celebrate!

Great things happen when people come together...

watch

share

celebrate!
We work hard to bring healthy change to our community. Let's keep showing these stories.

Watch, share, celebrate our success!

web address: