



USING STORYTELLERS IN LIBRARIES

This factsheet has been compiled in response to the many queries we have had from Librarians over the years. National Storytelling Week is the first week of February and many libraries use this as a platform to encourage people to visit their local library.

WHAT IS A STORYTELLER?

- * A storyteller is an artist, an entertainer and an educator. Storytelling is one of the most ancient art forms, stretching back for as long as humans have had speech.
- * A storyteller uses words to take you on a journey of the imagination. Each person will hear something different as the story is created in the space between the teller and the listener.
- * Storytellers may tell traditional folk tales, written tales, anecdotes, urban myths, and stories from history, religious or moral tales, stories they have created themselves or which have been created for a specific event. Some storytellers will create a story spontaneously to suit the audience.
- * A storyteller tells stories from memory rather than reading them from the book, memorising stories image by image not word for word.
- * Storytellers may tell a story differently each time they tell it, interacting with their audience, choosing stories and images to communicate with them.
- * Some storytellers use music, dance, song, pictures or puppets.
- * Many storytellers offer workshop sessions, which may either teach storytelling skills or engage participants in creative activities linked to the stories.



WHY TELL STORIES IN LIBRARIES?

Libraries are places for informal & formal learning (storytelling supports both). Including storytelling in your programme of events will draw people in.

Libraries are about stories, stories both factual and fictional about people's lives, nature, the universe, the past and the future, the possible and the impossible. In comparison to the written word, storytelling is unique in that both the tangible and the intangible can be explored simultaneously.

Stories build bridges between near and far in both space and time, enabling the listener to journey in their mind to a different time and place. Words create images in the minds of the listeners and through imagination and memory can trigger all the senses, providing a rich experience.

Storytelling is a popular event in the children's section of the library, encouraging pre-school children to use and enjoy the library and providing a lure to older children during school holidays. Schools are often keen to bring classes to the local library to encourage the children to use the library for homework, storytelling presents the library as a place of entertainment as well as of learning.

Storytelling is accessible to a diverse audience, it helps people with a variety of learning disabilities to enjoy and understand the treasures of literature and folklore.

Storytellers are important contributors to sustaining culture, by preserving and perpetuating intangible heritage through the oral tradition. You might use storytelling events to encourage a variety of ethnic groups into the library using storytellers steeped in their culture.

The telling of Stories was important in pre-industrial Britain. There are large collections of stories about characters from history that can inform teaching and enhance local history collections. If allowed to assist with the construction of narratives within the library framework, communities can feel more of a sense of 'ownership of the collections'.

Stories appeal to a wide age range and some libraries in the West Midlands have had great success in building programmes of adult storytelling in the evenings.



WHAT CAN A STORYTELLER DO FOR A LIBRARY?

Storytelling sessions in Libraries can be used to bring literature to life, focusing attention on special collections or exhibits; creating the atmosphere of a particular period and relating information in ways that are easily remembered.

What is special about storytellers and storytelling?

- Stories and storytelling are universal aspects of human communication - connecting people through time and across cultures
- Storytelling isn't just for children, storytellers work with all age groups, stories give people a reason to listen and something to remember.
- Storytelling looks at objects and events from a human perspective, making it easier for people to relate to them.
- Storytelling develops awareness of historical and global cultures, the need for inter-generational exchange and its rewards. A storyteller can widen the range of people's emotional, cultural and moral responses. Stories from a specific culture can be used to provide an insight into that culture.
- Hearing traditional tales can provide the atmosphere of the time and place the stories are set in.
- Traditional tales often provide clues that help us understand the past. Local tales are remembered long after paper records have faded.
- Storytellers frequently research stories or create stories, which can continue to be used by staff long after the event.
- Storytelling encourages a questioning attitude and inspires people to learn.
- A storyteller can teach storytelling skills to library staff to enhance their interactions with the public.
- Some storytellers can provide other types of workshop sessions. Some specialise in reminiscence work encouraging older people to share their memories and provide oral history resources for use with younger visitors.



CHECKLIST OF THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN BOOKING A STORYTELLER

With an ever-increasing variety of storytellers to choose from, how do you find those who will suit you? Whatever event you are planning, give yourself plenty of time. Many popular storytellers are booked up months in advance.

Decide what the main reasons are for wanting to book a storyteller:

- To provide added value to education sessions.
- To provide family entertainment – perhaps a number of short sessions during the day
- To provide an entertaining performance for adults and older children linked to collections (perhaps during an evening)
- To encourage a reminiscence or local history project through the use of local folk tales.
- To inspire staff and boost their confidence in providing storytelling sessions.

Have a clear idea of the sort of event you want:

- Is this to be a one-off event or a residency?
- Do you want a performance or a workshop?
- Will it be formal or relaxed, a performance at a set time in front of a large audience or working with smaller groups as and when they turn up?
- Are you looking for stories on a particular theme or from a specific culture?
- How many sessions will there be?
- How long do you want each session to be?

Audience:

- What age groups will be involved?
- Will the ages be mixed?
e.g. school groups, families or adults? Mixed?
- Have any of them special needs the storyteller should be aware of?
- How much audience participation do you want?

Timing:

- Consider carefully the time of the Storytelling session(s).

Environment:

- Remember that extraneous sounds carry and can be disruptive.
- Do you want it to be intimate or open?
- What area of the library are you planning to use?
- How do you want to arrange the performance space – will the Storyteller bring drapes, a set (backdrop), will they require a chair, table, water etc?]
- Do you require the storyteller to work outdoors?



Compiling your ideas into a brief:

Your brief should include:

- The main reasons for wanting to book a storyteller.
- The type or style of stories you are looking for.
- Information about any research required or specific stories you would like performed.
- The sort of event you want.
- The audience you are hoping to attract – age and numbers
- The date of the event.
- Length and times of sessions.
- Where you are planning to hold the sessions and what the space is like.
- What other staff and/or artists might be working on the project.

In communicating with storytellers and finding somebody who fits your needs it may be useful to compile your thoughts into a short brief. However, this brief should recognise that storytellers are creative artists, programme managers may benefit from avoiding being too prescriptive and instead encourage artistic input from the storyteller.

Having defined the context for your storytelling event should make choosing a type of storyteller easier. Some Storytellers perform individually, or as a duo or a group, some with music. Sometimes the storytelling is very dramatic and sometimes - as if you are by the fireside!

When booking a Storyteller, first and foremost ensure that the storyteller actually is a storyteller and not somebody reading from books (a skill many of your staff have already developed).

Remember that if you are requiring a storyteller to research and learn new material they will need plenty of time to do so.

Types of Storyteller:

Depending on the specific type of event you are planning, you may choose between:

- A Costumed Storyteller with good press publicity potential. (A number of high quality Storytellers like to dress inconspicuously believing that their appearance should not take the audiences attention away from the story)
- A performance Storyteller who can hold a large audience.
- A Storyteller who has experience of working with family groups and a repertoire of stories for 'tinies' who are often brought along to such events.
- A Storyteller from the region or with a good knowledge of local stories or someone who is able/willing to do the research or use your research as appropriate.
- A teller of traditional tales.
- Someone who can organise workshops.

Kinds of Stories:

Professional storytellers will have a solid repertoire to offer. When commissioning storytellers, it is helpful to brief them about what kind of stories you would like them to tell. Various people have put forward definitions of different kinds of stories, and the following



descriptions are adapted from Grainger, T. 1997:23, *Traditional Storytelling in the primary classroom*. Warwickshire: Scholastic Primary Professional Bookshelf.

Folk tales emerged from the need that communities have for sharing their wisdom and experience in a memorable manner. Animals often feature alongside, or instead of humans. Includes the trickster tales of Ananse (Africa/ America), Coyote (North America), Baba Yaga (Russia)

Fairy tales are also folk narratives, which open up the world of magic, of kings, queens, little people and the supernatural. Includes many tales collected by historians, scholars and folklorists including the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen and Andrew Lang.

Legends and sagas usually refer to kings, great heroes and others who lived in the period before written records such as Kings Arthur and the Greek Legends of the Trojan War.

Myths tend to refer to stories, which explain the origins of natural and supernatural phenomena, and human and superhuman characteristics. Examples include Greek and Norse Myths and the great Hindu myths.

Fables are often very short tales with overt morals, few characters and a strong element of the fabulous.

Epics are stories, which were composed as poetry.

Ballads are closely related to tales of heroes and epics and are sung or chanted to recount heroic deeds.

Tall tales are those in which exaggeration has run riot and the story has become extravagant, nonsensical and yet entertaining.

A further category is the **urban myths**, which are set in modern times, and more particularly are often passed off as truth.

When you have an idea of the sort of storyteller you are aiming for:

- Look in the quick reference section of the Directory of Storytellers, note those who meet your requirements.
- Look in the County listing to see which storytellers are local to you.
- Look through the Directory and pick out storytellers who sound as if they tell the kind of stories that would be suitable for your event.
- Phone the storytellers on your short-list to discuss your needs, they may be able to give you more ideas about what you could do or help you fine-tune your plans.
- Ask what they charge and if this includes travelling expenses.
- Ask if they are available on the dates you want.
- Ask for a couple of references from people for whom they have done similar work in the last few years.
- Ask when they are performing and check them out by attending their events.
- You do not have to make a firm booking at this stage.

When you have decided which Storyteller you want to book:

- Phone to confirm they are still free and are willing to come.
- Write to confirm date, time, place and fee.
- If you are sent a contract please complete and send it back in good time.
- Include a map and a timetable.



- If you have discussed a potential booking with a storyteller, and decided not to employ them, please contact them in good time so they can release the date for other bookings.

GETTING THE BEST FROM YOUR STORYTELLER

Employing any artist, writer, poet or storyteller is an expense and you want your money's worth. How do you ensure success on the day?

When you are planning the event:

- Choose a venue where the storyteller and audience will not be disturbed.
- Think about how you will set up the space so the audience can sit in comfort and see the storyteller clearly. If there is to be a workshop ask the storyteller how they want the room set out. Discuss with the storyteller how long each session is to be.
- Ask the Storyteller to provide you with publicity photos and media information and provide them with copies of publicity and reviews for the event.
- Advertise the event, including the storytellers name and giving some idea of what the session/s will be like.

The week before:

Confirmations of booking are essential for both parties – please note that some Storytellers have a cancellation fee. If you have to cancel due to inclement weather will you reschedule?

- Phone the storyteller to ensure that they have received your confirmation, map, timetable etc. Ask if there is anything they will need you to provide on the day. What are the plans for lunch or other refreshments? Confirm arrangements for payment.
- If they are coming by car confirm parking arrangements.
- Make sure all your staff know that there is a storyteller coming, where they will be working and when.

On the day:

- Keep a lookout to escort the storyteller to the exact venue where they will be working, offer them a drink, ask if they need help carrying anything from their car. Treat the Storyteller as a guest.
- Have a representative available to help unload and to orient them with the performance space, lighting, and electrical outlets.
- Before they start make sure they have a glass of water, know where the toilets and staff room are, check if there is anything else they need.
- If you are introducing them check how they want to be introduced and how to pronounce their name, many storytellers are happy to introduce themselves.
- Do not leave the storyteller alone with children, it is difficult to tell and supervise. This ensures you are complying with the Child Protection Act.
- Avoid interruptions during the session as this can spoil the magic.
- At break times, if the storyteller has joined you in the staff room, ensure they are included in the conversation.

Afterwards:

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- Give the storyteller constructive feedback - what went well, any concerns.
 - Forward any visitor comments sent to you via evaluation forms or thank you letters
- Ensure payment is sent promptly.