



ORGANISING A STORYTELLING CLUB

A beginners' guide

By Tina Bilbé

INTRODUCTION

I remember the joy I felt when I first encountered storytelling, how wonderful it was, how everyone must want to share with me this amazing experience. But the only events I knew about were quite a distance to travel so I decided to try and get something going locally. I found a venue; I produced posters and spread them widely. The first event had plenty of people, but slowly it faded out until I gave up.

What had I done wrong? What could I have done better? I asked for advice and here is what I've been given. My thanks to all those who have contributed especially Grenville Sherringham who has given us his clubs constitution.

VENUE

- All venues should now have disabled access facilities.
- Is the venue easy to get to by public transport and is the parking adequate for people arriving by car?
- When people arrive will it be easy for them to find the storytelling session?
- Is the seating comfortable and the room welcoming?
- What are the external noise levels like? It is easier to hear stories in a quiet room, loud traffic or a noisy Juke-box downstairs will distract. If it's warm you may need the windows open, a stuffy room can put people to sleep however good the storytellers are.
- Refreshments should be available at some point during the evening.

Many of these requirements can be met by pubs and arts centres. Some will give you a room for free on weekday evenings so it's worth shopping around. You should also bear in mind how your venue is perceived locally; will your prospective audience feel comfortable there?

The atmosphere of the venue can be enhanced with wall hangings and candles. Make sure you comply with fire regulations.

The host at the venue, especially if it's a pub or other public space, can also make a difference. Look for somewhere with an enthusiastic approach and cultivate any staff you will be in contact with. If they are not willing to point enquirers to where you are sitting, turn the Juke-box down, help advertise, you may have problems.



FORMAT

- What type of event are you planning?
- Do you want a regular monthly event? If so your venue should be available on the same night every month. Book it well in advance.
- Are you planning a one off event, a series of performances from well-known storytellers or providing a safe environment for beginners?
- If you are not inviting guest storytellers, have you a core group who can encourage and inspire newcomers and entertain those who have just come to listen?
- Do you like a 'Folk Club' format with a few floor spots from local tellers before the booked storyteller performs?

The type of event you are planning will have a bearing on your venue and target audience.

COMPERING THE EVENT

Someone needs to act as Master of Ceremonies and get things going. The type of person good at this need not be the person doing the main organisation. For a club featuring guest tellers you need someone who is good at quietening an audience and introducing the guest briefly, descriptively and enthusiastically. For an informal storytelling circle you need someone who will tell the first story and encourage others to follow on. They may also have to tactfully curtail anyone who takes more than their fair share of time. If you are charging an entrance fee, you will need someone 'on the door' with a cash box and float (about £20.00 in change).

PUBLICITY

Storytellers do not have the same high profile as pop stars, footballers or TV personalities, so let the audience know a little about them. Try to include a photo or some form of visual image on your flyer, word it to appeal to your target audience. If you are planning a series of events find a style that suits you and use it in your future publicity so people get to recognise it. Don't just put flyers out in the venue; think of everywhere your prospective audience might go and arrange for flyers to go there. Other venues are usually supportive, they may want your help to publicise their own events.

Use the local 'What's On' pages in the papers, on local radio. Put flyers in libraries, schools, bookshops, adult education centres, colleges, galleries, sports and leisure centres, community centres, doctors' and dentists' waiting rooms, ask nearby shops to put them in their window. You should be able to spread them far and wide with the simple goodwill of the local community.

Audience: Who do you think would be most interested in coming to your events? This may be affected by whether you have a guest storyteller and if so which one. Target your publicity towards the audience you are aiming for. If you are inviting a storyteller from a particular ethnic background you should make a special effort to ensure that the corresponding local ethnic community knows about it.

A storytelling workshop or course can be a good way to launch a story-sharing club. Many centres for adult education are open to ideas for new courses and they already have publicity organised. Don't just rely on their publicity, produce something eye-catching and distribute it. Teachers centres, libraries museums and country parks are all potential places in which to place publicity for workshops.

There are a lot of storytelling enthusiasts willing to travel to see a favourite storyteller, send information to the Sfs Storytelling Diary via our website or by post. Ensure the Local and



Regional Arts Officers have information about your events. You may even be able to get help with funding from them.

Mailing lists: If you are organising an irregular series of events or just one or two a year, it is worth asking people who come along if they would like to be informed of future events. Send them flyers in plenty of time so they aren't booked for anything else. This is more expensive than broadcasting hundreds of leaflets but has a greater success rate. Try to convince your audience that they must spread the word. Word of mouth is the most influential form of publicity.

The Press, Local Radio and TV: Write a press release about your forthcoming event, read the local papers and copy their style, make it sound interesting, use expressive language, give it local relevance. 'Local Storytellers to open new storytelling club.' or 'A one off opportunity to see internationally famous storyteller... ..at your local storytelling club.' If you only give them the date, time, place and storyteller's name that is all they can quote. Discover which section of the 'What's On' page they would put storytelling under, different events might benefit from being under different sections, talk to them about it. Make sure information reaches them in time but not too far in advance, check their deadlines, phone and ask for advice on the best time to send it. Follow up your press release with a phone call asking if they would like a photo. Local radio and TV may also be interested. Invite them to come along and find out what storytelling is all about, a good review is valuable but make sure they understand that you need publicity before the event. There won't be much of a story if no one comes because they didn't know it was happening.

Keep on publicising your events as widely as you can. You can never relax where advertising is concerned.

ORGANISATION

Form a committee. Organising an event or running a club involves a lot of hard work, which is easier if shared. Ask friends, fellow enthusiasts and participants' if they would be willing to give you a hand, be specific about what you need help with, e.g. collecting the money on the night, or publicity. Is there an extrovert willing to be Master of Ceremonies on the evening, or take turns at it? If you wish to invite guest tellers you might ask someone to plan the programme and send the invitations, or do some fundraising to help pay for the events. Once there is a small committee with a simple constitution, it is easier to get funding. (A sample constitution from Grenville Sherringham is at the back.)

Booking storytellers: When you book a storyteller you should confirm the booking, in writing, as soon as possible. Make sure you include: a map of how to get to the venue; what their fee will be; whether travel is being paid on top of this. If they are travelling some distance you might offer a bed for the night and/or a meal at a member's home.

FUNDING

Regional Arts Boards, the Lottery and Local Councils all have arts budgets. Storytelling is classed as 'Live Literature'. Contact them to find out what their funding policies are and when applications have to be in. Be patient and polite, politicians keep changing the goal posts, Arts Officers are overworked, underpaid, and they hold the purse strings. If you sound positive, enthusiastic and organised when you phone for information they may remember you that way when they receive your application. Filling in funding applications is time consuming, you need to decide whether the funding gained is worth

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the time spent. Look for funding for a specific project, festival or series of events rather than an ongoing commitment. There is also an element of building relationships, if the funding bodies are aware of storytelling and fund some good events they will be more inclined to fund it in the future.

FINAL WORDS

- Time, energy, commitment and planning are the keys to success.
- Get as much help as you can, a few reliable friends are essential.
- Provide a good setting and a core group.
- Publicise constantly.

A successful club or event makes all the effort worthwhile.



SAMPLE CONSTITUTION FOR A STORYTELLING CLUB
Provided by Grenville Sherringham

Malvern Storytelling Club
CONSTITUTION

Aim

To promote the art of storytelling in the counties of Herefordshire and Worcestershire.

Objectives

1. To provide a regular venue where storytellers and others interested in the art of storytelling can meet and develop their skills.
2. To provide opportunities for people in the counties of Herefordshire and Worcestershire to listen to professional storytellers.
3. To provide information on storytelling activities in the West Midlands.

Activities

1. Operate a monthly storytelling club open to all, with opportunities to participate and develop skills.
2. Promote and support events which feature professional storytellers, both through the monthly club and other local events..
3. Maintain a database of people interested in storytelling, and circulate information on relevant local and regional events.

Governing Body

The club will be managed by a committee of at least four members – chair, vice-chair, secretary and treasurer. Membership of the committee is open to all with an interest in storytelling and is not time limited. If one of the four key positions becomes vacant, applications will be invited from people on the club's database. If a position is contested, an election will be held, which will be open to all on the database or with a proven interest in promoting storytelling.

Membership

Membership is free and open to all. The organisation is under no obligation to provide any services to members. Inclusion on the database will be deemed to constitute membership of the club.

Assets

The organisations assets will be held in a building society or bank account, and records of income and expenditure will be available for inspection by any member. The organisation can be wound up at any time by a unanimous decision of the committee. Any remaining assets will be donated to the Society for Storytelling or other charitable organisation supporting the aims and objectives of the club, as agreed by the committee.

Signed..... Position.....

Date.....