



# DETAILED STORY CIRCLE INSTRUCTIONS

**A Story Circle is a small group of individuals sitting in a circle, sharing stories—usually from their own experience or imagination—focusing on a common theme.** As each person in turn shares a story, a richer and more complex story emerges. By the end, people see both real differences and things their stories have in common. A Story Circle is a journey into its theme, with multiple dimensions, twists, and turns.

Story Circles are often understood as deriving from indigenous traditions. There are many variations. Theater makers such as Roadside Theater and John O’Neal have been central in developing the practice for use in creating original performance and community telling and listening projects.

Story Circles are simple and often surprisingly powerful. Sharing a story from your own experience is different from expressing an opinion: whereas opinions often clash, no one knows more about your own experience than you, so no one can refute your story. Even when views are highly polarized—when two tellers in a Circle are unlikely to ever have a civil conversation in other circumstances—it’s possible to have a respectful Story Circle, sharing deep but different truths and considering together what they may mean.

## **SIZE**

The best Story Circles have 6-10 people. You can do a single Story Circle with people sitting around a kitchen table, or run a Story Circle event with a hundred people divided into a dozen Circles. With a large group, you can let people find their own circles, or use a method that randomizes them, always good for mixing things up. Either count off as you split into groups, with each person counting one, two, three, and so on up to the total number of groups to make random groups of just the right size. Or pre-number blank nametags so that folks can glance at their name tags when it’s time to split into groups, then follow the facilitator holding their number.

## **SPACE**

If you do multiple Story Circles at the same time, space needs to be organized so that people can hear each other without yelling and there isn’t too much sound-bleed from the next circle. If you have access to separate spaces such as classrooms, that’s a good way to do it. But you can set up several circles of chairs in one big room such as a gym or church basement, so long as you leave plenty of room between circles.

## **FACILITATORS**

Each Story Circle has a facilitator who makes sure that people know and follow the guidelines, keeps time, and ensures that everyone has equal space and attention. The best facilitators are even-handed individuals who don’t need to dominate things. Facilitators need training. The best way to train them is to give each of them a copy of these instructions beforehand, then do a demonstration Story Circle together, leaving time to ask questions and share comments as well as follow the normal Story Circle procedure. You can have facilitators arrive an hour before the event to be trained, or do it at a separate time and place.

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**TOGETHER, WE CREATE.**

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## RECORDERS

Not all Story Circles capture or document stories; sometimes just the telling and reflection is enough. But in USDAC National Actions such as the People's State of the Union, for instance, we want to be sure that everyone who wishes has the opportunity to upload a story to a web portal where anyone can read and be inspired by them. If you want to capture stories at your Imagining, at least one scribe or recorder is needed for every Story Circle group. Please see detailed instructions for scribes below.

## INTRODUCTION

Story Circles start with everyone in the same space listening to an introduction from the exercise leader. **Here's a sample script for that:**

*Story Circles are a simple way to get at complicated truths. The guidelines are easy, and the results are often surprising.*

*Basically, we divide into random groups of approximately eight. Each group has a facilitator and one or more recorders or scribes to capture stories. Everyone in the group has an equal amount of time—usually two or three minutes—to tell a story on a common theme. A story is anything that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Today we ask you to tell a story of up to three minutes based on your chosen prompt:*

[NOTE: The following is a selection of general prompts for an Imagining; craft your own as appropriate to your event, remembering to make prompts easily understandable and inviting to participants of all ages and backgrounds. You can provide a single prompt or offer a selection of up to three.]

- *Share a story about an experience that gave you insight into the state of your community.*
- *Share a story about a time you felt a sense of belonging—or the opposite—in your community.*
- *Share a story of something you saw that gave you a glimpse of the future you desire for this community.*
- *Share a story of something you saw that gave you a glimpse of what needs work if this community's future lives up to its promise.*
- *Share a story of something you experienced that showed you the transformative power of arts and culture in this community.*

*The facilitator tells the first story, then keeps time and calls on each storyteller in turn. The important things to remember are that:*

- *A story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. This isn't a time to offer opinions or commentary, but to share something you experienced or observed.*
- *Listening is as important as speaking; each person receives full attention while telling his or her story. It isn't about performance: the idea is to listen for the essence of what is being shared, however the storyteller wants to tell it.*
- *If you're thinking about the story you're going to tell when it's your turn, it won't be easy to give your full attention to other storytellers. Don't worry about preparing the best story. Don't make notes. I guarantee that stories will arise in your mind, and you will have one to tell when the time comes. Just focus on listening and the rest will take care of itself.*

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- *Attention passes around the circle in either direction. You can pass, and will be given another opportunity to tell a story at the end of the circle. If someone declines, that's fine. Don't insist.*
  - *There are absolutely no questions, criticisms, cross-talk, or comments on any story while sharing is going on. Every story anyone wants to share is welcome. Even if someone's story reminds you of your own experience—even if you were there when the story unfolded and remember it differently—it's not okay to contradict, correct, or embellish someone else's story.*
  - *We thank each storyteller and take a breath between stories to let them sink in before the next story comes.*
  - *At the end, the members of each Story Circle will take a few minutes to reflect together on what was revealed by all of the stories. Were there common themes? Notable differences? What stood out for you, if anything? What touched you, if anything? What feelings and ideas were sparked?*
  - *Then we'll come back together to share something of what we learned with the whole group.*
- Here's what you need to know about where and when the circles will meet.*

(At this point, if you are running multiple Story Circles at the same time, have the facilitators stand up and say their group numbers and locations so people can follow them. Be sure to say when everyone will meet back in the large group for the last part of the Story Circle event.)

### **SAMPLE STORY CIRCLE TIMING**

Timing is flexible. Many groups tell one three-minute story apiece, but in some other Story Circle situations, you may want to allow enough time for two two-minute stories apiece, twice around the circle.

Here's a typical Story Circle schedule:

:00 Exercise leader introduces process

:10 5 minutes to get into small groups

:15 3 minutes apiece for stories, starting with the facilitator (with a brief introduction and a group of 8, this will equal about 30 minutes)

:45 15 minutes to reflect together on the stories shared

1:00 Reassemble into the large group

1:05 15 minutes to share and discuss

1:20 End

### **INSTRUCTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL STORY CIRCLE FACILITATORS**

- (1) Briefly introduce yourself and if necessary, recap the guidelines and time allocations. Answer any questions about these guidelines.
- (2) Remind people of the prompts.
- (3) Remind people that all stories have value, and there is no right answer.
- (4) Repeat the time limit (e.g., three minutes), and say you will signal to wrap up when there are 30 seconds left. Let people finish their sentences when time's up, but don't let them eat too much into others' time. Please bring some type of timer!
- (5) If someone wants to pass on the first go-round, that's fine. Come back at the end to give those who passed another opportunity, but don't insist.

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- (6) Tell the first story to set the tone and demonstrate the practice. Unlike everyone else, you will be able to choose your story beforehand. Choose a story that reveals something or means something to you, to model for others that it is safe to share what really matters.
  - (7) Thank each person at the end of his or her story, allowing a moment of silence between stories. Then call on the next person.
  - (8) At the end, engage the group in reflecting on the stories. Were there common themes? Notable differences? What stood out for you, if anything? What touched you, if anything? What feelings and ideas were sparked? Ask people to raise their hands and call on them in turn. Be sure that no one dominates. Encourage people without putting them on the spot.
  - (9) End on time, thank everyone, and return to the large group.

## **FOR SCRIBES**

You may want to capture people's stories for use in devising a play, as inspiration to poets, as testimony on public issues. If so, be sure to let people know so that if any Story Circle member doesn't want to share a story, that person can say so. But for those who do, there are three ways to capture them.

## **RECORDING AND TRANSCRIBING**

- Pass a digital recorder or smartphone to each storyteller when that person's turn begins. Ask each individual to say and spell the correct name and email address before telling a story, so you can be in touch to ensure accuracy.
- After your Story Circle event, transcribe stories, being careful to attach the correct name and email to each one. Email the typed transcript of each person's story to the teller, giving each teller a deadline to reply with any corrections. Tell people that if they would prefer their stories not be posted or otherwise shared to let you know so you can omit them.

## **WRITING IN REAL TIME**

Using a computer, do your best to capture the story in writing while each storyteller is telling it. It's easier to have two scribes for each Story Circle, each equipped with a computer, alternating transcribing the next story. (Scribes should also take their turns telling a story.) At the end of the Story Circle, connect people with whomever typed their stories and ask them to read the draft text and add or change anything that doesn't capture the story as they wish.

## **WRITING YOUR OWN STORY**

Storytellers can also write up their own stories at or after the event and send to you. Just ask them to be sure to include their names (if they want attribution) and put their story title in the subject line.

To serve as scribes, choose capable writers who can type quickly, hear well, spell correctly, and offer gentle editorial changes that help to clarify stories. These individuals will sometimes be dealing with delicate material, so they should be kind and tactful.