

How to Be a Great Online Storyteller

Part One

Online Storytelling Is Different from In-Person Storytelling

While online storytelling shares many features with in-person storytelling, it is not quite the same. It is not better or worse for the teller or listeners, it just can be different. Understanding the differences and pros and cons will help you be a more effective online storyteller. The most important thing to remember is that even with additional technology or even when you're not in the same room, storytelling is a wonderful, powerful, and accessible art form. You can do this.

What's the same as in-person storytelling

- The audience and teller can connect.
- The stories are powerful.
- Tellers need to pay attention to context and technology.
- Listeners and tellers enjoy the experience.

What's different from in-person storytelling

- Different tools must be used to connect.
- Tellers need to assess which stories work best when told online.
- Technology may require tellers to learn some new skills.

Advantages of online storytelling

- You can tell stories with people next door or on the other side of the planet.
- Each listener feels as if the teller is looking right at them. This isn't possible when telling stories in person.
- Participants don't have to leave home to hear or tell great stories. It makes the art form more accessible for everyone.

Disadvantages of online storytelling

- You can't always respond to listeners the way you might in person.
- Applause and other responses may be muted during your performance.
- You can't see audience members.
- Physicality or call-and-response may not work as well online.

Transferable Skills from In-Person Storytelling to Online

Many of the skills you already have will work just fine for online storytelling.

This includes but is not limited to:

- Using expressive and effective storytelling techniques
- Connecting with the audience by looking at the right place
- Using voices, gestures, and other storytelling techniques
- Picking the right story for your audience
- Changing the story if your audience changes
- Having fun with both the story and audience while you are telling

You may need new skills for online storytelling, but none of them are too difficult. These include:

- Learning how to use your teleconferencing software, such as Zoom or Google Meet
- Learning to look at your camera
- Scaling your gestures so they fit in your screen
- Speaking so the technology can hear you

None of these skills are hard to learn, and they will help make you a great online storyteller. Library staff may be a resource for help.

How to Practice

You already know how to practice your stories. It's a good idea to practice them through your video conferencing software too, because some things may be different. Prepare your space as if you were about to tell online, then turn on your video conferencing software and watch for the following:

- Is your face clearly visible?
- Do your gestures work on the screen? If not, how can you modify them?
- Do you need to adjust your lighting?
- Are you audible? (More about that in part two.)

As a suggestion, set up a call with a friend ahead of time to make sure everything works.

How to Set Your Stage

Even though you're not on a stage, you still have a stage. Your stage is what your audience sees when you perform. Be aware of what's around you, and test any virtual backgrounds carefully before you start. This checklist is a good tool for setting your stage:

- Am I clearly visible and well lit?
- If I am not using a backdrop or virtual background, is the space behind me representative of how I'd like to be seen? Is it tidy? If there are things visible, are they what I want people to associate with me?
- If I'm using a backdrop, does it cover everything behind me? Is the backdrop busy or simple in its design? If it's busy, will it distract the audience? Do I stand out from the backdrop?
- If I'm using a virtual background, is it stable? Does it disappear when I move my body? Does my clothing or body disappear against it?

Examples of Effective Online Stories

Most stories you tell already will work online. Stories that require a lot of movement, gestures, or call-and-response may need modification. The following videos are examples of good online storytelling in a home studio.

- Donna Washington does a great job of using her online stage in this video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WuaS9_CLWHE&t=9s
- Jessica Robinson also does a great job of using her online stage in this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x8Q52eelQA>
- Antonio Rocha sits a bit farther back from the camera and creates a bigger stage in this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gzj6z2T7EjE>

Where Is Your Computer Camera?

You need to know where your computer camera is so you can look into it when telling. This helps your listeners feel as if you are telling directly to them. While these pictures don't cover every kind of technology, they give you a starting place.

