

STORY CIRCLES

A Story Circle is a group facilitation process built around narrative and personal experience. A group of people tell personal stories, led by a facilitator. Story Circles are meant to create a safe space for people to share across different experiences.



Why Story Circles?

Story Circles help individuals develop their own understanding of an issue, situation or idea, and then explore that understanding in dialog with other community members. The process of individual and collective learning often builds empathy and trust. It can also inspire mutual support and generate local resources and solutions.

What can Story Circles Do?

- Create a forum for reporters/civic organizers to listen to diverse community members
- Provide a space for residents to share experiences, resources, and solutions
- Inspire community dialogue and problem-solving
- Strengthen community networks to address local challenges
- Give journalists ideas on what's missing in current coverage of an issue
- Build trust and respect among participants, journalists and civic organizers

A Story...

- Is a sequence of events drawn from the teller's personal experience or imagination.
- Can be fashioned by a memory, a dream, or reflection.
- Typically has a beginning, middle and end, plus characters and a setting.
- Often describes challenges or changes, and may include realizations.
- Is not a lecture, an argument, a debate, an opinion or a complaint.

Story Circles are most successful when they:

- Are preceded by a formal or informal time to socialize.
- Consist of people sitting in a circle without notepads, phones, or recorders.
- Led by a facilitator who opens, leads and closes the Circle.
- Have a stated purpose and theme.
- Use story prompts that people can easily respond to.
- Have a stated time that each story lasts and a timekeeper (which can be the facilitator).
- Allow for silences between or within stories
- Be as much about listening as about telling.

Story Circle Approach

- There are no observers – only participants.
- Participants speak only when it is their turn.
- The order of telling is either clockwise or counterclockwise.
- When it is his/her/their turn, the participant may decide to pass.
- Participants should try not to get distracted by thinking about what story they will tell when it is their turn.
- Participants should listen to the stories told, and, when it is their turn, tell a story brought to mind by the previous stories, or pass.
- Participants and the facilitator never argue with nor debate another participant's story.
- Participants and the facilitator never comment upon another participant's story other than to say (when it is their turn), "That story reminds me of . . ."
- There is no cross-talk in a Story Circle and all responses to a particular story wait their turn and are in story form.
- Participant's stories are only audio or video recorded with their permission.

When a Story Circle should be stopped by the facilitator:

- Sometimes, difficult and painful stories emerge in a Story Circle. The facilitator must exercise judgment about when to continue a Story Circle and when to stop it. Story Circle facilitators should not try to serve as therapists, social workers, or doctors – even if these are their occupations in their professional lives – because participants did not come to the circle to receive these services.
- The facilitator can consider calling for a break, talking individually with the distressed person, referring the distressed person to the proper professional, or rescheduling the Story Circle. It's also possible to include a trauma-informed counselor in the circle to provide additional support.

Resources

- [Story Circles: Deep Listening and Bridgebuilding on Issues That Matter](#) (guide)
- [Nation Day of Racial Healing Story Circle Tool Kit](#) (guide)
- [CapRadio Story Circles: Creating Space for Deep Listening](#) (video)
- [Listen-Learn-Act: Story Circles on the Housing Crisis](#) (video)
- [Story Circles: Contact Zones for Deep Listening](#)
- [Story Circles: How We Use This Indigenous Tool When Reporting On Solutions With Communities](#) (explainer)

Story Circles are often understood as deriving from indigenous traditions. There are many variations. We give thanks and credit to John O'Neal of [Junebug Productions](#) and to [Roadside Theater](#) who have been central in developing the practice for its use in creating storytelling projects in the United States.