

# **Storytelling Tips: Creating, Crafting & Telling Stories**

“Where was this book when I was starting out? It could have saved me a lot of learn-as-I-go work and would’ve kept me on a much more productive path. This book offers a gentle helping hand to anyone wanting to not just do storytelling, but do storytelling well. Mark’s writing is easy to read and enjoyable, but don’t let that fool you. This book is packed full (and I mean packed) of fantastic hints, tips, advice, wisdom and best of all ... stories. It should be on every storyteller’s shelf.”

—**Kim Weitkamp**, Speaker, Storyteller, Humorist, Author

“How I wish this was available when I was first starting out! Mark Goldman offers us a book brimming with valuable insights, tips, and experiences, sprinkled with personal vignettes in Mark’s accessible and approachable style. This is a guide for storytellers both on and off the stage. It will prove invaluable for beginners who want to get started on the right foot, and for seasoned tellers who understand that our colleagues are our greatest teachers. A must-have for every performer!”

—**Karen Chace**, Storyteller/Teaching Artist/Author



# **Storytelling Tips: Creating, Crafting & Telling Stories**

**101 Tips from professional storyteller  
Mark Goldman**



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## *DEDICATION*

This book is dedicated to my mother, Elaine Eller Goldman. She is ninety-four at this writing.

I have learned more from her than anyone else. Most of who I am is due to her unconditional love, alongside her relentless expectation for me to be a caring, responsible man.

In the field of psychodrama, she was my teacher, my mentor, and even my boss, all while still being my mother. Although these roles caused some consternation at different points, in the end I had discovered so much about the human condition; that people are made up of many different parts, and how I could help them to help themselves.

When I was five years old, she bought me a kite (for 10 cents) and we put it together at the kitchen table. Tissue paper, two balsa wood sticks and an old shredded bed sheet for a tail. I ran outside to play with it and soon got it caught in the trees. Holding back the tears, I arrived home and opened the door. There, on the kitchen table, was her wisdom, her heart and her love: a second kite.

## ***ACKNOWLEDGMENTS***

Along this journey, I have learned a great deal from many other tellers/colleagues. Where appropriate, I have listed them and/or given them credit in this book. My thanks to them and everyone who has supported me in my own career as a storyteller, coach and educator.

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Doug Bland, my first storytelling teacher

Liz Warren, Director of the SMCC Storytelling Institute

Doug Lipman, “The Storytelling Coach”

Karen Langford-Chace, Storyteller and Educator

Kim Weitkamp, Storyteller

Laura Packer, Storyteller

Thanks also to all the people who are regular readers and who comment on my web site, blog and newsletter. I will continue to include a new tip each week in the Newsletter. You can follow them at [ww.storytellermark.com/newsletters](http://ww.storytellermark.com/newsletters).

I am indebted to Ted Parkhurst for his friendship and support. Four years ago he said he thought I had a book to write. Little did I know he was right!

June 2014

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## ***PREFACE***

### ***How Did I Get Here?***

In May of 2012, I began publishing a weekly online newsletter on my web site, StorytellerMark.com. When I started, I thought I needed to have a whole list of “tips” that I could insert into each issue. The reality was just the opposite. I had to come up with one tip each week based on my experiences telling, teaching, coaching, doing workshops and having discussions with other tellers.

After just over two years, I have compiled all the tips from the newsletter into this book.

Many of the tips were written with beginning storytellers in mind, although I believe they also apply to seasoned tellers.

They are broken down into four parts:

- General Tips for Storytellers
- Tips for Creating Stories
- Tips for Crafting Stories
- Tips for Telling Stories

M.G.

October 2014

**Part 1**  
***General Tips for Storytellers***

# 1

## *How Do I Start?*

Start by listening!

It's true. In order to learn about storytelling, the first thing you have to be able to do and practice is listening.

Listen to other tellers tell their stories, as many as you can. By listening and watching, you will see and hear what the good tellers do. You may also watch and hear some not-so-practiced tellers. Your job in listening is to start to understand what the great tellers do that make them great, and what mistakes many beginning tellers do that get them in trouble.

When you listen to a teller, ask yourself some questions:

- How did they make me feel and how did they do that?
- Did they paint a picture that I could see in my mind?  
How did they do that?
- Did I understand the essence and the flow of the story? How did they do that?
- Did the beginning engage me? How did they do that?
- Did the ending come to a clear conclusion and satisfy me? How did they do that?

- What parts of themselves did they use most? How can I find the best parts of me to use?
- Did they lose the audience at some point? What was needed to hold the audience's attention?

Listening to as many tellers as possible will be an education in itself. If you don't like what they do, study it. Understand how you can avoid their pitfalls. If you love them, study that part, too. How can you learn from that and use yourself to develop your own successful storytelling space?

Listen to other kinds of speakers, too: newscasters, commentators, video bloggers, TED talk presenters, etc. What do these people do—or not do—that engages their listeners? Your answers will surely relate to the craft of telling stories.

## *Tell Stories You Love But Wait, There's More*

Long-time teller Antonio Sacre once posted on Facebook:

*Want to be a storyteller? Choose a story that matters to you and then ask if there's anyone else besides friends and family who needs to hear it.*

I have often said that the one piece of advice most often offered by seasoned tellers is Rule 1: Tell stories you love! But that's not enough. Rule 2: You have to tell a story that the audience will love.

How can you know? You can never know 100% for sure, but here are two criteria that you should use.

### **Does your story have a universal theme?**

Is it something that most people can relate to? Would the audience be interested beyond the specifics of your story?

*Here is an example:* At one open mic, a young woman told a personal story about the time her mother was left at a gas station on a family road trip. It had the beginnings of a universal theme; getting stranded, forgetting one of your group. The problem was that the girl stayed focused

on how her family always thought this was so funny, and it had become a “Remember the time when Dad left Mom behind?” story. There was never a time when she brought the audience in. She didn’t find a way to translate what the family was feeling into universal terms. She just kept saying, “We laugh every time we think about it. It was so funny. It was so funny.”

Not to us.

**Is this story appropriate for this audience?**

Know your audience!

You most likely wouldn’t tell a *Blue Beard* variant to a group of six-year-olds. Is your story something to which this particular audience can relate? What are their expectations? Are they there to be entertained? Are they a business audience, wanting to learn something new? Are they senior citizens, wanting to hear stories that remind them of when they were younger? Make sure you choose and tailor your stories to your audience.

Here’s a little tip. If you practice your story with your family and friends, and they love it, find people who fit your potential audience demographics and tell them the story. If they roll their eyes just marking time, waiting for you to get to the end, then it’s time to change your story.



# 3

## *Don't Tell*

Now you know the first two rules of storytelling

Rule 1: Tell stories you love.

Rule 2: Tell stories the audience will love.

Here is Rule 3:

If you don't know - don't tell!

As tellers, we want to get as much exposure as we can. We are told by seasoned tellers to, "Tell, tell, tell," every chance we can get. There is, however, one place we should not tell: if we don't know the territory.

Suppose you get a call that a colleague has recommended you; or better yet, someone has found your web site. They want you to tell stories. Oh Joy!

They want you to tell lap tales to three and four-year-olds. Oh, No! You've never done that. You're not even sure what lap tales are. You've never even heard anyone tell lap tales.

You've never worked with that age group. What do you do now? Turn and walk away. Nicely. Do yourself and the client

a big favor. Kindly and graciously decline. Tell them:

*This is not my forte. My focus is telling folktales from the northern region of Yaktimon, tales of blood and death. If you ever have a group that would like those tales, I would be your person. But in this instance, I would feel much better recommending a colleague, or helping you find the right person for this job.*

Taking on a territory with which you are unfamiliar is a dangerous task. You will be doing a great disservice to your client, their group, yourself, and to the storytelling community. This is a time to step up and step down. Show that you are dedicated to the craft, and not just out there to grab any dollars that may come your way.

Remember:

Rule 1: Tell stories you love!

Rule 2: Tell stories the audience will love!

Rule 3: Only tell stories when you are comfortable with the audience, and you understand and can fulfill their needs

Oh yeah...there's one more.

Rule 4: Only tell stories you have practiced!

## *Practice, Practice, Practice!*

It's an old joke, but it still holds true: A young man with a violin case under his arm stops an older gentleman on the streets of New York City. The young man asks, "How do I get to Carnegie Hall?" The older gentleman replies, "Practice, practice, practice!"

The same advice goes for storytellers, whether your destination is a major storytelling festival, the neighborhood library or the nearby elementary school: "Practice, practice, practice."

How does one practice or rehearse storytelling alone: in front of the mirror, in front of the wall, telling to your cat or dog?

Or, do you just think about it? I have heard many tellers say that they, "...just run through it over and over," in their minds. I think this is a slippery slope, certainly for beginning storytellers.

When you "get the story on its feet" and speak the words out loud, something different happens. Your voice may be quite different than the way you had imagined it would be. Your body may not move the way you had envisioned it. The words may not flow in the order you had thought they would. Plus,

you might find better words, gestures and voices.

In addition to crafting the story, you must also craft your performance. When will you speak louder, softer? When will you use a character voice, and what will it be? How will you gesture, in what exact way, and at what exact point? To be effective, you must make intentional decisions about these things, and then rehearse them intentionally. Just thinking about how you will do it when you get on stage will not “cut it.”

Storytellers must find a way to actually stand up and rehearse the story out loud. You don't have to do the whole story, start to finish, without stopping. Eventually you will need to rehearse it all the way through, but at the beginning break it down into smaller, bite-size pieces.

I'm not a fan of practicing in front of a mirror, although it does work for some people. If you start that way, so you can observe yourself, eventually I believe you must move away from the mirror, and at minimum, face the empty room. Otherwise, you will always be focused on what you look like versus being in the moment of the story, even in rehearsal.

Sometimes, rehearsing by yourself is the only option. If you must practice alone, here's a suggestion. Imagine your audience, whoever they may be, right there in front of you. As tellers, we see the images of the story in our heads, and then describe those images to our audience. When practicing, we can do something similar, seeing an image of the audience before us. It should be the audience we will be telling to, whether a large group in an auditorium, or a small group of students in a classroom. Try putting yourself there, in the space that you will be in with your audience.

In addition to practicing with your voice and body, you will need to practice your gestures. Thirty-year veteran storyteller,

Sean Buvala, says that gestures should be intentional, not just an afterthought. Search for his great video on gestures on Google. Use the search words: Sean Buvala, gestures.

It is important to make every effort to eventually practice in a group or even with one other person, over and over, again and again. Do it over the phone, or use Skype, or have a coaching session, or practice with a *story buddy*. If you don't rehearse with a real live person, you are only practicing in a vacuum. You need that human factor to experience rehearsing in full storytelling mode: story-teller-audience.