

Tips for Telling at Open Mics

By Cynthia Westby and the Seattle Storytellers Guild

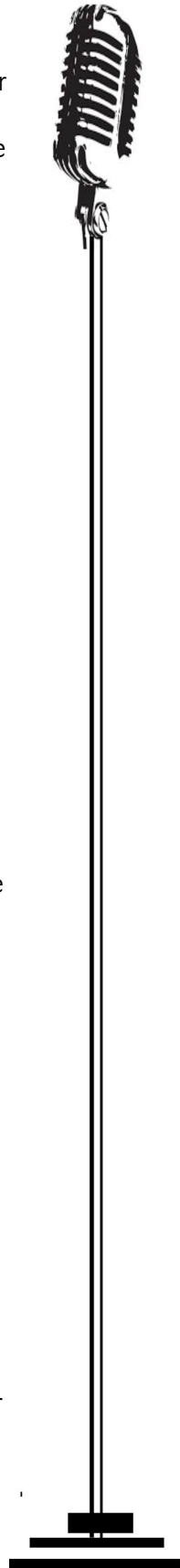


Open mics are an exciting platform for tellers and listeners; a perfect opportunity for practice in front of a live audience after we've satisfied ourselves in front of our hallway mirrors. Out of respect for our audience and ourselves, please be familiar with open mic etiquette. Here are guidelines when planning to tell a story at a Seattle Storytellers Guild open mic.

1) Find out what length of tale the open mic host is accepting. For the Guild's swaps and open mics, that is usually around 8 minutes. Practice your story to learn how long it takes for you to tell that story. When you tell it live that length may change. Remember that your story cannot last longer than the posted limit for a story. Some open mic hosts will keep an eye on the clock and cut you off when the time limit has been reached. Others will expect you to watch the clock. Both the host and audience will be aware of the clock as the evening grows later. It is vital to practice and respect the time limit.

2) You must determine copyright to know if you can legally tell a story. A rule of thumb is that unless a folk tale can be found in several versions, or that story has been published within the last one hundred years, it is likely within the author's copyright and you need the author's permission to tell it. If you want to tell some body's personal story, you must have their permission. To tell a folk tale, you must adapt the story in appropriate ways to make it your own. Know where your story comes from, and then adapt that story without undermining the integrity and beauty of that story and its cultural context. Do your research on its country of origin, the meaning and pronunciation of words, and retain the intention and key elements of the story. If you memorize a story, telling it word-for-word as it is written in a book, then you are likely violating copyright.

3) The Seattle Storytellers Guild asks that Open Mic stories at our programs be "Tasteful". "Tasteful" means appropriate for that particular audience – definitely neither lewd nor disgusting. While most story content may be appropriate for all ages, sometimes there are stories best told only to adult audiences. The Guild has the right to refuse what we determine is inappropriate for our audiences, and, if someone begins to tell something clearly inappropriate, we have the right to stop it- cut off the mic, etc. - and tell them the reasons why their story is not acceptable.



Please read through the following article by Laura S. Packer for some pointers regarding telling appropriate stories to an audience.

4) As you work on your version of a tale, it is very helpful to memorize your beginning and ending so you start without stumbles and end with a bang. We ask that stories be "Told, not Read". So please don't bring notes or a book to read from. An open mic at the Guild is for telling a story from your heart and memory. Find your own way for remembering the beginning, ending and core of your story – and be sure to have a beginning, middle and end. That is what makes a story. Each of us has a different method for remembering a story. For some it is imagining the story as a movie, for others it is remembering key images to aim for as you tell the story. Develop techniques and skills to tell in your own style.

5) Ask yourself what you love, value, and/or want to communicate with your story. Let your enthusiasm for the images, meaning, and ideas be communicated through body language as well as your voice. Let your connection to the story come alive.

6) After the open mic is over, you may want to find and ask a couple of people from the audience for their feedback. Be specific about what kind of feedback you want. Do you want to know if a particular part of the story worked? Or if there was anything they found confusing? Other possible questions include: What was the best part of how I handled the material? What did you like about my delivery? What gestures or movements worked well? Clarify if you only want positive suggestions. You might explicitly tell them that if the story did not work for them to please not share that with you. Choose audience members carefully before asking someone for feedback. Find people supportive of your efforts, who want you to do well, believe in you, and are willing to be honest in a useful way.

Finally, have fun!! We all benefit from hearing each other's stories, and from gaining experience in front of an audience. We can't wait to hear your next story at one of the Seattle Storytellers Guild's upcoming open mics or Story Swaps.

Cursing and other ways of transgressing boundaries

by Laura S. Packer

Language conveys meaning. Some storytellers use harsher language than others or enjoy being a little more shocking, and we must decide what kinds of boundaries we are willing to transgress. Each time you tell a story you make choices about the aesthetics you present.

Some of this is generational. and cultural. These kinds of issues have been around since there were generations and are present in every aspect of human life. I imagine Australopithecus parents shaking their heads at the outrageous antics of their young.

I find value in telling stories that deal with difficult or challenging material, but I make sure it's appropriate to the audience. I check with the curator and I make my own decision in the moment (for example, there may be children in an audience I was told would be only adults). Kids in the audience may change my content though I have been known to talk with parents when they bring children to a show advertised as adults-only. Every venue I have ever run has a free-speech clause, asking only that tellers let the audience know if they are including PG-13 or greater content so the audience can decide if they want to hear it. If you are including transgressive material in your shows, make sure the organizers know and consider including a free speech clause in the contract.

Even as someone who finds value in transgressive storytelling, I still want to behave professionally, so I take other factors into consideration.

“ **Use common sense.** *If you are hired to tell to preschoolers, tell stories that don't include swear words. Give parents forewarning if they show up at an adult-oriented gig with their kids. If you're telling to go-year-old nuns, you may need to mind your manners. Common sense goes a long way.*

“ **Authenticity matters.** *If the language makes sense in the context of the story and who you are, then it belongs there. I would never, ever ask a teller to be anything but authentic.*

“ **Let the audience self-censor.** *I make sure my curator and my audience know what they are in for. I believe in free speech. I also believe that everyone can choose what they are exposed to. Let your audience know you use salty language so they can decide if they want to hear it or not.*

“ **Diversity and presentation matter.** *This includes having a wide range of stories available for audiences. Some tellers who are uncomfortable with transgression have audiences who adore them because those are the stories they need. So too will the tellers who push boundaries.*

“ **Ultimately, you need to decide what is most appropriate for your story, your audience, and yourself.** *Be aware that there may be consequences to your choices and know that you are being deliberate in what you choose to say on stage.*