

What is Storytelling?

Here is what most of us mean by "storytelling": Storytelling is the interactive art of using words and actions to reveal the elements and images of a story while encouraging the listener's imagination.

1. Storytelling is interactive.

Storytelling involves a two-way interaction between a storyteller and one or more listeners. The responses of the listeners influence the telling of the story. In fact, storytelling emerges from the interaction and cooperative, coordinated efforts of teller and audience.

In particular, storytelling does not create an imaginary barrier between the speaker and the listeners. This is part of what distinguishes storytelling from the forms of theatre that use an imaginary "fourth wall."

Different cultures and situations create different expectations for the exact roles of storyteller and listener—who speaks how often and when, for example—and therefore create different forms of interaction. The interactive nature of storytelling partially accounts for its immediacy and impact. At its best, storytelling can directly and tightly connect the teller and audience.

2. Storytelling uses words.

Storytelling uses language, whether it be a spoken language or a manual language such as American Sign Language. The use of language distinguishes storytelling from most forms of dance and mime.

3. Storytelling uses actions such as vocalization, physical movement and/or gesture. These actions are the parts of spoken or manual language other than words. Their use distinguishes storytelling from writing and text-based computer interactions. Not all nonverbal language behaviors need to be present in storytelling. Some storytellers use body movement extensively, for example, whereas others use little or none.

4. Storytelling presents a story.

Storytelling always involves the presentation of a story—a narrative. Many other art forms also present story, but storytelling presents it with the other four components. Every culture has its own definition of story. What is recognized as a story in one situation may not be accepted as one in another. Some situations call for spontaneity and playful digression, for example; others call for near-exact repetition of a revered text. Art forms such as poetry recitation and stand-up comedy sometimes present stories and sometimes don't. Since they generally involve the other four components, they can be regarded as forms of storytelling whenever they also present stories.

5. Storytelling encourages the active imagination of the listeners.

In storytelling, the listener imagines the story. In most traditional theatre or in a typical dramatic film, on the other hand, the listener enjoys the illusion that the listener is actually witnessing the character or events described in the story.

The storytelling listener's role is to actively create the vivid, multi-sensory images, actions, characters, and events—the reality—of the story in his or her mind, based on the performance by the teller and on the listener's own past experiences, beliefs, and understandings. The completed story happens in the mind of the listener, a unique and personalized individual. The listener becomes, therefore, a co-creator of the story as experienced.

Storytelling can be combined with other art forms. The fruit born by the vital, contemporary storytelling movement includes the development of ways to combine storytelling with drama, music, dance, comedy, puppetry, and numerous other forms of expression. Yet, even as it blends imperceptibly into other arts, the essence of storytelling remains recognizable as the intersection of the five components included in the above definition.

Storytelling happens in many situations, from kitchen-table conversation to religious ritual, from telling in the course of other work to performances for thousands of paying listeners. Some storytelling situations demand informality; others are highly formal. Some demand certain themes, attitudes, and artistic approaches. As noted above, the expectations about listener interaction and the nature of the story itself vary widely. There are many cultures on earth, each with rich traditions, customs and opportunities for storytelling. All these forms of storytelling are valuable. All are equal citizens in the diverse world of storytelling.