



# How to Guide a Storytelling Walk

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For me, walking has always been a deeply democratic and humbling act. Social disparities, unsung local leaders, and informal gathering places are revealed when we navigate cities, sharing our concerns and hopes, shoulder-to-shoulder on the street level.

—Jay Pitter

Stories shape our personal experiences in cities and the built environment. Within the context of placemaking—the design, development, and engagement of public spaces—stories help us understand urban histories, foster relationships across difference, and articulate a collective vision for inclusive city-building. There are a number of existing Storytelling Walks including [Jane’s Walk](#) (an international walking tour that often features stories) and [Manchester-based walks](#) uncovering stories of the homeless population. Regardless of the Storytelling Walk subject matter, this form of placemaking engagement tends to bring people together shoulder-to-shoulder and uncovers cultural heritage. Whether celebrating the milestone of a place, healing a socially fraught site, or leading a public engagement process, this easy-to-follow guide will help you successfully organize an inclusive and enjoyable Storytelling Walk.

## 01 Develop Storytelling Walk Goals

The first step to guiding a successful Storytelling Walk is to be clear about your theme. *Why are you organizing this walk? How will it contribute to a particular city-building conversation or process? Is there a public space in your city with an important hidden history? What topic is hindering public spaces in your city from being deeply inclusive? Why is this walk important now?*

Being able to clearly and succinctly answer these questions will enable you to build partnerships and identify clear metrics for success. Remember, you can’t achieve or measure a goal that you haven’t clearly planned for in the beginning of a city-building process.

## 02 Organize a Walk Team

Storytelling Walks are events and require a concerted team effort. Before beginning, it is imperative to assemble a team to address key functions such as: storyteller outreach, project management, creative documentation, communications, mapping walk routes, and forming partnerships with local organizations and media.

Assign individual roles to team members and double check your walk theme and goals with everyone. Afterward, collaboratively develop a simple Storytelling Walk plan that includes:

- A critical path clearly identifying key tasks, interdependencies, deadlines, required resources (monetary, social, and institutional), and key indicators;
- A communications strategy outlining key messages, platforms for promoting walks (local media, coffee shops, online, electronic flyer, faith-based bulletin boards, etc.), participant photo consent forms;
- Storyteller orientation session materials: sign-up form, story development template, tips for telling, and consent form.

### 03 Storyteller Outreach and Orientation

Now that you've got your walk team organized, it's time to identify storytellers. Oftentimes, walks are led by a single person in a professional or local leadership role. This is not that kind of walk. Storytelling Walks should have a guide leading the process (step six expands on this role), but the emphasis is on **shining a light on a range of diverse voices**. While it may be tempting to strictly engage design or cultural heritage professionals, it's important to value the lived experiences and keen insight of local residents. Be sure to engage students/youth, single mothers, individuals living on low incomes, persons with disabilities, elders, and others. This will add narrative dimension and delight to your walk.

Prior to the Storytelling Walk, gather storytellers on a conference call or in-person meeting to explore the components of developing and telling a good story.

- A good story almost always includes somebody (or group of people) who has done or is doing something for a reason.
- Avoid simple hero and villain narratives—the world is increasingly filled with polarized stories and conversations.
- Cities are complex and increasingly divided. When telling stories fraught with social injustice or power imbalances, try to remember to avoid “us” and “them” framing.
- Storytelling Walks are a great way to engage historically marginalized groups. The stories shared by these individuals are often both emotionally compelling and insightful. Be sure to encourage those from historically marginalized communities to not only share their struggles but also to include their insights and resilience in stories.
- Good Storytelling Walks point to city-building gaps but they should also elicit hope and celebrate the contributions of local community members.

It is also important to encourage storytellers to sing, dance, or draw (sidewalk art) their stories. This will make your walk more dynamic while creating space for people with different communication styles to participate.

## 04 Amplify Your Storytelling Walk

Storytelling Walks are an excellent way to get a wide array of community members together in public spaces to learn and create a collective vision for their city. It is important to use a variety of promotional tools and tactics:

- Share the benefits of the Storytelling Walk, which may include: meeting new friends and neighbors passionate about the city, hearing under-told stories about public spaces in your city, enjoying a family-friendly civic activity, contributing to a planning process;
- Don't underestimate the power of an old school bulletin board. In consideration for the environment, print a small run of paper flyers and post them in areas where community members may not have access to high speed internet or in local spaces like faith-based fellowship halls, coffee shops, and laundromats where people commonly check out local bulletin boards;
- Share storytellers' headshots and a tidbit from their stories (opening line or question) to generate a buzz;
- Don't sell the Storytelling Walks. Start a conversation with people who care about your city;
- Write a simple media release and offer to make a couple of storytellers available for an interview;
- Create an online event to get early confirmations and so people can share within their social networks.

## 05 Before the Day of Your Storytelling Walk...

Before the day of your Storytelling Walk, ensure that a wide range of community members have been apprised of the walk details such as date, time, and meet-up spot. It often helps to post a route map online so that latecomers can join the walk at a mid-way location. Other key pre-Storytelling Walk day tasks include:

- Mapping route so that each walk should be approximately 1.5 hours with approximately five to seven storytelling stops. Storytelling stops should not be more than a couple of blocks apart, and if possible, a few of them should have access to water fountains and physically accessible, gender neutral washrooms;

- Walking the route to check for accessibility. Your route may span the downtown core or a suburban neighborhood. Wherever the location, make sure persons with disabilities, elderly individuals, and families with strollers can join you;
- Collecting micro bios (two to three sentences of each storyteller) so they can be properly introduced at each storytelling stop;
- Ensuring that storytellers know which stop they are presenting at. It's best if everyone meets at the beginning of the route 30 minutes before the walk;
- Securing water and snacks for storytellers and residents who join the walk—refillable, non-plastic water bottles are best;
- Renting a bullhorn or amplification device for your walk, even if you think there will be a small turnout, to increase accessibility. Also consider language and ASL translation.

## 06 Be a Storytelling Walk Guide, Not Leader

This Storytelling Walk approach is predicated on inclusion and unearthing the diverse stories of urban places. As such, think of yourself as the Storytelling Walk guide, not leader. What this means is avoid talking too much or being the single voice sharing stories. Your job as the Storytelling Walk guide is as follows:

- Ensure that everyone has water and a snack;
- Encourage everyone to meet someone new pre-walk and share what brought them to the walk;
- Glowingly introduce all storytellers, before they share their stories, using their micro bios; check name pronunciation and gender pronouns prior to the walk;
- Ensure that volunteers are leading the group at the front using a map while other volunteers are ensuring folks at the tail of the group aren't left behind;
- Prepare walk participant prompts between each stop to ensure that everyone is engaged and not being spoken at. These prompts should be simple, including questions regarding new lessons, possible shared experiences, or a personal insight about the place not shared by the storyteller. Walk participants should respond in small two- or three-person groups as they are walking to the next storytelling station. This creates a great energy and allows everyone to reflect, share their insights, and meet new people.
- Thank everyone for attending and issue a call to action related to the storytelling theme. For instance, calls to action may include doing more research about a particular subject matter, attending a municipal process to give feedback, or meeting up with new friends to continue sharing stories over coffee.

## 07 Evaluate Your Storytelling Walk

How will you determine if your Storytelling Walk is successful? Although evaluation is being situated as the final step in the process, it is actually a part of the first step. When you define your Storytelling Walk theme and goals at the beginning of this process, you should determine how and what you will evaluate. Conducting a simple evaluation is important because:

- It allows stakeholders to provide constructive feedback about a service or initiative;
- It demonstrates accountability and helps you to make improvements to future Storytelling Walks and placemaking initiatives overall;
- It allows you to report back to (and thank) partners (storytellers, media, local organizations, etc.) with tangible outcomes, creating the conditions for future collaboration.

For this particular placemaking initiative, it is recommended you create a very simple five question evaluation form. Ensure that your questions are directly related to the theme and goals of your walk. For example, if one of the goals of your Storytelling Walk was to share women's experiences of public spaces, then ask walk participants if they learned new and interesting stories about women's experiences in public spaces. Since Storytelling Walks are intended to be inclusive and lower social barriers among stakeholder groups, you may also inquire about whether or not walk participants met someone new or heard a valuable perspective different from their own. Also, to increase completion rates, distribute the evaluation form immediately following your walk and be sure to make it available in print and online.