

Storytelling Tips for RPCVs:

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Introduction: The Argument for Stories

Why are stories compelling and powerful?

One of the most compelling, heartfelt ways to share your Peace Corps experience is with stories. Peace Corps is 27 months of continuous funny, poignant and amazing stories. Storytelling is an excellent way to continue your service, show your commitment to Peace Corps' Third Goal, and share in a personal and engaging way the culture you encountered during Peace Corps so intimately. When RPCVs tell stories, they humanize and illuminate places and people with a unique, grassroots, Peace Corps perspective. These events, like all thoughtful creative Third Goal events, have the added bonus of inspiring people to apply to serve.

In addition, stories are memorable. Evidence suggests we are hard-wired to receive and learn information better in story form. Stories are powerful. Stories combat stereotypes which are often harmful and always incomplete. As the eloquent Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie put it in her famous Tedtalk [*The Danger of a Single Story*](#):

“Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.”

As RPCVs, it is our responsibility to bring these stories home. Whether for select friends and family, or large virtual or in person audiences, telling stories is in the best spirit of Peace Corps Third Goal. This guide is aimed to help you share your stories with America.

Finding Your Storyⁱ

Use these helpful brainstorming exercises to discover your story.

How daunting to summarize your Peace Corps experiences in a 5-10 minute story! Don't think of this story as a summary of your whole 27 months but as a window giving specific insight into

the culture or your experience. This story is just one way of communicating your Peace Corps country or experience; don't put too much pressure on yourself.

Below are a few exercises to help you brainstorm ideas that you might tell from your experience:

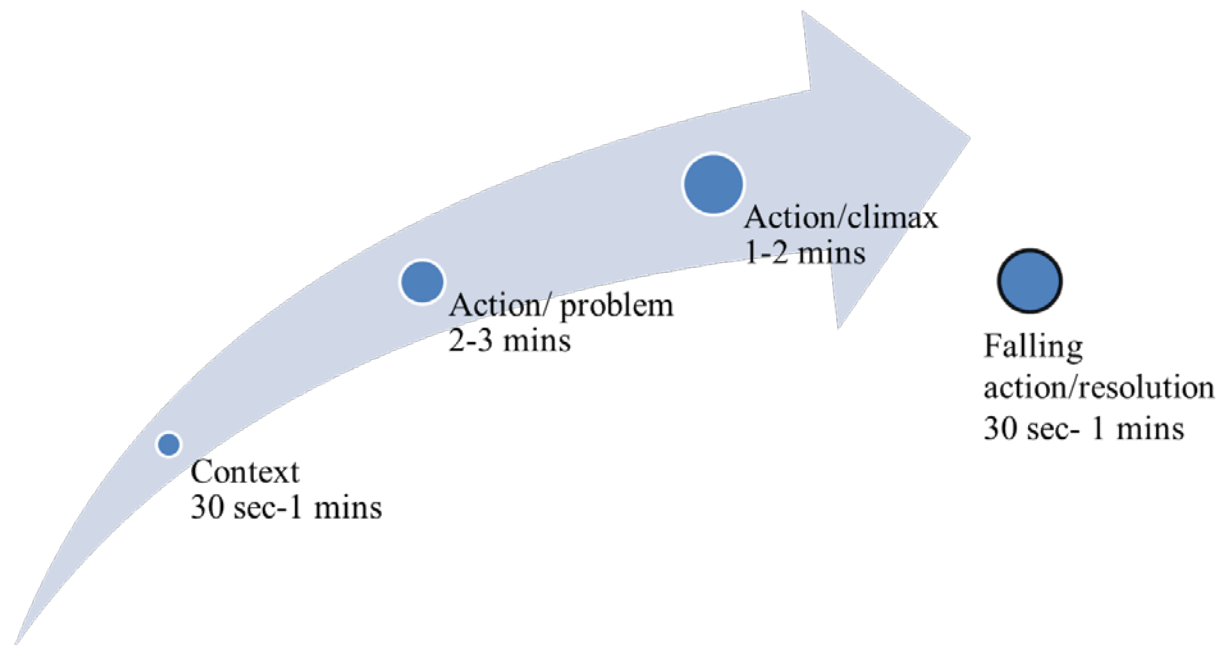
- Do a two minute free write listing all the people you met in Peace Corps. Now try another two minute free write listing all the places you went in Peace Corps (be specific i.e. Fred's Porch). After you are done with your lists, review them and circle places or people you think could be elements of a good story.
- Try some brainstorming lists that relate to a selected theme. For example if the theme is, "cultural arrival" try making a list of cultural surprises. Other potential themes include... Why I joined the Peace Corps, my local inspiration, host country heroes, and neighbors.
- You might try using certain words to as prods for stories. For example, tell a story about the word "almost" or the phrase "that is when I knew I had truly arrived".
- One key in finding your story is to think about the deeper meaning in addition to the entertainment value. There is action: who, what, where, and when, but make sure you know the important deeper WHY that gives the story meaning and importance.

Crafting Your Story

Remember the story arc, learn the “rules” and elements of a good story, and practice with the story spine!

The Story Arc

Most people learned some version of the story arc in school. This is a little refresher to help you think about your Peace Corps stories:



*Please note this story arc assumes a 7-8 min story and the arc should be adjusted proportionally for longer or shorter stories.

Elements of a Good Story:

Plot:

Context: When and where is the story taking place?

- Should be minimal.
- You need to transport your audience to your country of service
- Use easily relatable reference points.

Action: What happens in the story?

- What are the actual events and dialogue?
- This is the main part of your story and the most interesting!

Tension: Raise the stakes.

- Think about where the tension is and how you can build up the tension.

Change: It is not *really* a story unless something fundamental changes.

- The change is often internal, like a shift in perspective.

Closure: Do you deliver on your promise after setting up a central question?

- “If you introduce a gun in act one it better go off by act three.”

Other Elements:

Meaning: What is my story *really* about?

- Why am I telling this story? Why does this event matter?
- The meaning often relates to how you frame the story with your opening and closing line.
- What did it mean for you: cultural acceptance, life as a PCV, deeper understanding, and emotional well-being?

Senses: If people can picture it they can better relate.

- Can listeners see my story?
- Using all five senses can bring your story to life.

Insight: Let your listeners in on your thoughts, feelings, and in the moment reactions.

- Give them a backseat pass to your brain through your internal voice.
- Try to maintain the, “ignorance of the moment.” Rather than commenting on your behavior based on knowledge gained later, keep the storyline consistent with what you knew at the time.
- Try not to give away the resolution before the climax.

Characters: Compelling and few.

- Try to use dialogue to help bring each character to life.
- In an oral story your audience only has so much memory capacity.

A few Storytelling “Rules”

1. **Allow yourself to be vulnerable:** Trust the audience with information about yourself and remain humble, personal, and intimate.
2. **Use dialogue:** Move the plot forward with dialogue to develop characters and make it fun. If possible, do not be afraid to try to take on a character.
3. **Show, don’t tell:** Instead of “my students were amazing”, let them hear an amazing line from a student.
4. **Be specific:** “Breakfast was great” vs. “My Fruit Loops and toast hit the spot.”
5. **Find a way to frame your story:** Find the context of *why* you are telling the story. This relates to what your story is really about.
6. **Use the rule of threes:** This principle suggests that things that come in threes are inherently funnier, more satisfying, or more effective than other number groups. A series

of three often creates a progression in which the tension is created, built up, and finally released.

7. **Get the audience on your side:** If they like you, they will be much more open and attentive to your story. One way to impress them is to throw in a bit of translated local language. This will also transport them and teach them something about the country. It will make them *hear* your Peace Corps post/country.
8. **Have perspective on the story:** There is no crying in storytelling. If the story is still too close to you, it is not ready for an audience.

Story Spine

Another helpful way to think about your story is to see how your story fits into “The Story Spine.” Try filling out the story spine below with key moments in your story:

Once Upon a Time _____
and every day, _____
Until one day, _____
Because of that _____
And then _____
And then _____
Until finally/then suddenly _____
And the funny thing was _____
Ever since then _____

Sharing Your Story

Some helpful tips when you actually tell or perform your story

These tips are flexible. They can work for small audiences or storytelling performances i.e. open mics, story slams, classrooms etc. They can also work one on one. It is up to you to determine how to adopt them for your audience (size, age, interest).

Most of these are aimed at larger audiences, but telling stories to small groups of friends and family, or even just one interested person, has a Third Goal impact too. If someone is interested in your Peace Corps experience you can offer a story as a way to share without struggling on both ends (them knowing what questions to ask, you trying so hard to answer). Just remember to gauge interest before jumping in; it is important not to overwhelm your listener.

Story performance tips:

Voice: Use your authentic voice.

- Try not to over-perform, act or have a “storyteller affect”. This is you telling a true story from your life. You should try to be comfortable in your own skin. Remember you made it through Peace Corps and you can do anything!
- Be aware of the quality and volume of your voice.
- Be conscientious of your word choice. Avoid overuse of default words such as: anyway, at any rate, like, um, you know, eh, etc.
- Speak with energy, varying your vocal tone and quality throughout. Enunciate and project. Be aware of your volume speaking into the microphone and project as needed.

Body: Ground yourself.

- Try to stay rooted and minimize superfluous movements (its best to keep to the microphone stand). Keep hands out of pockets.
- Keep your head up either to maintain eye contact with the audience or to maintain that illusion.

Delivery: Pace yourself.

- Make no assumption about how and when the audience will react.
- Just roll with it.
- Be in the moment.
- Pause when you get the laugh, move on when you don't.
- Start strong and end strong, crisp, clear, and definitive.

Practice makes perfect!

- Practice with a friend, family member or peer to work on timing flow and delivery (Please see [Appendix 1](#)).
- Trying to tell your story in a shorter timeframe will help you realize the most important elements and focus on them.

Final tips

- A good exercise when preparing to present a story is a flowchart outline of lines or words that move you through the story. Remember generally it shouldn't sound too polished or memorized. Your storytelling should feel natural, not highly edited as a written story might be.
- Don't assume the audience knows anything about your country of service or Peace Corps. Remember to avoid acronyms and any language reference without explanation.
- Have fun! Storytelling is engaging and makes the audience relax. Hopefully you can enjoy the journey along with them.

Appendix 1: Peer Coaching Guide for Storytelling Pair-Share

Step 1: The Teller shares their story uninterrupted with a timer to see how long the story runs.

Step 2: The Listener gives positive feedback on what they liked about the story.

Step 3: The Teller asks the Listener for feedback on specific elements of the story or delivery, allowing the Teller to identify specific concerns they see in their story first.

Step 4: The Listener asks clarifying questions like: I didn't really understand "X" or I wanted to hear more about "Y". The Listeners asks questions that pull out more details and to understand the story Teller's intent.

Step 5: The Listener, if the story Teller invites it, shares final thoughts and feedback. This is not the time for the Listener to reconstruct the story for the Teller based on style and interests. The focus should be on basic story elements and structure. AVOID feedback like "what you should say is..."

Questions for the Teller to ask themselves:

- What is the story REALLY about?
- Why is it meaningful to me?
- What is the climax or turning point?

Questions for the Listener to ask themselves:

- Did I get confused anywhere in the story?
- What was I interested in hearing more about? Less about?
- Was I drawn into the story? If so, was I drawn in immediately or was there a specific point where I became interested?
- Did I want to know what happened next?
- How well do I feel I got to know the main characters through the story?
- Could I relate to the main characters?
- What is this story about?

ⁱ All content on finding, crafting, and telling your story was adapted with permission from SpeakeasyDC's Storytelling 101 class.