



# Telling Stories Online – You’ve Got This!



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# Hello my fellow and sister shut-ins!

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*In 2012 when we ran the first Facebook online social justice storytelling festival – Stories Connect Us All – we received a few angry emails: “How can you replace live storytelling?” Of course, we never meant, nor could we ever, replace the human connection between teller and audience and audience to audience that happens in a live event. Online storytelling was just... well, different.*

*Afterwards, thank goodness, we received other kinds of emails: “I am living in a nursing home; I am a shut-in. I haven’t been able to attend a storytelling festival in 10 years. Thank you so much for bringing the stories to me!”*

*Little did we know that there would be a time we would all be “shut-ins”. In these unusual times of quarantine, we have the opportunity to expand the audience for storytelling like never before. So, let’s do it well!*

*I, like you, am hungry for the time I can once again cry and belly laugh with a crowd of story lovers. However, if we do this really well, we will have an ongoing parallel way to bring stories to people and, then, more people to our live events.*

*What follows is an excerpt from some of the emails and subsequent handbook I have sent to the RacebridgesStudio tellers over the 20 years we’ve been videotaping stories.*

*I use Zoom – there are many other online platforms. Whatever platform you use, make sure you can record yourself before you go live so that you can check out what is or isn’t working. These are suggestions for solo telling. If you are being interviewed by someone in the same room, look at the host.*

*I put this together fast and furious – I hope it’s helpful.*

*Be safe. Stay healthy. And thanks for all you do for storytelling by lending your unique voice.*

*Best of luck,*



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## Delivery – Conversation Style

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Performing for a close-up camera is very different than performing on the stage or even videotaping a performance with a full body shot from the stage. Performing for the camera that is in your laptop or mounted on your monitor is a very intimate medium. It will be as if you are sitting across the kitchen table from your best friend swapping stories.

**When you're videotaping think: I'm just having a conversation with someone across the kitchen table.**

For those of you who have an expanded performance style, practice taking it down *several* notches and see how it "reads". Are you bursting out of the frame? Is that the effect you want? Probably not. You still want vocal variety and expression but not so much energy that it would cause the audience to shrink back.

If you are a quieter teller, you may want to consider adding a tad more expression to your voice and face. Tape yourself and have some folks you trust look at the recording.

I find it helpful to imagine someone I love (who needs or adores my work – yes, there are a few 😊) right in the camera lens so I'm talking to the face of a live person who brings great energy to my voice and body language. It's funny, but even imagining such a person changes your tone of voice and the relaxation of your facial muscles and, most of all, the light in your eyes.

See them smiling at you as you move *into* the lens. Don't think of the camera as a peering eye, coming at you and finding every blemish. Think of the camera as a pathway to the person in this world that you love so very much. If you were walking down a path to someone you love, you would smile as you approach them. Your heart would fill with warmth. You would walk a little taller. **The camera is your pathway to that person. Fall into it.** Sit tall and smile.

**If you make a "mistake", just as in real conversation or when you're in a live performance, you laugh it off and/or back up a bit, repeat and fix the word.** It actually sounds more real on the web if people aren't perfect or too presentational. You'll just keep going – *no matter what*. People like that feeling of your story and you being real.

## Eye and Camera Location

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With most online platforms, you can see yourself on camera before the session begins. Use that time to fix your hair, check your background, adjust your camera angle, etc. The audience doesn't want to see you come on live, squinting, fixing your makeup, adjusting the camera or your background and so on.

As you tell your story, don't look at yourself on screen. It's tempting but don't look at yourself and don't look at the chat box. Both will cause your eyes to lower and, for those few seconds, the audience will feel as if you aren't looking at them.

**You want to be eye level to the camera.** When people are looking down at their laptops or up at a camera mounted on their computer monitor, it's distancing. Sometimes, when I teach webinars, I might mount the camera up a bit for that more flattering jawline 😊. And, during webinars, I don't worry if my eyes minimally travel to open other tabs. Students don't expect you are going to look at them the whole time. They know you are needing to host and, therefore, run your dashboard. Still, I look at my students via the camera as much as I can.

**However, storytelling is unique. You want to maintain your connection with your audience throughout.**

## Framing and Lighting

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We're going to play Goldilocks here. You don't want to be too close or too far away from the camera. It's got to be just right.

If someone is sitting across the table from you, they are about 3-4 feet away depending on the table. You most likely are seeing them from the chest or waist up. If you only see a teller's face in the screen, they aren't sitting across the table; they're sitting on your lap. 😊 Being too close to the camera can cause your audience to pull back as if you're overpowering them. Of course, leaning in as your character shares a secret, for example, or some other *chosen* dramatic effect might work for a few moments.

In contrast, when someone is too far back, they become a little three inch person who just isn't as easy to relate to. As in any form of communication, what is your ultimate communication objective? What do you want your story to do for your audience – what will they be thinking, feeling or wanting to do when it's over? In a dance piece, we're used to viewing the dancers from afar. With stories, more often than not, we're going for more friendliness and warmth.

It's taken awhile for us to figure it out, but I'm liking the way we've been shooting the [www.RacebridgesStudio.com](http://www.RacebridgesStudio.com) the last several years. Check some of the video stories out and decide what look i.e. framing you like best.

About lighting: lighting becomes crucial online! If you're shooting during the day and can be facing a window that might be enough light. If you're outside, face the sun at an angle that doesn't make you squint. If you're inside, place a lamp on either side of you. If possible the lamps should be of the same height and wattage and placed so that the two light sources blend onto your face. Also, make sure there isn't a light source behind you such as a window. That will put you in silhouette and folks won't see your wonderful expressions.

If you plan to do a lot of online telling, there are video lighting setups you can buy online for \$40 or so. There are also terrific videos on youtube.com about lighting and everything else we're talking about here.

## Your Introduction

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Test your microphone beforehand so that you don't come on with, "Can you hear me? Is this thing working?" You do a mike check before you go on stage; do the same for online telling.

**You want to begin by looking or smiling into the camera (whatever is appropriate for the tone of your story) for a second or two and then, identifying yourself.** "Hi, I'm (NAME)..." or "Hello, my name is ..."

You may like to ask an engaging question: "Have you ever...?" In other words, just as your nightly news program teases their stories, you may want a short promo that grabs people's attention. People online are fickle – they can turn you off in 5 seconds if they're at all confused or they don't know what's coming. Let them know that there is something in this story for them.

Smile. Look at the camera. "Have you ever felt as if you were on the outside looking in? Hi, I'm (NAME) and this is a story about a time I felt I didn't belong. In 1985, I was in Chicago Illinois..."

Then, begin your story. As soon as possible orient your audience to the **TIME and PLACE of your story. You need to ground the audience in the setting (time and place) of your story as quickly as possible:**

Smile. Look at the camera - "Hi my name is... and this is an excerpt from a story published in the book TITLE published by PUBLISHER... I was stationed at Great Lakes Naval Station in 1998..."

## Background

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Keep your background clean. Practice your story in your showtime location at the same time of day and record it. Is there anything distracting behind you? Look at TV interviews. They will often have a vase of flowers or an abstract painting in the background, off to one side on a simple table. A framed picture doesn't work as the glare on the glass is distracting.

Don't let what's behind you "pull focus" either because it's too busy, too mysterious or too interesting.

An outdoor scene may work for you. For example, when tellers have a background of trees, the green carpet of leaves behind them adds color without too much busyness. However, if your kids are playing on the swing set behind you, that's just too much competition. We're going to look at the kids. Again, test.

You can also choose a digital background on Zoom. Go to the ^ icon to the right of the camera icon at the bottom of your screen and select “Choose Virtual Background.” Your computer needs to have certain requirements (On Zoom, the Mac specifications are Mac OS 10.13 or higher and an Intel Core i5 processor with a quad-core or better. Check specs for your computer.) You can choose one of Zoom’s backgrounds or provide your own photo.

**However, with virtual backgrounds, if you make hand gestures or move your body, your motions will flicker and you can look ghostly.** Again, record and see how it looks. Send the recording to a few people. Make a test recording of under one minute so that the file is small enough to email to a few friends for their opinions and suggestions. (If you want to record your whole story, it will be too large to send via email. You’ll need to upload to Dropbox or YouTube where you can mark the recording as private if you want.

## Gestures

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You can capture the expressiveness of a live performance even though people are only seeing you from the waist or chest up. Even when the audience can’t see your complete gestures – they are out of view of the camera - the audience fills in by the way your shoulder, neck and head move and your voice changes because of the gestures you are making. In their mind’s eye, they see you making the gesture. (See note above about gestures when using a virtual background.)

If it’s important that the audience sees your entire gesture, practice making your gesture to either side of your head or in front of your shoulders. (Yes, your arms and hands need to be that high up to be seen.)

If you feel it’s absolutely essential that more of your body shows than a head, shoulder and chest shot, then test that your microphone can pick up your voice from a distance. (You can order a relatively inexpensive mike online that you pin to your shirt or blouse.) Record yourself and check the sound.

For the most part, full body shots don’t work as well. On people’s monitors or screens, you are suddenly a three-inch person. They relate so much easier and better when they feel you are talking to and looking at them. However, I’ve seen folks who are standing with guitars or holding a book – a knee to head shot – that worked very well. There are always exceptions to every rule.

Are you tired of hearing me say this? Test – record – send to a few trusted friends/colleagues. Don’t try to “wing it”.

## Dress

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Even though people will see you in close-up - a head and shoulder shot – it's still best if you wear a solid color, nothing too busy. Shoes are optional 😊

## Your Ending

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At the end of your story, simply continue **looking at the camera for a couple of seconds. Smile at your audience to show you've enjoyed spending this time with them.**

**Avoid facial reactions** to your story such as - "Oh no! I forgot a part!" or "I'm so glad I'm done!" If your story was upbeat, you can hold a smile and even give a laugh. I imagine looking at the person to whom I've just delivered the story and, in my mind, I'm saying something to them such as "Does that make sense?" or "Have you ever felt that way?" Having a silent conversation in your head with that person, even as you're being still, keeps your face lively. You want energy in your face up to the last second you're being seen.

If you are being hosted by someone, remember you are on camera the whole time. Don't touch your face or look away. Imagine the host who loves you! 😊 is in the camera. Relate to him or her until you know for sure you are off live camera.

## Shooting from a Stage

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If you are shooting from a stage and everyone knows there is no audience, look at the camera. (Don't look out and try to pretend there's an audience unless, at another time, you are purposefully shooting a Demo video and ARE simulating performing in front of an audience.)

The camera is your audience of one who loves you and is your biggest fan. Melt into that camera. The stereotype of celebrity portrait photographers has them saying to their subjects, "Make love to the camera!" You don't have to go that far 😊 but warmly greet the person you're imagining in the camera.

In a concert space, the camera is most likely 10-12 feet away. However, in your mind, zoom the eye of the camera towards you so that you are talking to someone just 3-4 feet in front of you. You're still sitting across the table from them or walking down a path to them. Move *into* the camera.

## Hosting an Online Event

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If you are the host and calling on storytellers one at a time, I suggest you don't show the participants as the teller is presenting their story. It's too distracting to watch people watching (or not watching, leaving the room, eating, etc.) You can flip back to a visual and/or audio of the



audience in between tellers if you like. But a full facial shot of your teller, uses the medium for what it does best: creating intimacy.

To make the event more interactive, you can arrange breakout rooms for people to discuss the stories or give links to surveys, polls, photographs and such to your audience in the chat box through such sites a Padlet.com, google forms or even take your audience to the place where the story took place via google earth.

Audience interaction is a whole other discussion but adds to our premise that **online storytelling isn't better or threatening to live storytelling. It merely offers a whole host of new opportunities.**

## **Parting Thoughts...**

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During our 2013 Stories Connect Us All online festival, we had a Facebook reach of 112,000 people from 52 different countries. Imagine how many more people we can reach now with so many storytelling events launching during this shelter-in-place time!

***What you do matters. Storytelling can be the inspiration and comfort-in-place GIFT we give to the world.***

*When you want to watch some excellent short videos – if I do say so myself 😊 - please visit [www.RacebridgesStudio.com](http://www.RacebridgesStudio.com) where you'll find over 250 video stories dealing with race, belonging and identity. Free discussion and resource guides accompany each story. You can look up stories by theme – Interfaith, Bullying, Civil Rights, Peacemaking, etc – or by storytellers' names. Enjoy!*

*You got this!*

Sue