

Proper Prior Planning
© Linda Gorham, Storyteller
Telling Stories to Children
National Storytelling Network - October 2005

My father used to say, “Proper prior planning prevents poor performance.” I have found this to be wise advice for living and even wiser for running my storytelling business.

There is no greater joy than sharing a story with a young person. It is magical. But “proper prior planning” creates that magic; it does not happen on its own. It’s more than simply selecting the right stories. We’ve got to meet the goals of the hiring venue, be in the right space, have the right sound system, earn a satisfactory amount of money, and make sure we communicate well with our host.

Gathering Facts

The phone rings. The caller wants a teller for a group of children. And he or she is interested in you! So far, so good. First, gather some facts. To avoid missing pertinent information, I designed inquiry/assignment sheets. They are bright pink; I keep them near my phone. The color makes them easy to spot, and they become the first page for my pending or assignment files. They have room for all of the necessary info: proposed date, time, length of program, contact name, address, fax, phone and email info, and referral source. Plus, they have spaces for the address and location of the show and the stories planned.

What Do They Really Want?

Before I get too detailed, I need to find out what callers *really* want and whom they want it for. I ask questions: Who is the decision maker? What does he or she want to accomplish? Should the program tie into the curriculum or a school or summer theme, or must it meet the requirements of a grant? Is this program related to a holiday or special celebration? Are there particular stories or story types required? How many children are expected and in what age range? The more I know, the better.

I try to be part of the event planning process. My task is to see if there is a good match between what the sponsor wants and what I am willing to provide. If the type of program requested is not for me, I tell this to callers. Often I can recommend another teller. Either way I have an opportunity to develop a rapport with callers. Every connection provides potential for employment – even if it is at another time.

Location, Location, Location

The location makes a huge difference. Ideally, I’d like a room that is comfortably full without too much extra space, has no traffic from passersby, and has no visual or auditory distractions (find out if bells will ring and never tell in front of a window). Typically, I’ll be offered gyms, lunchrooms, auditoriums, multipurpose rooms, or outside spaces.

Gyms have horrible acoustics, but there is plenty of room. For young children, I try to have them sit on the floor. Chairs create barriers. Bleachers are disasters waiting to happen: they are spread out, noisy, and potentially dangerous.

Auditoriums are better. The sound is usually good and it is easy to manage larger groups. There is one drawback: often the stage is too far away from the audience. In that case, I ask for steps to be added center stage so that during the show I can occasionally move closer to the audience. One plus: where I limit gym and multipurpose groups to a maximum of 300, I’ll allow up to 500 students in an auditorium. Fixed chairs and an elevated stage do make a difference.

Meeting rooms in libraries are usually pretty good spaces. Multipurpose rooms and lunchrooms are probably the most popular venues for elementary school performances. But remember, the lunchroom staff will need time to set up and/or break down tables. My rule: no tables during a show. Tables are barriers to an intimate experience. (*Yes, telling to 300 kids can be intimate!*)

And now, on to my least favorite venue: the great outdoors. My voice will blow like the wind and I will invariably encounter the distractions of the world. I've had to compete with giant inflated jumping rooms, a fire truck loaded with firemen who started tearing down a nearby building, and a helicopter that landed behind me. Even the best stories can't compete!

A "Sound" Investment

The best investment I ever made was in my sound system. Without one, I was at the mercy of schools that had marginal to awful systems, if they had anything at all. I was once offered a bullhorn! Bad sound will translate into a bad performance. I recommend a system with a wireless lavalier (a small mike which pins on a shirt) or a headset – my favorite – for unencumbered hands and freedom of movement.

Negotiating Fees

Storytelling is an art worthy of a respectable wage.

Negotiating fees is tricky because there are no hard and fast rules. I need to feel that my time and efforts are valued, but I don't want to price myself out of the market. In determining your fees, consider the following:

- Your experience level
- Potential to build your reputation (is the venue prestigious? what publicity might you get?)
- Fees other local tellers are charging
- Sponsoring group's budget (*it is okay to ask*)
- Travel time
- New stories that may have to be developed
- Personal affiliation with the venue or audience

Efficiency is Key

I developed a contract form on my computer into which I simply type the important details discussed above. I send a cover letter and two copies of the contract (I keep a third copy). I request that one contract be signed and returned to me with directions. I also send a sheet outlining my space and set-up requirements, plus a publicity notice that the venue can use for advertising my show. And I send every job a thank you letter. Someone took the time to hire me; I take the time to say thanks.

Ask Questions, Offer Input, and Confirm Details

I try not to sound like a census taker, but building the "who, what, where, and why" questions into my initial conversations has saved me many headaches. I feel prepared, I understand my audience's needs, and I'll be in the best possible location. Then I relax. Now, on to the stories!

Linda Gorham tours nationally. In 2003 she co-chaired the National Storytelling Conference in Chicago. In 2004 she co-led a group of sixty-two American storytellers who traveled to South Africa as part of a professional exchange. Linda is a founding member of ASE: The Chicago Association of Black Storytellers and an award-winning recording artist