



## **Making the Magic Last: Guidelines for our “Stories We Tell” Alumnae Writers’ Groups**

After taking part in the “The Stories We Tell,” The Voices and Faces Project’s two-day testimonial writing program for survivors of gender-related violence, workshop alumnae often want to continue meeting as a group. We don’t just encourage that sort of local action — we believe it is essential to keeping the purpose and power of “The Stories We Tell” going long after our workshop team has left your region.

With this in mind, and in response to requests made by past workshop participants, we created *Making the Magic Last: Guidelines for “Stories We Tell” Alumnae Writers’ Groups*. What follows are suggestions for meeting as an alumnae group, thoughts on what makes for effective “meeting moderation,” ideas for continuing to learn from other social justice and human rights movements, and ways of assuring that alumnae meetings remain writing-focused, productive and trauma-sensitive. With that:

**1. Give your writers’ group a clear purpose and agree to group “rules of engagement.”** Are you there to share writing? To be a source of support to one another? How often do you plan to meet? How long will your meetings last? “The Stories We Tell” was created to be writing-focused, though of course our personal stories are at the heart of our writing. Still, one of the things you may have noted during the workshop was that our facilitator and instructor (Anne and Clifton) were not afraid to gently guide us back to our writing when the discussion moved into a “group therapy” mode. Staying “on purpose” will help you create a writing-focused space that is compassionate and real, but minimally re-traumatizing. The purpose of your local writers group is yours to determine, of course. But if your goal is to meet as writers, agree to that upfront, and create the conditions for keeping the writers’ group in that space.

**2. Choose a moderator to lead the session.** The moderator is tasked with the job of respectfully and firmly redirecting comments and conversations that take the group in a direction that is not writing-focused. If you agree to meetings lasting 90 minutes, that person should also keep the group aware of the time (especially when it is running out). Ideally, the moderator will have experience managing groups (at their place of worship, at work, even in a family setting — and let’s face it, most of us have done plenty of that!). But because you have observe Anne and Clifton moderate, any member of your group may be very



good at this. One of our workshop team's oft-stated philosophies is "Be Kind. But be true." That means having the courage to keep the group on point, which is the most essential job of the moderator.

**3. Think about what writing you wish to share, and how you wish to share it.** You may want to focus on sharing a piece that you are currently working on. Another good idea is to share and discuss writing that is not from group members (something like what we do with the "Stories We Tell" reading packet you received in advance of our two-day workshop). Consider sharing writing that has moved you via email a few days before you meet, and then discuss when the group reconvenes: Why did you want to share this? What can you learn from it? How is this an example of writing that creates change? One of the most important parts of "The Stories We Tell" is our dialogue about writing from other social movements. That global and historical focus may be of interest to your local group.

**4. Remember that the first principle of "The Stories We Tell" is that listening is as important — *maybe even more important* — than speaking.** Be fully present (remember: cell phones off). Actively focus on the writing of others. Think critically, but critique lovingly. Don't be afraid to talk about the ways that the writing that is shared can be strengthened. Draw connections between the work being read by group members, and other testimonial writing that has moved you. Put another way: *listen actively and give actionable feedback.*

**5. Consider ways that you can integrate "Lived Through This" into your discussions.** A Chicago "Stories We Tell" writing workshop group is currently using Anne's book, *Lived Through This: Listening to the Stories of Survivors of Sexual Violence*, to spur dialogue about testimony and trauma. Ask participants to read individual chapters of the book in advance of your meetings, and use it as a catalyst for a dialogue about how to craft stories that are both personal and political.

**6. The wind down period is key.** Allow some time at the end of your meetings for closing comments and shared feelings — this is where you move "away from" the writing, and into a space of reflection. Consider a breathing or meditation exercise to end on a positive note. But remember: starting and ending on time is also what gives the group a sense of safety, professionalism, and focus. To stay true to that, make sure to build your wind-down time into your meeting schedule.



## **7. Be trauma-sensitive at all times.**

One of the reasons that our Voices and Faces Project “Stories We Tell” writing workshop is offered with a safe person is that we know that some discussions may be triggering - and that some may need the support of a one-on-one discussion. So we recommend that you consider having a safe person there — ask your local Rape Crisis Center if they can provide one — at least for the first few meetings. At a minimum, have a plan in place for how to handle a situation in which a fellow writer needs support. We want to be there for one another, but we need to also know when professional support is in order.

***One testimony at a time, we truly are changing the world. To find out more about bringing The Voices and Faces Project’s “Stories We Tell” writing workshop to to your community, email [testimonial@voicesandfaces.org](mailto:testimonial@voicesandfaces.org) #TheStoriesWeTell***