Storytelling Guidelines: How to Evaluate a Good Story

There is no single “right” way to tell a story, but your students can follow some basic guidelines to ensure that their stories have the maximum benefit—for themselves, for their peers, and for your institution.

Blogs are a popular form of storytelling, but while productive for the writer, they can make for a tedious reading experience. We encourage students to draw from blog entries to create a short, slice-of-life narrative that focuses on a single experience or a set of closely related experiences. In the process of carefully crafting a story, the writer is forced to think more deeply about the experience—rather than just chronicle it—and will succeed in sustaining the reader’s interest.

The best stories are the ones that a student might recount around the dinner table. They revolve around a specific cultural adventure, or an interesting person s/he got to know. In the process, they reveal something surprising or noteworthy about the host country. Here are some essential questions we ask when evaluating a story:

Is the story in first-person?
The story should be about something your student did or participated in. We want to get to know the student and relive his/her experience. You don’t want:

• Essays or news reports
• Stories about someone else that don’t incorporate the contributor

Do you learn something about the host culture or someone from it?
You want to learn about your student, but when you finish the story, you also want to know something new about the country or the person that s/he wrote about. You don’t want:

• Travel-oriented stories about hostels, restaurants, tourist attractions, etc.
• Personal-growth or adventure stories that take place in another country but reveal little about its culture

Does the story take you there?
You want sights, sounds, smells, tastes. Students should abide by the golden “show don’t tell” rule and pack in those juicy details. You don’t want:

• Long-winded descriptions of your student’s thoughts and feelings
• Broad, unfounded generalizations about the culture.

Does it start (and end) with a bang?
Your student should bring readers in with a strong beginning, send them away with a powerful ending, and keep them engaged in between. There has to be a sense of movement in the story, an evolution or a revelation. You don’t want:

• Stories that start on the airplane. Airplane rides are notoriously boring. There is almost never a good reason to start a story on an airplane.
• Summaries of your student’s entire abroad experience

Is it funny?
Not all stories need to be funny, but we’re partial to tasteful humor. Even if the story is about a serious experience, there’s often some nugget of comedy in there—encourage your students to bring it out! You don’t want:

• Preachy stories. No one wants to be preached to.
• A stuffy academic tone. Stories should be energetic and accessible.
Top 10 Organizational Benefits of Using a Digital Storytelling Platform

1. **Adds Educational Value**
   When students write about their experiences, they discover why those experiences were important. They are also forced to think about what they took away from their experiences and how to best relay that insight.

2. **Helps You Recruit New Students**
   Young people spend 30+ hours a week online and are much more attuned to accessing messages through digital media formats. Plus, there is no better way to get prospective students excited about the abroad experience than through the personal experiences of their peers.

3. **Increases Your Visibility On Campus**
   A digital storytelling platform can increase professors’ awareness of your international programs and also form a foundation for building connections with parents, supporters, and sponsors.

4. **Helps You Increase Student Engagement**
   Developing and sharing stories is one of the most powerful ways to build community and thus deepen students’ connections to the opportunities that you offer.

5. **Helps You Improve Program Offerings**
   A digital storytelling platform can function as a de facto focus group, offering you insight into students’ ideas, frustrations, and untapped interests, allowing for more targeted marketing and program development.

6. **Helps You Develop New Offerings**
   Dialogue and community connect you to your most committed students. With guidance and focus, digital storytelling allows these students to become proactive in helping you develop and introduce new offerings.

7. **Expands Marketing Opportunities**
   Not only do students naturally tell their friends about anything they have published online, but you also gain material that can be repurposed into communications efforts and email campaigns.

8. **Inspires Productive Dialogue**
   Students like talking about their experiences. Stories can be used to inspire productive dialogue around key issues, like culture shock, and deepen students’ understanding and commitment to more specialized topics.

9. **Supports Niche Interests**
   Digital storytelling allows you to better reach out to and prepare students with certain sets of concerns.

10. ** Adds An Edge To Student Résumés**
    By sharing their stories through a digital platform, students gain an innovative means of presenting their international experiences in their professional résumés and of getting noticed by future employers.