

# STORYTELLING TOOLKIT



Introduction



Smithsonian  
Institution



**MUSEWEB  
FOUNDATION**

***This handbook will guide you in telling the stories of your community.*** The handbook is split into sections based on the different stages of a storytelling project. Each section is full of steps, tips, and things to remember when crafting the audio and video-based stories of your community. You may want to read through the entire handbook before you begin, or you may already be an expert at some of these steps. That's when you can use the sections that are most relevant to you. Check out page 12 for more information on the different sections of the handbook. Good luck with your project!

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# The Power of Storytelling

*We have always told stories.* Since we were in the caves, or on windswept plains, or settling nearby the river deltas, scratching for survival, we told each other stories. While in tribes, or in clans, we told our stories to each other, around the communal fires we built, telling ourselves we could defeat the terrors out there, beyond the circle of light cast by the flames. Our stories gave us courage, and when infused by real-world experience, they gave us useful knowledge, equipping us to deal with the circumstances confronting us—eat this berry, not that one, store food in a hole dug in the ground, surround yourself with friends on cold nights. Stories are our tools, our elixirs, our libraries and histories. They are integral to who we have been and are vehicles for imagining what we might become. They nurture and feed us. Without stories, we are aimless, holding out torches against the setting sun. With them, we are less afraid, able to recognize our neighbors as fellow keepers of these tales by which we grow generation upon generation. In inventing stories, we invented ourselves, through telling them to each other, we make a community.

Since we began to gather ourselves together into towns and cities, our stories have helped us organize ourselves. The narratives we exchange give the members of our community a shared sense not only of place but also of purpose. Think of the cities that have gained character by the accounts told through them: Montgomery, Alabama, linked to the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, or Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, known as the birthplace of the great American experiment. Think of how stories can be redemptive: the tale of Detroit working its way back from the brink to become known as a city of second chances. We live in an historical moment when telling our stories is crucial, because they become our truth—a truth that circulates and gives ourselves a vision of our life chances.

For all these reasons the *Be Here* project is an essential venture right now. We need the light and the warmth of stories authentically told and shared. We need them especially from community members who are not typically heard—the citizen storytellers, corner oral historians who have a wealth of lived experience not found in official records or broadcast reports. Our technological tools now allow us to give local voices a new platform; we can pin content to geolocated areas that are triggered through smart phone apps. Visitors walk onto a certain street or plaza and the space suddenly opens up its history, hidden riches for them to take. This initiative is a new and unique form of storytelling, yet it is also part of a deep tradition of making a world for ourselves in which we don't just survive, but we thrive.

– *Seph Rodney*

Seph Rodney is a staff writer and editor for Hyperallergic, a forum for playful, serious, and radical perspectives on art and culture in the world today. Seph also writes and edits for other publications and has particular expertise as a museum visitor engagement specialist.

# Stories from Main Street | Be Here: Main Street

**Created by the Museum on Main Street (MoMS) program within the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES), “Stories from Main Street” is the Smithsonian’s home for stories from rural America.**

Did you know that about 43% of museums and historical societies in the U.S. are located in small and rural communities? America’s small museums and libraries are the caretakers of a staggering number of objects, photos, and documents that preserve local history. Whether they record the history of your local sports teams, buildings in your area, or the coming of the railroad to your town, local museums tell the complete story!

The work of local volunteers to collect and preserve these materials ensures that stories that are even closer to home can be told. These organizations are centers for the study of American history and culture just like our major museums.

If it happened in small-town America, Museum on Main Street is interested in your story. One of Museum on Main Street’s programmatic commitments is developing collections and programs to help the public better understand the experience of living in America. Even if it seems mundane to you, these stories are important to us all!

Your story matters to the Smithsonian. Imagine hundreds of stories, photos, and videos provided by people from all over the nation. The items stored by the *Stories from Main Street* program and its companion website: *Stories from Main Street*, will give people who call rural America home a place to show everyone what makes each community unique and quintessentially American.

***Be Here: Main Street* is an initiative by the MuseWeb Foundation that builds on the Museum on Main Street's long-standing *Stories from Main Street* project.**

*Be Here: Main Street* is part of a national program, *Be Here*, which capitalizes on the popularity of smartphones and how they offer explorers a new way to discover the hidden culture, history, and stories of your town. *Be Here: Main Street* creates a permanent network of digital stories about the town that residents and visitors can discover and learn from for years to come.

The stories collected through *Be Here: Main Street* are inspired by the content of the Museum on Main Street traveling exhibition and placed on a variety of open and free platforms so the largest number of people possible can benefit from hearing them. The exhibition is the catalyst for the creation of the stories, so these stories may be included in the traveling exhibition in the section containing local content.

*Be Here: Main Street* is covering America in a permanent network of multimedia tours that will reveal connections between towns, cities, and even countries. We all know that a town's economic success is inextricably tied to a thriving cultural sector – and vice versa – so in addition to helping locals tell the town's stories, the initiative connects local businesses and to local cultural destinations, creating guided pathways among the town's points of interest that stimulates culture, tourism and other forms of economic activity.

Ultimately, *Be Here* aims to create a community of towns and cities throughout the United States, learning from one another and ensuring that the geolocation market is used for the technological advancement of our cultural history.

## **Museum on Main Street (MoMS)**

The Museum on Main Street program is the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service's key initiative that directly engages small-town audiences and brings revitalized attention to underserved rural communities through their own Main Street museums, historical societies and other venues.

MoMS develops critical partnerships with state humanities councils to bring Smithsonian traveling exhibitions to small towns. MoMS exhibitions are a powerful catalyst – opening doors to a community's own history, its culture, its people, and to an enhanced pride of place.

To generate grassroots engagement, MoMS works in close collaboration with state humanities councils and more than 1,400 institutions in rural towns across the nation. For these communities (with an average population of 8,000), the opportunity to host the Smithsonian provides much more than a quality educational experience. Through highly targeted community programs and creative activities, MoMS exhibitions become a hub for storytelling and local pride. Residents enthusiastically engage with exhibition content, as diverse community members come together to share and celebrate their heritage. Visit the Museum on Main Street website to learn more at [www.museumonmainstreet.org](http://www.museumonmainstreet.org)

## **MuseWeb Foundation**

The MuseWeb Foundation is a nonprofit offshoot of the international Museums and the Web Conference (MW), which began in 1997 and has since showcased and documented leading work in the cultural field. The MuseWeb Foundation was conceived as an accelerator of cultural innovation to help develop and fund some of the most promising projects and initiatives from the conference and the cultural heritage field at large.

In 2016, the MuseWeb Foundation partnered with the Museum on Main Street (MoMS) program to bring our flagship *Be Here* initiative to the towns hosting MoMS traveling exhibitions. MuseWeb is bringing new technology partners, and new methods of telling stories to the program, so that long after the exhibition has left town, the stories remain – and continue to grow for years to come. Learn more at [www.museweb.us](http://www.museweb.us).

Currently, the cultural stories training and recording with Museum on Main Street happens under the header *Be Here: Main Street*, and uses the hashtag *#bHereMainSt* accross social media platforms.

# Toolkit Sections

**This toolkit is designed to be used as needed.** Not all sections will be relevant to your specific project. Below are descriptions of each section:

## **Introduction**

As you've seen, this section explains the *Stories from Main Street* and *Be Here: Main Street* projects and introduces the national partners.

## **Storytelling Basics**

This section goes over nonfiction narrative and basics of storytelling that will help you craft an engaging nonfiction story about your town. It also helps you narrow down your topic and choose the medium in which you would like to tell your story - audio or video.

## **Research Tips**

This section is to help you if you want to use research to tell a broader narrative about the town. It will guide you through the steps of research and gives tips on how to use archives to find historical documents and images.

## **Scripting**

This section takes you through the steps of scripting audio and video projects, so you have a solid plan as you begin to record your project.

## **Interviewing**

This section is to help you if you plan to interview others for their story. It contains tips and tricks to make sure you get the most out of your interviews.

## **Recording**

This section guides you through the process of recording your audio and video stories. It has tips to make your story dynamic and ensure the quality is high.

## **Editing**

This section will help you as you edit your audio and video projects. There is also a list of free editing software and sites that have free music and sound effects that you can use.

## **Publishing**

This section will help you publish your audio and video stories on Soundcloud and YouTube, as well as geolocate your content on izi.TRAVEL. Each of these platforms has thorough guides on how to upload and use their platforms, so this handbook is simply meant as a starting point and links you to the platform's own user guides for more information.

## **Marketing**

This section is mainly for organizations who want to publicize their content, but can also be used by individuals who want to tell their friends and followers about a story or tour they've created. The guide covers social media, traditional media, and other ideas. It also has examples and templates to use.

## **Facilitated Dialogue**

This section is for organizations who want to plan programming around topics related to the traveling exhibition. The guide walks the organization through planning, facilitating, and evaluating the facilitated dialogue program.

