

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.

Is the story in first-person?

The story should be about something you did or participated in. We want to get to know you and relive your experience. We don't want:

- Essays or news reports
- Stories about someone else that don't incorporate you

Does something *happen*?

Your story needs a complication, some point of tension. This is what gives the readers a reason to keep reading: They want to know how the complication is resolved. We don't want:

- Blog-style stories that simply chronicle an experience: “I did this, then I did this, then I did that.”
- Summaries of your entire abroad experience

Do we learn something about the host culture or someone from it?

We want to learn about you, but when we finish your story, we also want to know something new about the country or the person you're writing about. We 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 us there?

We want sights, sounds, smells, tastes. Remember the golden “show don't tell” rule. Don't tell us that you had a conversation, show us the conversation. Recreate it as dialogue, so that we can “hear” it. Don't tell us you felt ecstatic or scared; rather, describe exactly what happened so that we can experience those same emotions. Pack in those juicy details! We don't want:

- Long-winded descriptions of your 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. We 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.
- Stories that end at sunset. A sunset signals an end of a day, thus making it an obvious way to end a story. So obvious, in fact, that it's become quite unoriginal.

Is it funny?

Not all stories need to be funny, but most readers are partial to tasteful humor. Even if the story is about a serious experience, there's often some nugget of comedy in there—bring it out! We don't want:

- Preachy stories. No one wants to be preached to.
- A stuffy academic tone. Stories should be energetic and accessible.