

TRAILBLAZER STORY COMPETITION

A GUIDE FOR ORGANIZERS



BLAZE A TRAIL: MAY 2016

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In the spirit of this year's Older Americans Month theme, "Blaze a Trail," your organization may want to hold a community "trailblazer" story competition. Personal stories are great ways to share the accomplishments of your community members while inspiring others to take action. Encourage the older adults in your audience to share how they are blazing trails—giving back to the community, starting new careers or hobbies, redefining aging, or anything else that says, "trailblazer." You might leave the call for stories broad, or target a special topic by focusing on something specific, like fitness trailblazers or advocacy trailblazers. This guide offers tips and suggestions for organizing your competition.

Step 1: DESIGN Your Effort

Planning is the most important step in any successful project. If you want to host a story competition, here are a few things you will want to consider right at the start.

Timeline: Think about the time you need to plan your project, promote the competition, collect stories, and review submissions. It may help to work backward from the date on which you plan to announce the winner(s). Allow at least two weeks for story submissions; three to four weeks is ideal.

Team Members: First, choose someone who can answer questions during the competition. This person may also be responsible for receiving and filing stories. Next, select two to four individuals to review submissions and choose the most compelling stories. Depending on your organization and your plans for the stories, you may also need a story editor and/or someone to provide final approval of the winners.

Awards and Rewards: Start by deciding how many "top" stories you will identify. You may want to choose one winner, recognize several people, or have winners in different categories. Then, think about how you will acknowledge them. Personalized certificates are inexpensive but meaningful. They work best when presented in person. If you plan to announce winners online, publishing the story on your website is often enough. If you want to go a step further, consider a small prize, like a gift card.

Event: Hosting an event is certainly not necessary to a successful story competition. However, if you plan to have a celebration in honor of Older Americans Month, it is a perfect time and place to announce the outcome of your contest. The winner(s) could even read a portion of their story to the gathered audience.

Step 2: PREPARE Materials

Guidelines: Create a document or some web content that helps writers to craft their stories. Try to include:

- Word limit (500 is usually adequate for this type of competition)
- Suggestions for content, especially if you are focused on a special topic
- Photo guidance (e.g., dimensions), if you plan to include images with the stories
- Submission instructions (email, web form, hard copies, etc.) and deadline
- Review and selection information, including the estimated number of winners

- Intended use for stories (i.e., where they will be shared)
- Contact person for questions
- Notes related to the required release form (See sample at the end of this guide)

Graphics: If you have the resources, design collateral material. As noted in the following section on promotion, graphics are especially helpful online. You may also need to develop a flyer for the competition, an event, or both.

Step 3: PROMOTE the Competition

Promotion of your story competition is essential. If your community is not aware of the call for submissions, they cannot respond. Here are a few easy ways to reach out to your audience.

Social Media: Engage your followers on Facebook, Twitter, and any other platforms you use. If you created graphics as part of the previous step, this is the time to use them. Images increase attention to, and sharing of, posts.

Website: Use a web slider, banner, article, or other feature to promote your competition on your site. If you plan to post the winning stories online, consider developing a separate subpage from the start—it can save time later. Again, graphics are a nice addition.

Face-to-face: Online promotion is great, but you might not reach everyone. In fact, your audience may be offline more than they are on. Do not underestimate the value of bulletin board signs and/or announcements during your organization's regular activities.

Partners: Reach out to other organizations or community members who might help you collect stories. They may simply help you promote online, or perhaps they know of a special community member who would like to submit a story.

Step 4: COLLECT Stories

Gather: Now, it is time for the stories to come in. Per your plan, the individual responsible for organizing submissions should ensure compliance with any requirements (e.g., release form, word count, and adherence to any specified theme). That person can follow up or disqualify as appropriate, and file the stories. If possible, confirm receipt of each story and thank the submitter for participating.

Review: Since this is competition, rolling reviews are discouraged. Provide all acceptable stories to reviewers at one time. To make sure that all reviewers judge the stories in the same manner, provide a scoring sheet. Use your story submission guidelines as a start to the scoring sheet, and add categories based on what you would most like to see in the winners. Once you receive recommendations, wrap up by navigating any required approvals. If the stories are edited, let authors know. If there is time, allow them to see the new versions before announcing winners.

Step 5: ANNOUNCE Trailblazers

First, inform the winner(s). Email or call them to express your appreciation and explain any next steps. Those steps might include an award or prize, a planned event, or simply information about when and where the story will appear online.

Announcing Online: Generate a website blurb and social media posts to make the announcement. Be sure to thank everyone who submitted a story. If appropriate, include gratitude for partners and individuals who helped your effort.

Announcing at Event: Prepare award certificates, copies of the winning stories, and anything else you will need on site (e.g., gift cards). Remember, it is best to be inclusive: With only a little extra effort, each person who entered can receive a certificate of participation or gratitude.



Sample Story Release

<Logo or letterhead>

I, _____, authorize <organization> and those acting on its behalf to use my story and/or photograph that I voluntarily submitted in response to the 2016 Trailblazer Story Competition. <Organization> is entitled to edit, copy, adapt, or translate the contribution. I understand the story might be shared online or in person.

I understand that the use of my story is not guaranteed and that there will be no compensation for use of my information. I waive any right to inspect or approve products that use my story and/or image. I agree to save harmless <organization> and those acting on its behalf from any liability, including claims for invasion of privacy.

Name (Print)

Signature of Subject

Date

Phone Number

Email Address (optional)

