

How to Play Narratopia

Narratopia is a game that runs on the wild and wondrous power of **your own stories**. It works best with 3 to 6 players and takes 30 to 60 minutes to play.

Setting up the game

Look in the box to find 42 question cards, 42 connection cards, 150 round tokens, a square token bank, one rectangular token mat per player, and a pad of story forms. Shuffle the two card decks. Sort the tokens and put them on the token bank. You will also need a pen or pencil.

Give each player **four question cards** and **four connection cards**. Place the remaining cards in draw piles. Leave space for discard piles.

The oldest or youngest person goes first. Each turn has **three parts**, as follows.

Taking your turn – 1. Telling a story

If it's the first turn of the game, start things out by remembering **something that happened** to you. Look back over the past few weeks or months. What has surprised you lately? Can you recall a high or low point? **Tell everyone** what happened. (If you want to center your game around a particular theme or topic, agree on it now.)

If it's not the first turn of the game, look at your connection cards, and look at the story names on the table. **Choose a connection card that creates a link** between a story somebody already told and a story you would like to tell. You can connect to *any* story you see on the table, including your own. **Read the card you chose out loud**. Where the card has a blank space, use your own words. (Some of the cards have hints to help you think of things to say.) Then **tell everyone the story** you thought of.

When you have told your story, give it a name, **write the name on a story form**, and put the story form on the table. If this is the first turn of the game, put it right in the middle of the table. If this is not the first turn, use your connection card to **literally connect the story you just told to a story somebody already told**. (See illustration.)

Finally, pick up another connection card (so you always have four).

Taking your turn – 2. Answering questions about your story

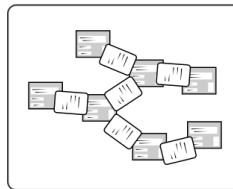
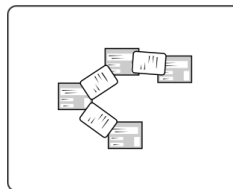
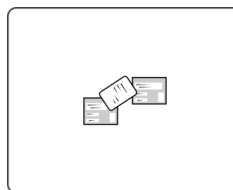
Next, **everyone except you** should use their question cards to **ask you one question each** about the story you just told (in no particular order). Listen to the questions people ask, and answer them as you like.

***Everyone else:** While you're listening to the story, look at your question cards and choose one you would like to use. After the story is over, when there's a pause in the conversation, read the card you chose out loud. Where the card has a blank space, use your own words. Afterwards, discard that card and pick up another from the draw pile (so you always have four).*

Taking your turn – 3. Giving and receiving tokens

Now each player (including you, the storyteller) should **pick up one token from the token bank and give it to another player**. Tokens can refer to stories, questions, answers, or comments. Keep the tokens you get on your token mat.

Now your turn is over, and it is the turn of the person to your left.



Ending the game

When each person has told **three stories**, stop.

Compare your tokens. Which type of token does each player have the most of? Who has the most of each type? Who was informative? Who had deep thoughts? Who surprised everyone?

Making memories

You can use your story forms to **create a record** of the game you just played. Before you pick up the story forms (if you haven't done it already), fill in their storytellers and connections. **Add some notes** to the back of each form about the story and the conversation that surrounded it. Use one of the included game forms to **describe the game itself**. Assemble a bundle of memories you can find and enjoy years from now.

Narratopia and conversational story sharing

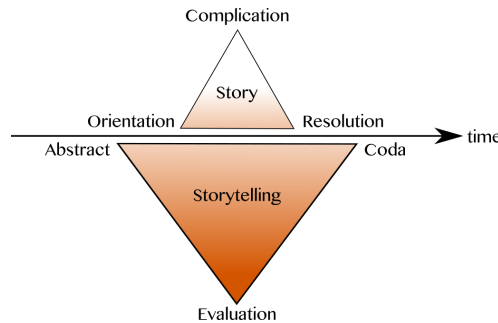
(This is extra information for the curious. For game instructions see the other side.)

Everyday conversation has a **tick-tock** rhythm: I talk, you talk, we all talk in turns. When someone tells a story, the rhythm changes because only one person **has the floor**. Thus telling a story is a **privilege** (because people are listening) and a **risk** (because people might not like what they hear). To enjoy the privilege and reduce the risk of storytelling, we learn from an early age to surround the sharing of stories with ritualized communications.

The shape of a conversational story

The **narrated events** in any told story are the same as those we recognize from movie plots. In the **orientation**, the setting and characters are described. In the **complication**, the story's protagonists face challenges and respond to them. The **resolution** completes the story.

Simple, right? But there is more to conversational storytelling than what you see above the surface. In a conversational story, **narrative events** negotiate permission to tell and willingness to listen.



The abstract: How about a story?

The storytelling ritual starts with an **abstract**, an offer to tell a story. People say “One day...” or “My aunt used to...” and then *pause* to see if those around them are listening. If the others pay attention, the storyteller goes on.

During story abstracts, people usually do some quick alteration of the story to fit the conversation. They might use **formulaic phrases** (“I’ll never forget the time”); **reframe** the story (“I was walking my dog—he was a big dog—we were walking”); **repeat** important words (“It was a hot day—such a hot day”); refer to an **authority** (“My boss said this was funny”); or **refer to a story** someone already told (“That reminds me of the time...”).

Narratopia’s **connection cards** become story abstracts when players fill in the blank spaces in them. The card texts represent some of the reasons people build chains of stories together, such as: simple **reminding**; **comparing** experiences; giving **advice**; giving an **account** of one’s actions or beliefs; building **analogies**; and **making sense** of the topic being discussed.

The evaluation statement: This story is worth listening to.

Once the abstract has been adjusted and accepted, the story starts in earnest. Most conversational stories are peppered with **evaluation statements**. These are comments that aren’t strictly necessary to move the plot of the story forward. Evaluation statements are direct lines of communication from storyteller to audience, and they all contain one message:

this story is (still) worth hearing. Evaluation statements often contain **exaggerations** (“I *never* saw anyone that upset!”); **reported speech** (“Then she said, ‘No, sir, you *can’t* have it back.’”); or requests for **confirmation** (“Did you *ever* hear of anything like that?”).

Narratopia doesn’t explicitly support evaluation statements because they take place within the telling of the story. Interrupting the conversation when a story is being told would not be helpful. However, as people listen to stories and look over their question cards, they connect questions to evaluation statements in order to choose appropriate questions to ask.

The coda: I’m done, let’s talk.

The ending of a conversational story, called its **coda**, is another piece of ritualistic negotiation. In the coda the storyteller **closes the circle** of narrated events, returning the time frame to the present and the control of the floor to the group. During the coda storytellers offer additional proof of the story’s worth, with elements like: a **formulaic conclusion** (“And I lived to tell the tale”); a **summary** of the story (“And that’s how I learned to swim!”); or a reference to **authority** (“My dad said he’d never heard anything like that”).

Narratopia’s **question cards** support story codas by giving people **interesting questions to ask and answer**. The card texts are based on typical audience responses, such as: considering the **perspectives** of the storyteller and the story’s characters; understanding the **forces** at work; considering issues of **responsibility**, blame, help, and hindrance; thinking about **connections** between the story and other experiences; and playing with **what-if** scenarios.

Narratopia’s **tokens** support story codas by representing the **gestures of appreciation** audiences (and storytellers) express when a story ends. Usually such gestures are subtle and unconscious, consisting mainly of eye contact, facial expressions, and body language. But when gestures of appreciation are *not* offered, people notice their absence, and they alter their behavior afterward. No one can play the story sharing game alone.

Why is this so complicated?

When we give someone a gift, the paper we wrap it in is a physical representation of a ritualized message. It says, “This gift is an offering from me to you. Out of consideration for my feelings, please do not destroy it in front of me. At least *pretend* you like it and appreciate the gesture.” In other words, we use wrapping paper to signal a **context of noncritical acceptance**. We learn as children to recognize these signals and accept wrapped gifts graciously even when (especially when) they are not wanted.

Stories work in the same way, and at two levels. An outer layer of wrapping is made up of the conversational rituals that surround storytelling. An inner layer is the story itself, which is a package we use to **safely disclose feelings, beliefs, and opinions** without making claims to truth that would otherwise be open to immediate dispute. When we tell each other stories, we give each other gifts that draw us together, help us keep learning, and **make life fun**. ☺