

# Storytelling Magic

## • Keep 'em Reading •

Grades  
2–6

by | Judith Snyder

**T**he moment a child is enfolded into a storyteller's tale, magic happens. Reality falls away. The teller vanishes. Children become a part of the story. And in that transformation, stories come alive.

As librarians, we can promote this art form by inviting a storyteller to perform, or by learning a story to tell, ourselves. Never tried? Doesn't matter—it's easy to get started. Just choose a story, and practice to hone your technique. Once you feel confident telling the story and you've experienced its effect on an audience, others will follow. Eventually you'll be ready to teach your techniques to others.

Folk tales can provide a comfortable starting point, since so many will already be familiar to you. Find several versions of the same story and notice how the more recent authors made their adaptations. Read the stories several times to get a feel for them, and then, to make your own version unique, try the following techniques to add variations.

### Storyboards and Memorization

Storyboards or story maps chart the main events in the story. Create a storyboard or map and fill it with notes to use as you learn the story. Remember that a storyteller doesn't memorize every word, though it does help to memorize the first and last sentence. Look for a culturally appropriate or ritual beginning and ending to the story you choose. Lines such as *Once upon a time* and *happily ever after* not only give the storyteller confidence in knowing where to start and stop, but the words themselves become a ritual that moves both the teller and the audience through the magical portal into the world of story.

### Voices

Once you are comfortable with your storyboard and have gone through your notes several times, practice telling the story without notes to embed the story's sequence into your memory. Tape yourself and listen to the recording. By using both your auditory and visual senses, you will make the fundamentals of your story indelible.



When you are fully comfortable with the sequence, it's time to get creative. A different voice for the main character creates variety for the listeners. Compose a list of all the different ways people talk (i.e. volume, dialects, speech impediments, age, etc.). Try several voices to see which one fits your main character, and make sure you can be consistent with your choice. For instance, if a squeaky voice makes your throat tired, try something a little lower-pitched so you can use it for the duration of the story.

Keep practicing.

### Repetitive Phrases

If your audience is elementary age, consider adding repetitive phrases. Such phrases already exist in many folk tales and invite audience participation. For instance, the wolf in the *Three Pigs* repeats, "I'll huff, and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house down!" If you need to create your own phrase, look for actions that repeat at least three times. If the character does a lot of walking, create a repetitive phrase. For instance, "The goat and the cat crept out of the door. Clip, clop, tippy-toe, tippy-toe. Clip, clop, tippy-toe, tippy-toe."

## Keep 'em Reading

### Secret Spices: Phrasing, Pacing and Pausing

Now for the secret storytelling spices: phrasing, pacing, and pausing. With practice, **phrasing** takes care of itself. The better you know your story, the better your confidence, and the words begin to flow like water from a spring. It's almost magical. **Pacing** creates the ebb and flow of the story. Varying the pace creates interest and keeps listeners involved. Slow down to build anticipation, speed up to build excitement. The **pause**, when used effectively, lures the listener even closer to the story. Pauses preceding a repetitive phrase are invitations to participate. After hearing the phrase once, the audience automatically joins in during the next pause. Pauses can also escalate tension when leading up to exciting parts.

### Body Language

Stage presence, the awareness of the body while standing before an audience, helps a storyteller deliver the story. Choreograph simple gestures to go with a repetitive phrase. Be aware of nervous habits that may distract from the story. The best way to identify trouble spots is to videotape yourself.

### Educate Yourself

Be careful: once you experience magical storytelling moments with your listeners, you may never want to stop telling stories! Feed your appetite for storytelling by looking for university courses, or find workshops offered by regional storytelling groups. Listen to other tellers and read from an ever-growing list of books detailing additional techniques to make your stories even stronger. Simply search the Internet and the public library to find other storytelling resources in your region.

## Storytelling Magic: Teaching Students

Once you have a story or two under your belt and you are comfortable with your abilities, try sharing your skills with your students. Introduce them to the same techniques that helped you, and watch as their own stories evolve and their confidence grows. Use your story as an introduction to a storytelling unit, and demonstrate the different

techniques. Your students will share your excitement and become even more appreciative of this oral heritage, and you will reap the benefits of reinforcing your own knowledge and skills. Use your experience to adapt and extend the techniques you learned.

Many curriculum units offer great opportunities for integrating a storytelling unit. Folklore subjects and themes can complement units on Native American Studies, World Culture Studies, Tall Tales and U.S. History, Space, Animals, and more. For older students, storytelling in the first person can be used for biography presentations.

### A Legal Note

If you use folk tales in your storytelling unit, you won't run into copyright issues. However, if you choose to have students use picture books, performances should take place only during the school day. Performances taking place after school constitutes a public performance that requires permission from the author or publisher.

## Storytelling Unit Planning Guide

The following planning guide provides a suggested timeline for lessons. You may need to add additional class periods to meet the needs of your students.

### Information Literacy Standards: 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, and 9

**Skills:** public speaking, voice projection, eye contact, use of gestures, phrasing, sequencing, retell

### Mini-lesson #1: Unit Introduction

- Model storytelling
- Share a brief history of storytelling. I like to ask students to imagine a world without T.V., movies, video games, radio, books, and magazines. Then I explain that before these things came into being, storytellers sang or told stories to audiences, telling of the brave adventures of famous heroes or deeds of the gods.

Often grandparents told stories to teach the proper way to behave. Both royalty and commoners welcomed traveling storytellers who told tales that had been passed down from person to person throughout history. It wasn't until recently—about 500 years ago—that the stories began to be written down and printed into books. Even so, storytellers all around the world continue to tell their stories. Once your students tell their first story, they become a part of this oral tradition. As a result, they learn to entertain their friends and become better public speakers.

- Provide adequate time for students to choose a story and read it several times.

### Mini-lesson #2: Learn the Beginning and Ending

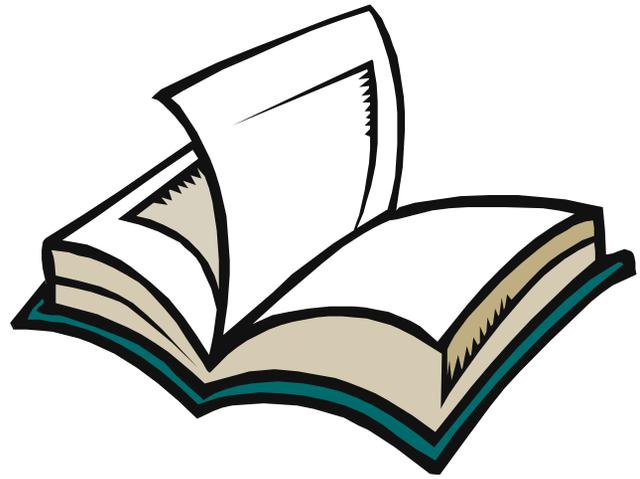
- Explain that a storyteller does not memorize every word. Refer to different versions of a folk tale and remind students that each storyteller makes the story his own by adding or changing little details. The storyteller shouldn't use the exact words from the written page. Telling a story with little variations creates a unique version—a goal for any artist. That said, it does help to memorize the first and last line of a story so the teller knows how to start and stop.
- With their chosen story in mind, students will write their first and last sentences in a storyboard or story map. Using these as notes, students should practice saying both sentences aloud with a partner.

### Mini-lesson #3: Sequence the Story Using a Storyboard or Story Map

- Students should now sequence the rest of the story. Upon completion, divide the class into pairs, and instruct the pairs to use their notes to retell their stories to each other. Each day, divide students into pairs and provide ten minutes for each student to retell her story. With each retelling, encourage students to rely less and less on their notes.

### Mini-lesson #4: Develop Character Voice

- To make the story interesting, encourage students to use a different-sounding voice for the main character. (One voice variation is usually enough for beginners.)



- Try the Voice Game:
  - Brainstorm a list of different ways to change a character voice (e.g. loud, low, whines, slow, lisp, teenager, granny, regional accent or dialect, etc.).
  - Have the class gather in a large circle.
  - Choose a phrase for the class to repeat in different voices.
  - Go around the circle and have students repeat the phrase using different voices, keeping in mind that words should be enunciated so they are clearly understood.
  - When finished, ask the class to consider the voices they heard and choose one for a character in their story. Have them come up with a sentence or two that the character might say in the story, and then practice saying it to a partner. Ask several students to model their sentences before everyone practices their next retelling.

### Mini-lesson #5: Create a Repetitive Phrase

- Discuss how to find or develop a repetitive phrase. Students should then choose and write down the repetitive phrase they plan to use. Have them practice saying the phrase with a partner.
- Locate at least three places in the story to use the repetitive phrase, and make notations in storyboard/map.
- Provide time for multiple practices

### Mini-lesson #6: Practice Pacing, Pausing, Phrasing

- Demonstrate poor storytelling form by telling an exciting part of a story using a monotone voice at a slow pace. Ask students to identify



what made the story seem boring. Tell the same part again, but this time, vary the voice inflection and the **pace** (slow down to build anticipation, speed up to build excitement).

- Demonstrate a part of your story that requires a **pause** just before the repetitive phrase to invite audience participation. Tell a very exciting part of your story and use a short pause to develop tension. Discuss other techniques and what they add to a story.
- Demonstrate **phrasing** first by showing the wrong way (once...upon...a...time there...lived...a sweet...princess) and again fluently. Ask students to explain the differences.
- Provide practice time after teaching each of the techniques above so that students can apply the skill to their story.

### Mini-lesson #7: Develop Stage Presence

- Tell parts of a story, modeling both good and bad use of gestures. For instance, nervous fidgeting detracts from storytelling as well as any public speaking—and most of the time, the speaker is unaware of the body movements.
- Develop students' stage presence by having them:
  - Practice the way they wish to perform (sitting or standing or both).
  - Choreograph hand gestures to go with the repetitive phrase.
  - Keep the gestures/movements simple.

### Mini-lesson #8: Practice Makes Perfect

- Model good and bad examples of voice projection and eye contact. Videotape practices if possible. You might want to have students view and self-evaluate themselves using a rubric. For a rubric example, visit <http://jsnyder444.googlepages.com/storytellinghelp>.
- Provide several more days for practice in the classroom and at home.

### Performance

Designate a performance day, and invite parents and other classes. There are many ways to organize this event. Here are a couple of ideas:

### Option 1

Schedule specific performance times for groups of four to five students. Establish a short break between performances. Arrange the presentations throughout one day or over several days.

### Option 2

Scatter performance areas throughout the library. Station two to three tellers at each area and set up four or five chairs for the audience. Students can create a poster with the title of their story to post at their station. When each group finishes telling their stories, the audience members should then move in a clockwise rotation to the next station.



*Judith Snyder has more than thirty years of experience in elementary classrooms and libraries in the Cherry Creek School District in Colorado. She integrates Creative Drama activities with all levels of students, and is a firm believer in the importance of including the arts in education. Judith is a professional storyteller, freelance writer, and the author of the Jump-start Your Library series, three books featuring hands-on library lessons from UpstartBooks (2008). Her picture book, What Do You See? will be available from Odyssey Books in the fall of 2009.*



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