



# Effective Storytelling

## A manual for beginners

by Barry McWilliams



Effective storytelling is a fine and beautiful art. A well-developed and presented story can cut across age barriers and will hold the interest and reach its listeners. Stories will be remembered long after other orations. Knowing and applying the basics of storytelling will strengthen your stories.

**Finding stories:** There are many kinds of stories you can work with. It is recommended you start with simple folktales, with simple elements.

While traditionally stories were learned by listening, the best source today is the children's department of the Public Library - particularly in the section (J)398. There you will find all sorts of folk and fairy tales, tall tales, trickster stories, etc. Many stories are on the internet as well. As you browse, look for stories that "touch" you. Start with simple stories, then as your experience grows, be sure to explore and branch out.

With time you will probably find many kinds of tales that will interest you personally. All sorts to choose from including: folktales from many countries and cultures, accumulative stories, droll and humorous tales, traditional fairytales in numerous versions, wish (magic) tales, trickster tales, tall tales, myths, legends and hero tales from the sagas and national epics, animal fables, scary stories, urban legends, Bible and religious stories, literary stories, pourquoi (why?) stories. With time and experience you will want to try a variety of stories and perhaps even branch out into telling your own personal stories or giving Improvisational storytelling a try.

And be aware of copyrights, it is best to work with traditional folklore or tales in public domain, than to plagiarize a living author or storyteller without their permission. Remember to give credit to sources.

### **Characteristics of a good story:**

A single theme, clearly defined

A well developed plot

Style: vivid word pictures, pleasing sounds and rhythm

Characterization

Faithful to source

Dramatic appeal

Appropriateness to listeners

Baker and Greene, *Storytelling: Art and Technique*, pp. 28

**Adapting to our audiences:** The audience has a very important role in storytelling - for their minds are the canvas on which the teller paints his tale. Oral storytelling involves much interaction between teller and hearer. I have observed that our audiences have lost some of the skills to follow a narrated story and see things in their minds. Storytelling has become more difficult. Attention spans are shorter and more demanding, more sophisticated, yet less able to independently imagine or visualize. People seem to need more visual stimulation.

Take the story as close to them as you can. Keep it brief and simple- especially for younger children - pare down to the heart of the story. Stimulate their senses so they feel, smell, touch and listen and see vivid pictures. Describe the characters and settings, and help them sympathize with the character's feelings. Aim your story at the younger ones when telling to a audience of mixed ages!

*Storytelling is a task shared by storyteller and story listeners;-  
it is the interaction of the two that makes a story come to life!*

**Preparation:** Once you settle on a story, you will want to spend plenty of time with it. It will take a considerable period of time and a number of tellings before a new story becomes your own.

Read the story several times, first for pleasure, then with concentration. Analyze its appeal, the word pictures you want your listeners to see, and the mood you wish to create. Research its background and cultural meanings. Live with your story until the characters and setting become as real to you as people and places you know. Visualize it! Imagine sounds, tastes, scents, colors. Only when you see the story vividly yourself can you make your audience see it!

Stories paint word pictures and use the sound and rhythm and repetition of words. In developing and learning a story concentrate on its visual and audio aspects: either assemble it into a series of visual pictures like a filmstrip, or consciously absorb the rhythm and arrangement of the sounds of the words.

Learn the story as a whole rather than in fragments. Master, and then simplify, its structure to a simple outline of scenes. Don't try to memorize it, though you should always know your first and last lines by heart!

Map out the story line: The Beginning, which sets the stage and introduces the characters and conflict; the Body, in which the conflict builds up to the Climax; and the Resolution of the conflict. Observe how the action starts, how it accelerates, repetitions in actions and how and where the transitions occur. If simplifying or adapting a story, do not alter the essential story line.

Absorb the style of the story: To retain the original flavor and vigor, learn the characteristic phrases which recur throughout the story. Observe the sentence structure, phrases, unusual words and expressions.

Practice the story often - to the mirror, your cat, driving in the car, with friends, or anyone who will listen. Even when telling an old and familiar story, you must use imagination and all the storyteller's skills to make it come alive. Use your imagination to make the story come alive as you prepare.

*Give your characters personalities...live the story with them...  
know and feel their emotions... breathe the breathe of life into them,  
until they become so real to you that you feel like they are people you know.  
If you are convinced - your listeners will be too.*

**Delivery elements:**

- Sincerity and whole heartedness (Be earnest!),
- Enthusiasm (This does not mean artificial or noisy excitement),
- Animation (in your gestures, voice, facial expressions)

Stories are more interesting when there is animation and variety in the voice of the teller.

**Particular Oral Storytelling Skills:** A Storyteller's skills include: emphasis, repetition, transition, pause and proportion.

**Dialog** should make use of different voices for different characters and using the Storytelling "V" - where you will shift your facing (or posture) as the dialog switches from character to character.

Use your voice to create the atmosphere or tension as the story progresses.

Use gestures and facial expressions add much to the visualization of the story. Be sure they are appropriate and natural. Practice them!

Pacing involves both the volume and rate at which you speak, and the progression of the action in the story. Dialog slows a story's pace down, while narrating action speeds it up.

Repetition and Exaggeration have always been basic elements of story telling.

Experience will hone these skills, and when - and how - to use them most effectively.

Most importantly -- relax and be yourself. Develop your own style - one you are comfortable with.

**Beginning a story:** Storytelling is best done in a relaxed atmosphere free of distractions. The audience ought to be comfortable and close. Candle light and campfires are ideal situations for telling stories, but often impractical. The teller needs to give careful attention to the setting before hand - and be prepared to rearrange a room to bring his hearers closer, or use a backdrop or hangings to create atmosphere - especially in classroom settings. Props, costumes, or some getting acquainted patter may also help in getting and keeping attention and creating a mood.

Storytelling traditionally begins with a "Once upon a time..." opening, and then a storyteller's silent pause to gather his thoughts. The traditional openings, of which there are many (often with responses from the audience), were "rituals" that served as a signal that the teller was suspending "time and space" as we know it and transporting the audience to a world of imagination and play. They identified the teller and established the audience's commitment to accept for the moment that imaginary world and its "rules". Similar "rituals" also signal the end of the story and their return to reality. Many adults today have forgotten these "rules of the game." There are online lists of Beginnings and Endings.

**Some attention keepers:** Many factors affect the attention of your listeners. A storyteller always needs to be sensitive to his audience and may need to regain their attention before continuing.

Involvement or participation. Use volunteer(s) from the audience in your story. Or have the audience participate in hand motions or making sound effects. Or responding with "chants" or refrains. A distinct change in your pace, voice, or mood. An unusual or unexpected twist in the narration. Throw-away lines or asides work well as does comic relief.

Be especially prepared to deal with disruptions with groups of children. There is always one or two children that want the attention. Sometimes you can just ignore it; sometimes it make take a stare, or a pause till the disruptive behavior ends, sometimes maybe involving a child in your story - whatever you do - do not speak harshly or in anger, or you will lose the audience.

**Concluding:** Once you finish the story - stop! Don't ramble on. Leave their thoughts lingering over it. Don't feel you have to explain everything, or tie together all loose ends. Let them go away thinking about what has been said, and drawing their own meaning from it!

Applause is no measure of the effectiveness of a story presentation. Sometimes it will be exuberant, but other times the audience is quietly savoring and treasuring the story. An attentive audience and the feeling you "told it well" are the best reward you can have.

Finally...and most importantly: The more you practice the more skilled you will become. Don't be afraid to try different methods. Be creative. As you do learn from your experiences. Expect to flop, the best of us do. Don't be overly self conscious. Have fun and share the joy of story.

In the end, it is most important that you should tell your story in your own words with sincerity and enthusiasm and....

***Tell stories!, Tell stories!! Tell stories!!!***

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