

Literature-Based Storytelling

Read One, Tell One

Use these proven storytelling techniques to bolster reading comprehension and get students talking about literature. **By Sue Black**

Recently a fourth-grade teacher stopped me in the hall. “I had tears in my eyes,” she told me. “Three of my special ed. students volunteered to tell their stories. They were awesome.” Another teacher said, “I can’t believe he’s participating; he never acts interested in anything!”

As a storyteller who teaches hundreds of students in grades one to eight to tell stories each year, I have witnessed their enthusiasm for story. Students have fun experimenting with voice, facial expressions, emotion, and gestures that make the story “just right” for telling. As they present their story to younger grades, their comprehension, knowledge of story structure, presentation skills, and self-confidence grows. The positive impact on the class as it works toward a common goal, as class members tell one another what they are doing right, spills over into other areas.

So Many Great Ideas, So Little Time!

Teachers are BUSY. It’s hard to find time for a separate storytelling unit. So don’t! Use techniques from the world of storytelling to get your students sharing and talking about literature they are reading in the classroom. All it takes is the courage to set aside the book, a few practice tips, and five to ten minutes for each of the activities listed below.

- **Choose a Story to Tell.** Students could retell stories they are already reading in class, or you could introduce them to folktales and fables in your library. These stories have a limited number of characters and strong story lines. Ask students to read at least five different stories before they choose the one they would like to tell.
- **Tell It Ugly.** Read the story. Set the book aside. Either alone or with a partner, try to tell the story out loud. Students should choose the words that work best for them, keeping the details that are necessary, while adding or changing details to enrich the telling. It won’t sound pretty or polished; indeed, I call this first telling the “tell it ugly” stage. Then students should go back and skim the story to check for any important missing details. Set the book aside and tell it again—a little less “ugly.”
- **Tell It Bare Bones.** Find a partner. Retell the story in just six sentences—two for the beginning, two for the middle, and two for the ending. Try telling it again using only three sentences—beginning, middle, and end.
- **Talk It Out.** Without using the book, answer some of these *W* questions as they apply to your story: Who are the main characters in the story? Where did the story take place? When did the story happen? What was the problem? Why was there a problem? How was each of the main characters feeling about that problem? How was the problem resolved? Which details are important and need to be in the story? Which details make the story interesting?

- **Walk It / Talk It** (shared with the permission of storyteller Bob Kann). Get moving! Take your class for a walk. Have each student find a partner. Decide who will be the storyteller first and who will be the listener. As students walk the halls of your school, or around your library or gym, they tell their story to their partners. Encourage your students to notice any gestures that naturally enter the storytelling when walking and talking. Does the teller want to keep any of those gestures for future tellings? Encourage your students to notice how their voices change as they walk and talk. Are they projecting just a bit to be heard? Do they emphasize certain words or add effective pauses? Do they vary their voice during the telling – high/low, fast/slow, loud/soft? Do character voices enter the telling? What worked well? What will they keep for the next telling?
- **Grow the Good Stuff.** Encourage your students to listen for positive aspects of the telling. Listening partners are responsible for helping the tellers grow by offering positive feedback. The listening partner should share their responses to these sentences with the teller:
 - “The thing I liked best about your story was . . .”
 - “The thing I liked best about your telling was . . .”
 - “The part I could visualize best was . . . This is the way I pictured that . . .”
 - “I liked the gestures you used during this part of the story . . .”
 - “I liked how you used your voice during this part of the story . . .”
 - “I noticed your facial expressions changed when you . . .”
 - “I think you told (this part of the story) really well because . . .”
 Only after the listening partners have offered positive feedback can they then offer one suggestion to make the story even better. They should phrase that suggestion by asking, “Have you thought about . . . ?” That allows the storyteller to consider the suggestion in a non-threatening atmosphere.
- **Time for Popcorn.** Divide your storytellers into two groups, tellers and listeners. Each listener should find two chairs and place them so that they are facing one another. Then each listener should sit in a chair, facing an empty chair. On your command, each storyteller finds an empty chair and sits across from the listener. The storytellers begin telling their story. After a few minutes of telling, you shout, “Popcorn!” The storytellers stop telling immediately—even if they are mid-sentence. They pop up from where they are sitting, trade places with someone else who is standing up, and resume telling to a new partner. Repeat. When the storytellers finish, they trade chairs with the listeners and the new teller begins. Repeat until all stories are complete.
- **Four Corners Storytelling.** Your students are ready to tell their stories to a small group of peers or to a younger class! Place one storyteller in each corner of your classroom. Invite a small group of students to gather around each storyteller and listen to his or her tale.

There’ll Be No Stopping Them!

When I finish working with students in a storytelling residency, I like to ask them what they’ve learned. My favorite comments come from a fifth-grader who said, “Thank you for teaching us how to face our fears. I’m not afraid anymore.” Another learned, “Never give up if it’s hard.” Once your students have experienced the success that comes with sharing a story, they’ll ask, “When can we do that again?”

Imagine . . . all that from storytelling.