

the whole story

Bruce Potts explains how to tell tales full of magic and wonder...

All teachers use storytelling techniques to some extent: to deliver a key message during a lesson, to liven up a learning situation, to bring a dull topic to life, or simply at 'storytime'. But considering it's one of the most important skills you'll ever need in the classroom, it's a shame that - as far as I'm aware - there are so few teacher training courses on the subject.

Children will become fluent, independent readers not because we grill and drill them daily with phonemes, graphemes and word lists, but because we light a fire in their belly and ignite a passion for stories that makes them want to read.

I believe that every child should experience great storytelling every day - not only in school but also at home with their parents and carers. It is a time for them to shrug off the cares of the world and immerse themselves in a realm of magic and fantasy. And I don't mean reading a story from a book (although that is enjoyable and has a place in your repertoire). I mean great storytelling delivered with passion, enthusiasm, energy and without a text in front of you.

Not everyone will be a natural storyteller, but using the following ideas, and with practice, you'll soon have children rapt in your performance.



1 Choose the right story

When choosing a story, be careful to spend time thinking about:

- The ages of the children
- Their prior experience
- The level of language used in your story
- The children's conceptual understanding of the subject matter
- The length of the story
- Whether they've heard it before

There are so many wonderful stories to choose from, so spend time familiarising yourself with a wide variety before making your choice.

2 Practice makes perfect

Once you've decided which story you want to use, read it over and over on your own until you are completely familiar with it and feel you could easily retell it without recourse to the book itself. At this point, practise it on an unsuspecting victim or victims; perhaps a niece or nephew or even your own children. Analyse the reaction you get from your trial run and use your analysis to improve your delivery for your intended audience.

3 One step at a time

If you have never tried storytelling before, or if your experience is very limited, don't be too over ambitious the first time. Choose a fairly short and simple story (lasting no more than five minutes) with which you are confident. If that goes well, try something a little more challenging the second time and so on until you feel confident enough to go for anything really difficult.

4 Catchy start, clear ending

One of the secrets of good storytelling is capturing the children's interest right at the start, so spend a lot of time thinking about how you will begin the story. Here are some examples:

- 'I'd never seen a million pounds before, so to win it was incredible...'
- 'The boy was standing right on the edge of the cliff, looking down when all of a sudden...'
- 'Jasvinder looked up, and there before her very eyes was the most wonderful thing she had ever seen...'
- 'A long time ago, in a far off place where many people were thought to have magical powers, lived an old man. People say he knew everything...'

And when you come to the end make it absolutely clear that this is the conclusion! Here are some possible endings to the above starts:

- '...and because of that I've learned that all the money in the world can't make you happy.'

■ '...if it taught him one thing it was that you should never play near the edge of a cliff.'

■ '...but she realized that just because something looks wonderful it doesn't mean it is wonderful.'

■ '...so it's true, he really does know everything.'

5 Use facial expressions

One of the most powerful tools in your armoury is your facial expression. Use it to indicate surprise, alarm, excitement or whatever mood you are trying to create. Practise in front of a mirror on your own, or ask a trusted friend to be your guinea pig while you tell him/her a story.

Hand in hand with facial expression is eye contact. Try to ensure that during the course of your story you make eye contact with every member of your audience at some point.

give some of the characters in the story names of children in your class

6 Experiment with voices

Children love it when you use different voices for different characters. This needs to be rehearsed beforehand, so work out which voice belongs to which character in the story. Experiment with high and low pitch, squeaky and clear, soft and loud. Use accents from different countries. Try different dialects from around Britain such as Geordie, Yorkshire, Cockney. Again, practise these long before trying them out on your children.

7 Make use of props

Every good storyteller has a range of props at their fingertips so start to collect together gowns, hats, cloaks, wigs and other items that can be worn. Collect artefacts that can be brought out at the right moment

in a story. Start listening carefully to music which you may be able to use to create a sense of danger, fear, happiness or fun and prepare these for easy access during your storytelling sessions. Think about whether the story may better be told with puppets. Using sound effects can be great fun too.

8 Get a move on

Some tales are best told sitting in one place, others are better delivered moving about and 'engaging' with different children during the course of the story. You decide in advance, but as you develop your storytelling skills make sure there is variety in your approach. Whether seated or moving around, use bold hand, finger and whole body gestures to get the message across.

9 Question and repetition

Children love to feel they are part of the story. Give some of the characters in your stories the names of children in your class. Prepare parts of the story so that some phrases are repeated and let the children join in with the repeated phrase, e.g. 'I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house down'. Use questioning to involve the children further, '...they went further and further into the woods and...' What do you think happened next?

10 Pause for effect

Pauses emphasize a point and can be used to create dramatic impact or suspense. The pause can be silent or can be filled with sound effects or music, especially when used at a moment of tension, expectancy or fear! Experiment with this technique – you'll find it a little difficult to get this right at first but it will get better with practice.

If you want to find out more about storytelling or you'd like to have an inset day to help all the staff in your school develop storytelling skills you can contact Bruce on bruce_bp@hotmail.com