

TELLING TALES

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO TELLING STORIES

This has been developed to supply the needs of the many people who contact the Society for Storytelling asking for advice on how to begin telling stories. It aims to provide information for anyone wanting to learn the art of storytelling, whether for pleasure or to help them in their work.

The ideas contained in these pages come from a number of sources within the SfS and will help beginners make that first leap into storytelling.

In this factsheet we will be looking at:

Why Tell Stories

Choosing Stories

Learning Stories

Telling Stories

Further Information on storytelling and places that regularly run storytelling courses are available from the SfS website www.SfS.org.uk or write to SfS c/o Mythstories Museum, Morgan Library, Aston St. WEM Shropshire, SY4 5AU

Why 'Tell' Stories?

Storytelling is about sharing – not just the sharing of words and plot, but the sharing of emotions and experiences. It involves a direct coming together of the teller and the listener, with no barrier of text. There is a subtle interaction between the teller and the listener which is unique to oral communication.

We are all storytellers! We tell each other stories quite naturally as part of our everyday life. We need look no further for proof of this than the snatches of conversation overheard in the workplace, the playground, or on the bus.

Telling stories gives us the opportunity to express emotion and to use our imaginations with a freedom no other medium can offer.

Telling stories to children enables them to learn the art of listening, in an age when many are lacking this skill. Encourage them to tell stories and they will gain confidence, improve their vocabulary and their literary skills.

Finding Stories

Stories can be found in books, magazines and newspapers, on the internet, radio and television. They lurk in our memories; there are stories all around us. Your local library is a good starting place.

Choosing Stories

Many people find it easier to tell stories which have their roots in their own culture. Make this a starting point. However, if a particular culture holds a great deal of interest for you do not be afraid to explore tales from that culture.

Many storytellers advise starting with Folktales, Myths and Legends which have been passed down through the ages, their value as a story has been proven by their survival, they usually use language which is naturally spoken and contain patterns which are easy to remember. Literary tales can be too complex or use language more appropriate for reading than telling and the retelling of personal anecdotes is more skilful than it seems.

Do not try to look at too many stories at one time or you will suffer from mental indigestion. Instead look at just one or two at a time, noting down the ones that touch you enough that you need to tell them. It has been said that 'a storyteller does not choose the stories, the stories choose the teller,' and to a great extent this is true. If you are not captured by the story, it will be hard for you to convince your listeners of its worth.

Learning a Story

Learn your story not by heart, but with your heart! Traditional tales have been told for generations, each teller changing and adapting the tale to meet the needs of the time and the audience. Develop your own version of the story you wish to tell.

Consider how you feel most comfortable learning other things and apply this to how you learn stories. You may find one method works better than another or you may like to use a combination of learning techniques.

Some people have a good visual memory, they learn by creating a series of pictures in their head or storyboarding on paper. Aural memory is strong in others who find it easier to remember a story by hearing it. Others prefer the written word, or learning key points/facts.

1. Learning a story from the text.

- a. Having found a story you wish to tell, read and reread it until you feel that you have the plot safe in your mind.
- b. You may wish to write it out in your own words.
- c. Put the book away.
- d. Try to tell the story aloud to yourself in a comfortable place, this may be standing in the middle of your living room or sitting in an armchair, whatever suits you best. Do not worry about stumbling or forgetting things, just tell it. Try to get all the way through the story without stopping. **Tell it in your own words!**
- e. Now go back to the book and scan the story. Have you missed out anything important? If so you can put it in at your next practice.
- f. Have you added anything? Did it add to the story as a whole in atmosphere, pace, character, or any of the myriad things which can enhance a telling? If it did then you are on your way to making the story your own and becoming a storyteller.
- g. Having looked at the book put it away and tell the story again. Get the taste of the tale on your tongue. (repeat the reading and telling as necessary)
- h. Eventually you will not be looking back at the text in order to improve your telling

2. Visualising a story.

It is often easier to put a story into your own words if you learn this way. However you won't be able to do this till the story is fixed firmly in your mind.

- a. Having read your story, a number of times to fix it in your mind, take a piece of paper and a pencil. Think about what happens in the story and draw a series of pictures of the action. These can either be in the form of a series of storyboards or a more flowing, map like interpretation. Don't worry about the quality of the artwork; it is just a form of visual notes. You should try to reduce the story to a series of key images, no more than ten.
- b. Find somewhere comfortable and retell the story, visualising what happens as you go, see how each scene follows the next like a silent movie.
- c. Having retold the story look back at your storyboards and if necessary the text of the story. Ask the same questions you would if learning by the text method.
- d. Once you have the action firmly fixed in your head start visualising the details. Don't bother to draw anything, just close your eyes and look at the people in the story and the places where they are. See them so clearly that if someone were to ask you a question about them you could answer as though you had been there and seen it with your own eyes.

3. Learning a story by the key facts

- a. Read the story through once or twice.
- b. Write the story down in your own words, keep it as brief as possible.
- c. Tell the story out loud, somewhere you feel comfortable.
- d. Write the important things to remember as a series of keywords. For example to remember the story of the Gingerbread Boy you might list. Gingerbread Boy, Runs, Old couple, Rhyme(Run, Run, as fast as you can. You can't catch me, I'm the Gingerbread Man.), Cat, Dog, Pig, Goat, Cow, Horse, Fox, River, Swim, Back, Shoulder, Head, Nose, Mouth. Keep the list short, and record as little detail as possible.
- e. Tell the story again, see what you have left out or added in as described earlier.

4. Learning a story Aurally

- a. Read the story into a tape recorder. Some tellers find it best not to read with great expression, just recording the story and adding the expression when they tell it later.
- b. Having listened to the tape a number of times practice telling the story.
- c. Alternate listening and retelling till you can remember the whole story, as detailed in the 'learning by text' section.
- d. Do not worry if you make errors or forget elements of the story, you will improve over the retellings.

Whatever method, or combination you use to learn your story, do not be afraid to add to the story or change the unimportant elements. A story is a living thing that grows and changes; this is the 'Oral Tradition'. The urban myth of the 'Vanishing Hitchhiker' is related to an old story often called the 'Suffolk Miracle', when the story travelled to India it became the 'Pink Pashmina'.

When you have learned the plot of the story think about the protagonists. Why do they behave in the way they do? Think about their backgrounds and motives, if it isn't in the text then make it up. What emotions are they experiencing? Try telling the story to yourself from different points of view before returning to your original version.

Once you know your story sufficiently well to tell it fluently, tell it to a friend who is willing to ask you questions about it. If you can answer all their questions confidently you know the story well enough to tell it to a wider audience.

'Storytelling is an art of both interpretation and improvisation. You tell a story in your own language for the listeners who are immediately in front of you. You can tell the same story to 500 adults in a theatre, 35 seven year olds in a classroom or to a friend down the telephone... In each case the story is the same, but, by necessity, the language, tempo and energies involved will be different. A storyteller is simultaneously the interpreter, adapter, author, performer, director and critic of his or her material.'

Ben Haggarty

Telling Your Story

Once you have learned your story you will want to share it. You think it is a good story for your audience, and for yourself.

1. Remember you are telling a story; you are not performing a part you have learned for a play. Memorising a story to tell like that is recitation not storytelling. Relax and let the story tell itself through you, that way it will be fresh and spontaneous.
2. Wherever you are telling your story you should first check your audience is ready. Look round to ensure everyone is settled before you begin.
3. Start clearly. You might use a traditional beginning to enable people to key into your voice. 'Once upon a time' or 'Far away and long ago' are both traditional English beginnings, find one that matches your story.
4. While you are telling make brief eye contact with members of your audience.
5. Enhance the story by varying the rhythm and tone of your voice. Taste the words as they pass over your lips.
6. Hold the story in your mind's eye as you tell it. Be aware of where things are in the story in relation to yourself.
7. End the story strongly. There are as many traditional endings as there are beginnings: 'They lived happily, so may we. Put on the kettle, lets have a cup of tea.' Or you could make up your own.

If you have internet access you can find a variety of traditional beginnings and endings on some of the storytelling websites.

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