

The Matches

Starting age: seven years

Themes:

- The concept of story
- Storytelling skills
- Structure / content
- Scary stories
- Implication

The session around this story invites the children to devise their own storytelling techniques and will allow them to explore the concept of 'story' itself.

Explain to the children that they will be given a special task this week: *to tell a story to someone else*. Explain that they could tell whichever story they like but, to make things easier for them, you are going to give them a 'scary story' to tell that shouldn't be too difficult to remember. Make sure everyone is settled and ready for a story. You could dim the lights to help create an atmosphere before telling them *The Matches*.

Note: I first found this story in the introduction to *Favourite Folktales From Around The World*, edited by Jane Yolen (1987). She says that the story was first reported by the collector Katharine Briggs. In Yolen's book it is even shorter than mine:

'He woke up frightened and reached for the matches, and the matches were put into his hand.'

I have made explicit what is only implicit for the benefit of a younger audience. You may want to refer to Yolen's version when discussing whether it should have more description or less.

When they are ready, tell the children the following story in as lively and interesting a way as you can (without going over the top!):

The story

(I have marked in with a / the beginning, the middle and the end sections. You may want to use these for a later discussion. The children may not agree with this division.)

A long time ago there was a man who lived by himself in a big house. / One night, he awoke sweating and terrified, convinced there was someone else in the room with him. / He searched in the darkness for some matches with which to light a candle... and in the darkness, the matches were handed to him!

Task Question 1: Can anyone say back to the class what happened in the story?

This is not a storytelling task, just a plot-recall task to help embed the story in the minds of the children. You could extend this by asking them to turn to a partner and take it in turns to tell each other what happened in the story. They should correct each other and fill in any gaps. Even at this stage, some of them will naturally *storytell*. The next task is a storytelling activity.

Task Question 2: When you tell this story to someone, how can you tell it so that it will work really well?

In pairs or groups the children should be given a minute or two to think of different ways that they could tell the story effectively. Suggestions I have heard from some Year 3 (age seven to eight) classes have included:

- Lower your tone.
- Use more description.
- Get a friend to make some sound effects while you tell it.
- Turn it into a play.
- Turn the lights down.
- Use hand gestures.
- Put pauses in.
- Speed up at the exciting bit ('He scrambled around for some matches to light a candle...').
- Turn it into a comedy ('...and then his mother's voice said, "Are you still up, you should be asleep!").

- Give the story an ending. (This makes an excellent discussion point: does it have an ending?)
- One very interesting suggestion was that you should say *when it happened* so that people would know that there were no electric lights, providing a reason to the listener for why he didn't just switch the light on.

Whenever the children make a suggestion ask them to demonstrate it to the class. As the story is so short this should not be too difficult for them to do. If you want to make it solely a *storytelling* exercise then stipulate that they are not to change the story in any way. Whether it is a story and whether it can be improved can be a separate discussion.

Some of the above suggestions offered by the children are more controversial than others. It is often a good idea to engage the children in a discussion about the more controversial ones. If someone says 'use more description' or 'give the story an ending' ask the class what they think about this and allow different points of view to be voiced, for example: (Year 3) 'It should have an ending because it's boring if you don't know what happens at the end.' / 'It shouldn't have an ending because it keeps people wondering about who or what is in the room and that's more exciting.' You could use an opportunity like this to explain a distinction between 'an ending' and 'a conclusion' (or 'a finish'): *The Matches* clearly has an ending but it is inconclusive for dramatic reasons.

I offer some of my own basic hints for storytelling to the children (to add to their own, if they haven't already said them):

- 1 Split the story into three parts: a beginning, a middle and an end (not the same as 'a finish'). Ask the children to say what these are in the story.
- 2 Suggest that they try not to say 'and then...' between every sentence or event. Demonstrate this by telling the story with 'and thens' and then (!) telling it without them.
- 3 Insert dramatic pauses between the three sections instead of saying 'and then'.
- 4 Try telling the story in lots of different ways to find out which way works best (list the suggestions the class has already made).

Leave them with the task of telling the story to others at home and then to report back to you the following week about how their storytelling went and about which storytelling method worked best with their audience. If they told a different story ask them to tell it to the class; avoid saying 'perform it' as this may put some off.

Extension activity 1: story enquiry

This extension activity can either be done after *The Matches*, above, or after *Once Upon an If (Part one)* – see page 85. If using with the latter story then see the additions suggested in the notes for that session.

The following enquiry stimulus came from Dylan (aged seven). Explain that you are going to tell the children another story and then say the following:
Once upon a time, the end.

Task Question 1: Is this a story?

Nested Questions:

- If so, then why? If not, why not? (List criteria as children make their suggestions.)
- What is a story?
- Is there something a story must always have?
- What's the difference between content and form?

Note: As an extension activity for older children introduce the following very short story attributed to Ernest Hemingway to compare and contrast with *'Once upon a time, the end'*:

For sale: baby shoes, never worn.

Here are some examples from a Year 3 (age seven to eight) class:

A story has...

- Got to be about something or someone. (Subject)
- Got to begin with 'Once upon a time' and end with 'The end'. (Formal)
- Got to have a problem in it. (Content / tension)
- If you say something (anything!) it's a story.
- Something's got to happen. (Plot)
- More than one thing has to happen. (Plot / sequence)
- There has to be action. (Content)
- It's a story if the teacher says it is. (This was said because I had said 'I'm going to tell you another story'.) Question to the class: 'If I say it's a story, does that make it a story?'

As you can imagine many of these ideas generated a great deal of debate. For example, many of the children did not agree that a story is 'anything you say'

(‘I could just say “was” – that’s not a story!’ objected one child) and many disagreed that a story is merely formal. Once this enquiry has been conducted return to the story *The Matches* and ask:

Task Question 2: Was that a story? If so, why? If not, why not?

End the session by telling them a longer story (one of your own favourites or one from this book). Invite them to tell the story too, when they go home. (If you do, then don’t make it too long.)

Extension activity 2: tell a longer story

- 1 Take a longer story and chop it up into lots of little bits.
- 2 Draw a storyboard – little pictures that describe the sequence of events; a picture version of a keyword list (see page 35).
- 3 Give out the story in bits to pairs of children.
- 4 Set them the task of learning their bit and telling it without reading it off the page.
- 5 Tell the story around the whole class.

Extension activity 3: what was it?

Ask the children to say what it was that handed him the matches in each of their own imaginations.

(This could be done as a writing exercise.)

Endings suggested by a Year 3 class:

- a werewolf
- a ghost
- his mother! (comedy ending)
- the air itself
- aliens.

Extension activity 4: stories

Are these examples stories?

- Once upon a time there was a twig.
- Once upon a time they lived happily ever after.
- Once there was a boy. He was happy. Then he wasn’t happy. But eventually he was happy again. The end.

- The Hobbit, or There and Back Again (Tolkien, 1937). Is this, the official full title of Tolkien's classic, by itself a story?

Extension activity 5: flash-fiction

There is a name for very short stories such as the Hemingway example above; they're called *flash-fiction*. Here's another example of flash-fiction by the graphic novel author Alan Moore (see Very Short Stories link in bibliography):

'Machine. Unexpectedly, I'd invented a time'

- Set older children the task of writing a flash-fiction short story (perhaps with a word limit: 20 or 100 words, or fewer words each week).
- Can the class say what the story is in Moore's example? For example, can they say:
 - Whether there are any characters?
 - Or goals?
 - Whether any characters achieve their goals?
 - What the genre is?
 - What the subject is?
 - What happens?
 - And any other questions you can think of...

Taken from Once Upon an If: The Storythinking Handbook by Peter Worley, published by Bloomsbury 2014.

www.philosophy-foundation.org

www.bloomsbury.com/uk