

ONCE UPON AN IF (PART 1)

This story lends itself to the use of props (see page 47). If you would like to tell this with props then you will need two books, a larger book for The Big Story Book (preferably decorative to meet with its description in the story) and a smaller one for The Little Story Book. I wrap the larger book before the class arrives so that I can open it at the appropriate time in the story; I also place the smaller book under a table or chair on the other side of the room from me, in advance, so that I can retrieve it (almost magically) when it appears in the story.

In this, and the next story, it is important to stop the stories at certain times, such as where I have indicated, in order to engage the children actively in the story. This is important to help them prepare for the creative writing part of the exercise. By asking the class to say what they think will happen, what might happen, or what should happen, they are not only thinking creatively about how the story will unfold, they are thinking within the narrative confines of what has already happened up until that point. This is important given the particular aims of the 'Once Upon an If' story-writing exercise on page 97. (See, in particular, the question in Matilda, The Fireless Dragon where the children are asked to say what they think the water monster should do – or believe – when faced with a dragon that may, or may not, be able to breathe fire.) Log on to the online resources that accompany this book for a PowerPoint supplement to this story. This will help the class to follow the story but also introduces the basic outline of the activity they will be asked to take part in after the stories have been read or told. I have included in the text instructions when to show each numbered slide. Do not show a slide until it says, in the text, to do so, although the title page [Slide 1] should be open at the beginning of the story. (See Appendix 1 'Quick view steps' Once Upon an If (part one) on page 207 and 'Storytelling procedure with slideshow' on page 212.)

The story

Zadie was a little girl who loved stories. Her mum travelled far and wide around the world for her work. While travelling in the Middle East she was sold a very special object by a street seller at a bazaar in Turkey. She took it home as a gift for Zadie.

On her birthday Zadie opened up the present that she was sure was a book from its shape and weight. She wasn't very excited at the prospect of a book for her birthday, but when she took off the wrapping she found something she really wasn't expecting. It was a book beautifully bound with leather and a cover decoration made from real silver, curling and winding all around the book's cover and spine. The silver also formed the words 'The Story Book'. Now she really was excited. 'Thank you Mum!' she said.

Her mother, however, had a puzzled look on her face. 'What is it?' Zadie asked her.

'Oh, it's just that, when I bought it from the bookseller in Turkey –'

'Turkey! You bought this in Turkey?' Zadie interjected.

'Yes, from Turkey,' said her mother. 'As I was saying: when I bought it from

Turkey I was sure the title was in Turkish. Funny how your memory plays tricks on you,' she said, more to herself than to anyone else.

'It's beautiful!' said Zadie, and then she kissed her mother. To Zadie, Turkey was a far-off, exotic place that brought to her mind magic carpets and minarets. Zadie became distracted by all the other presents that she had to open and with all the fun things she did on her birthday and so didn't get to open the book all day. She went to the zoo and then came home and had a party with all her friends.

That night, when she lay in bed, she remembered that she hadn't opened The Story Book yet. She reached down to the pile of presents she had collected throughout the day and pulled the book out from the bottom.

She became enchanted again by the beautiful cover and her eyes tried to follow the twisting and curling lines that decorated it. But she could never follow one line to the end. Eventually she opened it...

Flicking through the pages she was disappointed to see that it was empty. Or, almost empty, for there was something on the first page only. [Slide 2] There was some writing with a picture above it of a stick person standing in front of a crudely drawn book that lay on the ground in front of it. The writing underneath said, 'Hello, I am the character from this book. You will need to tell me who and what I am. To do this you will need to use the book that is in your room – not this one; the other one. Take a look!' There, the writing ended.

Zadie thought that this was a very strange book indeed because if this was all that was written then it wasn't a story at all. But then something caught her eye just over the top of the book. In her room, across from her, lay another book that hadn't been there before. 'Wow!' she said as she decided that The Story Book must be magic.

She put down the book and jumped off her bed to retrieve the other, smaller one. She opened it to the first page and found only the words [Slide 3] 'Who am I?' written at the top, the rest of the page was empty. She turned the page to find [Slide 4] 'What am I?' at the top of the second page and [Slide 5] 'Where am I?' at the top of the third page; [Slide 6] 'When am I?' at the top of the fourth page and [Slide 7] 'What if...?' and [Slide 8] 'Who else?' at the top of the fifth and sixth pages. She had no idea what they could mean. 'Oh no!' she said, 'Now I'll never find out who's in The Story Book!'

That night it took her ages to fall asleep, she just didn't know what to do with the books. And she was so disappointed to discover that they had nothing but mysteries in them.

Task Question 1: What do you think the questions in the little book mean?

Nested Questions:

- ✓ What should Zadie do with the books? • Can the mystery be solved?
- ✓ What would you do?

But the new day brought with it an idea.

The first thing she did was to see if both books were still there. They were.

Then she took her favourite pen and opened the smaller book that had appeared, she could only imagine magically, the night before. She opened the book to the first page where it said 'Who am I?' and she removed the top of the pen and wrote, 'You are...' then she stopped and wondered what name she could give the character. She realised that she could give the character any name she wanted. [Slide 9] 'You are... Matilda,' she wrote. Her mum had told her that she and her dad had nearly named Zadie 'Matilda'. Then she wondered about what sort of a person Matilda might be.

Task Question 2: What sort of person would someone called Matilda be?

Nested Questions:

- ✓ Would a Matilda have any particular characteristics at all?
- ✓ Does a name have anything to do with what sort of a person you are?
- ✓ Does someone called Matilda have to be a girl?
- ✓ Do you think Zadie would have been a different person had she been named Matilda?
- ✓ TX (see page 7) name-change: imagine that you have had your name changed. Perhaps you have travelled to live in a new country where your old name was too difficult to pronounce. Are there any names you could have that may affect your personality or what sort of person people think you are? What about: Hilary? (Both a boy's and a girl's name)
Biff?
Farquhar?
- ✓ Are there any other names you can think of that might significantly affect you or the way other people see you?

Under the question 'What am I?' at the top of the second page Zadie wrote, 'You are a girl.' [Slide 10]

Zadie closed the little book then ran back to her bed, climbed up and opened The Big Story Book.

Task Question 3: What do you think she will find?

This time, instead of the stick person there was a picture, simply drawn, of a

young girl about the same age as Zadie and underneath the picture it said,

Once upon a time there was a girl and her name was Matilda. [Slide 11]

It was written in beautiful, middle eastern-style calligraphy. The picture also showed Matilda holding and reading the book that had been on the floor before.

But then it occurred to Zadie that Matilda didn't have to be a girl, and a sudden rush of freedom surged through her. She crossed out 'girl' and instead wrote the word 'dragon' into The Little Story Book [Slide 12] so that the story in The Big Story Book now read [Slide 13],

Once upon a time there was a dragon and its name was Matilda...

There was now a picture of a dragon reading the book instead of the girl that had been there before.

A shiver ran through Zadie's body as she realised what was happening. She thought about what she could do. She took in a deep breath and lifted her pen to begin her story...

Task Question 4: So, what has happened?

...As she breathed out, her breathing out gave her an idea, so Zadie wrote these

words down in her Little Story Book under the question 'What if...?' [Slide 14]: What if there was a dragon that couldn't breathe fire?

She opened The Big Story Book and, starting with a title

Matilda, The Fireless Dragon

it read [Slide 15]:

Once upon a time there was a dragon called Matilda. Matilda was a dragon

that couldn't breathe fire and she lived in a...

Zadie realised that she was going to have to think of somewhere a dragon would live. So she lifted her pen and, using *The Little Story Book*, told Matilda where she lived under the question 'Where am I?'. Very carefully, she wrote [Slide 16],

Matilda lives in a cave all by herself and she likes being alone.

When she opened *The Big Story Book* again it now read [Slide 17]:

Once upon a time there was a dragon called Matilda. Matilda was a dragon that couldn't breathe fire and she lived in a cave by herself. All she wanted was to be left alone.

'Oh!' said Zadie, 'It's sad.' Then she realised that she needed to tell the book what other characters there would be so that the story could be finished. [Slide 18] Under the question 'Who else?', she wrote:

There will be a grumpy princess, the princess's parents, the king and queen; an annoying knight and a monster made of water...

Under the remaining question, 'When am I?' she wrote [Slide 19]:

A long time ago in Fairy Tale Land.

[Slide 20] Once Zadie had finished answering all the questions in *The Little Story Book* she ran over to *The Big Story Book* and sat down to read the story that now lay within, waiting to be discovered.

This is the story she found...

Extension activity: story enquiry

I would suggest waiting until the following week, or session, before going on to read / tell *Matilda, The Fireless Dragon*. Use the remainder of this session to explore the nature of stories. This will give the children some reflection time on the subject that they will be thinking about – stories, plots and characters – when they do the 'Once Upon an If' activity on page 97. If you have not done so already, then you may want to use the 'Story enquiry' extension activity on page 102 following the story *The Matches* to begin your enquiry into the nature of stories. If you are using the 'Story enquiry' to follow the story *Once Upon an If* instead of *The Matches* then you may want to consider some of the following ideas / questions in addition:

- ✓ Does a story have to have certain kinds of characters?
- ✓ What is a genre? (The class could be set the task of researching this.)
- ✓ What does a genre tell you about what sorts of characters you may have?
- ✓ What does the when of a story tell you about what can happen in a story?
- ✓ (Can a story that happens 'long, long ago' have cars, for example? If so, how?)

Follow on with Part 2: Mathilda the Fireless Dragon (<https://www.philosophy-foundation.org/enquiries/view/once-upon-an-if-part-2-matilda-the-fireless-dragon>)