

SHEHERAZAD'S HANDBOOK: HOW TO TELL STORIES PART 1

THE VIRTUES OF STORYTELLING

Among the many media for telling stories such as film, literature, theatre and song, storytelling has its own – some unique – set of virtues.

DIRECT COMMUNICATION

Oral storytelling is one of the most direct forms of communication, especially between the teller and his audience. Even the written word, which is often thought of as a pure form of storytelling, is less direct than oral storytelling – a text is a physical barrier and the words spoken are not those of the teller but of some distant, non-present other.

For teachers, it is always tempting to defer to some kind of technology when using a story with children, whether it be a CD, DVD, interactive whiteboard or even the printing press, and there are clear advantages to using technology, but the advantages of communicating directly with your class in the kind of way that storytelling affords cannot be overstated. Here, again, we can invoke the breath metaphor because storytelling is a way of communicating that ‘breathes’. This has a literal sense too as a teacher tells a story using nothing other than her body and vocal instrument.

IMPROVISATION AND EMBELLISHMENT

Once a novel, poem, play or symphony has been written then it is usually thought that, in order to best communicate the story it tells, the words, notes and phrases chosen by its author or composer should be preserved as closely as possible. Many other skills are brought to a successful production or reading such as acting, direction and reading skills; cuts are sometimes made, particularly in plays, but very rarely are changes made to the text. Actors do not rewrite scripts. Storytelling is different. The same story may be told differently by different tellers and, indeed, the same story may be told differently by the same teller on different occasions. In the classroom this makes a great deal of resources available to an age-group that would otherwise not have access to them (see ‘Matching the register to adapt’ on page 40).

MOVING ‘THE WALLS’

Sometimes known in theatre as ‘the fourth wall’ there is an invisible, metaphorical wall that lies between the actors on a stage and the audience. Actors sometimes talk about ‘breaking the fourth wall’. This is done during a soliloquy, for instance, but not during a monologue, because a soliloquy in some way addresses the audience, whereas a monologue does not.

A storyteller addresses the audience throughout a telling but can, with greater freedom, play with where ‘the walls’ are in relation to the audience. A storyteller can, as with theatre, put the wall between him or herself and the audience, or he can point to the space behind the audience, when describing the entrance of a monster, for example. Here the wall between the events of the story and the audience has, in some way, been dissolved altogether. The audience is now inside the story but would be unseen by the characters. However, even this can change.

VARYING PERSPECTIVES

When a class, based on what we had done, was describing what philosophy is one Year 3 girl (age seven) said, ‘In philosophy you take us into the stories.’ At first I thought this was meant merely to say that I tell them stories and that perhaps she meant that I told them well, but when I questioned her further it turned out that she meant something more specific – and much more interesting. She had observed that I had been telling some of the stories in the second person and, if not the second person, then I had been asking them to imagine that they were a character in the story in order to explore a dilemma, for example. As we shall see, much can be made, in storytelling, by the different perspectives the storyteller, and in some cases the audience, are able to assume.

THE OMNIPRESENT NARRATOR

The storyteller is also able to inhabit different places within a story. Not just perspectives but also physical spaces. The storyteller is an omnipresent narrator who may assume different characters or points of view at any point in his telling to inform or beguile his audience.

HOW TO TELL A STORY

The last time I had seen a particular Year 5 class the previous year I had told them The Odyssey stories. Now they were in Year 6, and I was about to start a new philosophy programme with them. I began by asking them whether they had told any of the stories they had heard during The Odyssey sessions to anyone else. Many of the children put up their hands and told me which story (or stories) they had told and to whom. Then, one boy, called Billy, said, ‘Well, I didn’t really tell the stories; I just said what happened.’ Billy had drawn a very important distinction between narrative and story that anyone about to engage in storytelling should be made aware of. So, how does one ‘tell a story’ rather than merely ‘say what happened’?

In short, the storyteller inhabits the story and breathes life into it, making the story live for its audience so that the story is happening before them instead of being reported as having happened. How this is done is the subject of this part of the book and there are many techniques for making stories breathe.

THE GOLDBLOCKS PRINCIPLE

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‘And then she went to the porridge of the Little, Small, Wee Bear, and tasted that; and that was neither too hot, nor too cold, but just right...’ Robert Southey, *The Story of The Three Bears* (Tatar 2002)

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The secret of the good storyteller (or, in my view, a good anything) will often have something to do with a sense of balance. The good storyteller uses description, but not too much, she chooses interesting words, but not too many and she will make use of movement, but not excessively. Beyond saying that the storyteller applies a sense of when and when not to use certain techniques, it is difficult to say precisely how this balance is achieved and it is this difficulty – to put a formula to it – that lifts a craft to an art; perhaps it is just this difference that makes something an art.

To make a musical analogy, all musicians learn, as part of their craft, techniques such as vibrato but it is for each musician to make his own judgments and decisions about when to apply vibrato and how much to apply. Any musician can learn to read music but there’s an art in how to shape a phrase. There is no formula or algorithm for artistic decisions and that’s what, in my view, separates art from craft.

My first use of stories for teaching thinking involved simple thought-experiments. These involved no description or fleshed-out characters and when I first learned about using description to create an atmosphere I saw the effect this had on a class, so naturally, I wanted to employ this device. Understandably, I over-used it. This is perfectly forgivable at the initial stages of learning a new technique but remember that the best storytellers are as aware of when not to do something as much as they are when to do it.

On the subject of appropriateness, style and taste in general, I would like to share something that neatly captures the principle I am trying to describe. George Orwell closes his seminal essay on style in writing, ‘Politics and The English Language’ (1946) with this short list of style points, the last one capturing the difficulty of judgement and the pitfalls involved in any attempt to provide a formula to style (my italics):

- 1 Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- 2 Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- 3 If it is possible to cut out a word, always cut it out.
- 4 Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- 5 Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- 6 Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

HOW TO BEGIN AND END A STORY

First of all, make sure you know exactly how you will begin and end your story. This is often the one part of the story that you will need to rehearse and learn by heart. The flow that you hope to reach in your storytelling, where you achieve fresh talk (see page 28) without reciting word-for-word, is likely to prove most elusive at the start of your story. One way is to reach for tried- and-tested sentence-starters such as ‘Once upon a time...’ but you need to be careful with these kinds of openers. A sentence-starter such as this will certainly trigger a certain kind of expectation from your audience: that they are about to hear a story. With young children this can be a very helpful way to signal to them that from the moment they hear these words they are engaging in a special kind of transaction with the storyteller; from that moment on the rules have changed. However, ‘Once upon a time...’ is in danger of sounding clichéd or trite to older children and this can be off-putting for them.

Often the best way to start a story is to start straight away with a simple statement such as ‘There was once a king and he had two sons’. Some storytellers have a preamble before starting a story, perhaps contextualising the story within their own personal experience. This can function to signpost for the audience what to look out for in the story or what lesson to draw from it. However, when using stories for thinking, avoid preambles that prefigure learning outcomes, especially moral ones. Let the story place the situations before your audience in its own way and then allow your audience to respond to it without any expectation from you about how they should do so. If using a Task Question then do not have an expectation about how they should respond to it. Try to show with your story and not tell, as the saying goes. (See ‘Making effective use of the moral’ on page 64 and ‘Stories and thinking’ on page 14 for more on dealing with morals in stories.)

If the stories are continuous or part of an ongoing narrative, such as *The Odyssey*, *The Voyages of Sindbad*, or – for that matter – *The Arabian Nights* then you would do well to use Sheherazad’s technique of finishing on a cliff-hanger. My preferred way of doing this is to move to the very beginning of the next story, so, instead of finishing when they make their escape from one island, go on a little more until the ship hits the shore of another island; but make it arrive at night so that they can’t see what sort of island it is... they’ll just have to wait until next week for that! If you’ve been telling well, this usually elicits a disappointed ‘Ohhh!’ from the class as they realise that that’s it for this week! (One of the only times a sound of disappointment is the mark of your success!)

Always leave a silence at the end of your story for your audience to take in what's happened or to readjust to reality. Whatever you do, refrain from jumping in with comments or from filling the silence until they have said something. That's like a comedian who laughs at his own jokes. (Watch comedians like Paul Merton, Jack Dee or Rich Hall who have made it almost a trademark to keep an absolutely straight face after they've delivered a joke.)

TENSES

The default tense of written stories is the past tense and this is the tense most children will be familiar with and comfortable reading. Apart from a few notable exceptions, stories written in the present tense read awkwardly for children. However, stories told in the present tense seem much more natural. This observation highlights the difference between storytelling and other media for communicating narratives, such as books. If you were to read it, you'd expect to see the following:

King Midas was a king who loved, more than almost anything in the whole world, gold.

But if you tell it, it would seem natural to say (albeit not to read):

'King Midas is a king who loves, more than almost anything in the whole world, gold.'

When storytelling I like to think of the past tense as being like black-and- white and the present tense like colour. The present tense (as well as the first and second person) is one way to bring the story as close to your audience as possible.

NOWNESS

Breneman and Breneman (1983) describe a quality they call 'nowness': '... though [the events of the story] may have occurred hundreds of years ago, [the story] seem[s] to come alive now for the audience as it hears the story.' Although I think this quality or state can be enhanced or achieved with the help of the present tense (and possibly the use of the first / second person) it is important not to identify nowness with the present tense. A good storyteller will give an audience an impression of nowness whether they tell the story in the present or past tense, first, second or third person.

(For more on tenses see page 79 in Chapter three: Storythinking.)

PERSONS – FIRST, SECOND OR THIRD?

THE SECOND PERSON – PUTTING THE AUDIENCE INTO THE STORY

Storytellers sometimes invite the audience into the story by giving them a role. When I tell The Odyssey, for some of the stories, I tell the story like so: '... you see a huge creature lumber into the cave blocking your way out...', in other words, I tell it from the crew's point of view, the children inhabiting the role of the crew. This helps to heighten the drama when they are trapped in the cave with the Cyclops or when they are swept away from their homes in the story Aeolus and The Bag of Winds. Once the audience becomes a member of the cast then they can interact with the characters – the Cyclops sniffs around them when he is searching for the men in the cave.

POINT OF VIEW AND SYMPATHY

'Point of view' is the perspective through which the story is viewed. A great deal may hinge on this. How the story is interpreted to the audience may have a lot to do with who is experiencing the story. When you tell a story in the third person and in the past tense sometimes it may not be so clear from whose point of view the story is being relayed and so consequently it is not clear with whom the audience are to sympathise.

One eight-year-old girl, when hearing the tale of The Wooden Horse of Troy and after I had asked the question 'Were the Greeks right to go to war against the Trojans?', said to me, 'Whose side are we on?' This was a great question because she had implied that our emotional response to the story and how we invest in it depends on whose side we feel we are on. But the way I had, quite deliberately, told the story had left this somewhat ambiguous. The Greeks had done some – arguably – despicable things, such as slaughtering the Trojans while they slept, and tricking their way to a victorious conclusion to the war, but Odysseus seemed to be the hero of the story, though he too had done some questionable things. Putting the story into a first person perspective, such as Odysseus', would very likely have influenced her answer to her own question; our sympathies naturally fall with the speaker in first person stories.

So, which perspective do you adopt when telling a story? As you may already have guessed the answer depends very much on the story you wish to tell and the sympathies you wish to engender. Sometimes it will be easy to switch the perspective so that you can tell it from different perspectives with different audiences but other times the story will demand a particular perspective. The story of The Odyssey can be told from either perspective without too much trouble. Homer also tells it from both: the classic monster tales are told by Odysseus to King Alcinoos in the first person whereas the majority of the rest of the story is told in the third person with one very curious move to the second person with the story of Eumeos, Odysseus' banished servant, suggesting that the whole tale is being told to Eumeos by Homer.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY: THE RASHOMON EFFECT

The story that the musical Wicked tells (Maguire, 1995) is the well-known story of The Wizard of Oz (Baum, 1900) but from the point of view of the Wicked Witch, having the effect that the audience's sympathies lie with her. Japanese director Akira Kurosawa's film Rashomon (1950) is well known for telling a story from multiple perspectives and, today, the expression 'the Rashomon effect' describes the problem of establishing truth in story- telling given that stories are often (or perhaps always) irreducibly told from someone's perspective.

1 As with Wicked set the class the task of retelling a classic tale but from one of the other character's points of view, such as The Three Billy Goats Gruff but told from the Troll's point of view.

2 Or, as with the film Rashomon, ask them to tell the same story from several points of view. For example, Rumpelstiltskin from the point of view of:

- The miller's daughter
- Rumpelstiltskin
- The King
- The miller
- (More challenging) the messenger.

(For more on person-perspective see 'Bite and sting: tense and person for thinking' page 79 in Chapter three: Storythinking.)

SPEAKING AND 'LIFTING FROM THE PAGE'

Take some time to listen to, for example, the presenters of The Today Programme (BBC Radio 4) in the mornings. Listen to how they introduce a topic or news piece. Every so often you will hear them trip over a word. When this happens you are suddenly acutely aware that they are, at least some of the time, reading. Though I am drawing your attention to mistakes they make I do so in order to draw your attention to their skill. It is only when they make a mistake that you realise what it is they manage to achieve the majority of the time. They are able to produce the effect of speaking spontaneously though reading. This is a phenomenon the sociologist Erving Goffman (1981) called 'fresh talk' and he wrote that only the 'hyper-fluent' are able to read while making it appear spontaneous.

Try it. Select a passage from a story and read it so that it sounds like the words are falling from you naturally and not being read. Clearly distinguish between voices in any dialogue and look up from the page at your (probably imaginary) audience as you read. The best way to assess your success at this is to record yourself and then listen to the recording some time later. Does it sound read? If you were a presenter on the radio, would you know (if you were also the audience) that you were reading?

This ability to fresh talk is central to the storyteller's art whether reading or not. It must feel and sound like the words are yours and that you are thinking of them there and then. Sometimes, even though the teller is not reading, it can still sound like a recitation. So, the danger of sounding as if one is reading is not necessarily overcome with the act of memorisation. Again, once you have learnt a story, record yourself delivering it, and then wait some time before listening back to it. Does it sound recited?

When it no longer sounds as if read, though it may be, and when it no longer sounds recited, though it may be, then you will have succeeded in 'lifting the story from the page' and you will have found a way to place the story before your audience as something happening and unfolding before them. You will have achieved a sense of 'nowness' (see page 26) and brought breathed-life into the story. This could be said to be the aim of all storytelling. How you learn to lift a story from the page has much to do with how you decide to learn your stories (see 'Learning stories' on page 33).

All this applies also to stories that you decide to read to your class from books or a computer. A good exercise to try is to take a simply written children's book such as Not Now, Bernard by David McKee (1980) and read it as well as possible: create clearly distinguished voices for each character, including the narrator, and switch between them effortlessly; leave space between each complete thought but maintain a rhythm and flow that will carry an audience with it. In short, make it breathe.

The story Matilda, The Fireless Dragon has been written to be read, so use this one to practice storytelling while reading. Here are some hints for telling well while reading:

- ✓ Look at your audience as often as possible.
- ✓ Glance at a sentence and then look up towards your audience to deliver it.
- ✓ As much as possible, look down only with your eyes in order to maintain an audience-directed body and face. (A well-placed computer screen in front of you, instead of a book, may enable you to free your hands.)
- ✓ Practise, so that you know the story well; try to avoid sight-reading.
- ✓ Read meaning and not just words. (See above)
- ✓ Clearly distinguish voices (see below).

VOICE AND VOICES

BREATHE

Project your voice, as you do when addressing your class, so that those at the back of the class can hear you without having to strain. Projection, however, is different from shouting; one can project while whispering, or hold back on projection while shouting. Projection, and the extent to which you project, is often about intention rather than, necessarily, about volume. Though, in some cases, to project better, you may simply need to raise your voice.

When nervous, one of the first things that often happens is we forget to breathe; people often find themselves running out of breath when presenting or storytelling. This is because breathing can become constricted to the upper chest as the stomach ties itself up in knots.

One of the easiest ways around this problem is to concentrate on breathing deeply from your belly – not only will it support your voice, it will also calm you down. Remember: when you get nervous, if you have prepared your story well, rehearsed and written your keyword list (see page 35), then the only thing to do before starting your story is to breathe in deeply and begin with your well-rehearsed opening line.

WHOSE VOICE?

There is another sense in which we use the word ‘voice’, it can also mean who is saying what’s being said. It should always be clear to an audience who is saying the words that issue from the storyteller’s mouth. The standard way to do this is to report who is about to speak or who has just spoken by saying ‘and then she said: “I’m always here.”’ or “‘I’m always here,’ she said.’ This method works very well, especially if the ‘he said’s’ and ‘she said’s’ are skimmed over as if they are not there, and treated more like a comma. Incidentally, as a storyteller you should avoid the use of adverbs after the ‘he / she said’s’ – for instance ‘he replied angrily’ – because you have the advantage of being able to reply in an angry way rendering such descriptions superfluous.

Alternatively, and especially once you are more experienced, you can begin to drop the ‘said’s’ on occasion. But if you do so then you need to find another way to indicate who the speaker is. This can be done with physicalisation or with the adoption of an affected voice or accent, and / or the use of props. For instance, as one of my colleagues once did, if you have explained that a character spends all her time sitting on a chair hating everything, then by sitting down in the chair that you – as narrator – indicated towards, this shows that you are now inhabiting the character and it may not be necessary to say, ‘and then she said’ – you may simply begin her speech. You must be careful when employing these kinds of more subtle devices. They have the benefit of making your audience work a little harder because they have to work out for themselves that there has been a shift from narrator to character but such ambiguities can also lead to confusion, so always have the ‘said’s’ ready-and- waiting. Slipping one in later can help indicate, or confirm, to the audience who is speaking while retaining the benefit of keeping the audience on their toes. So,

As narrator: ‘Miss Anthropy hated everything and she would spend her time sitting in her rocking chair [indicating the chair with hand] watching the TV hating everything she saw.’ [Adopting a withered, screwed- up physical appearance while sitting in the chair and using an affected bitter sounding voice] As Miss Anthropy: “I hate it when I see adverts, soap operas and documentaries,” said Miss Anthropy, “I also hate...”” Etc. (Thanks to Philosophy Foundation Specialist Andy West for this example).

If the storyteller does not clearly delineate his move from narrator to character with careful use of voices, physicalisation and so forth you can see how easily the sense of the narrative could be lost to an audience, especially a young one.

VOLUME AND PROJECTION

Subscribing to the Goldilocks Principle (see page 23) your default voice should be moderately loud so that listeners do not have to strain to hear you but so that you are not shouting as this makes for an unpleasant listening experience for the audience and will unnecessarily tire your voice.

Volume is helpful for emphasising a situation within the story. For example, if the characters in the story need to be quiet in order to avoid being eaten by a giant then you may turn your narrator’s voice down to a whisper, heightening the need for quiet (within the story) and drawing your listeners in all the more. Of course, if your listeners are having to strain to hear you most of the time they will soon lose interest in your story, but there are times when making them strain to hear will help to draw your

audience in. It’s all about choosing your time and timing your choice well. A similar example comes in the traditional story of The Timid Hare (see Robert Fisher’s Stories For Thinking, 1996) where a loud bang is central to the story. Shouting ‘BANG!’ unexpectedly when one occurs can help young children understand what has frightened the hare. Careful though! I over did it the first time I tried this and made someone cry (they were very young), an event which goes to show the effectiveness of the technique...

CLARITY

It is of paramount importance that you make your words, phrases, sentences and thoughts absolutely clear. Clarity of expression comes only with clarity of thought so always know what it is you are trying to say. When you are unclear in yourself your words will be correspondingly unclear. (See Visualisation on page 48 for more on helping to prepare for clarity.)

PACE AND PAUSE

Again, your default voice should be neither too fast nor too slow. Find a good, moderate rhythm to pace your storytelling. Speaking too fast causes words and thoughts to trip over each other. An audience needs time for the images and scenes from a story to form in their imagination, if you speak too quickly you won’t allow this to happen and they will become lost and consequently lose interest. If you speak too slowly the story will sound laboured and seem boring. That said, the correct use of pause is a very powerful tool available to the storyteller. Here are some suggestions for when pauses could be useful. There will be others but you’ll need to be sensitive to when those times could be.

TAKE STOCK

Sometimes a pause is necessary for you to think about what’s coming or to take a glance at your keyword list. If you do this then make sure that you do so at an appropriate place in the story. Finish the thought, scene or action before pausing; it won’t seem so unnatural then and the audience will be less likely to know that you’re unsure – it will seem that you are pausing for effect while you take the time to recollect. Steven Hoggins, a colleague of mine, was once preparing his class for an assembly and found that they had a tendency to look down into the piece of paper with text on and race through it. His advice was to read a sentence and then to look up at the audience to deliver it. This helped them to both address the audience and to slow them down considerably, improving the pace of their

performance.

TRANSITION

Pausing between events, characters' dialogue, scenes and so on can help to draw your audience in; when you pause, the audience will lean in towards you, physically demonstrating their desire to know what happens next. When speaking, and particularly when addressing an audience, many people have a tendency to fill space with words. The worry is 'if I'm not speaking or conveying something they'll get bored or lose interest'. The truth is the opposite of this. Spaces between words, thoughts and events help to foster expectation and anticipation. This is often the best way to get your audience wanting to know what's going to happen. (Thanks to Philosophy Foundation specialist Andrew Day for this insight.)

AUDIENCE ANTICIPATION

A well-timed pause can usher your audience along when you hope that they will anticipate something of your story before the situation is explicitly stated in the story, such as the second episode with the Roc in the Sindbad stories where it should dawn on the audience, as it dawns on Sindbad, that the ship had arrived on the island of the Roc and that the crew members had probably secured their own demise by breaking open the egg (see page 200). A pause is as good as saying, 'So, where do you think they are, then, and what do you think is going to happen?' No, it's better. A pause and a look is often all you need to elicit the (very satisfying) gasps from your audience that tell you they've anticipated. This facilitates your audience's understanding of the story.