

# SHEHERAZAD'S HANDBOOK: HOW TO TELL STORIES PART 2

## LEARNING STORIES

When learning a story to tell, one question you must answer is whether you will learn the story word-for-word or not. Ruth Sawyer (1942) reports how the storyteller Marie Shedlock learnt her stories word-for-word but Sawyer suggests that, though her performances were excellent, this is more a dramatic performance than storytelling. Storytelling is usually understood to be an oral tradition and, as such, storytellers are not usually encouraged to recite. However, someone who does recite a story, poem or song will have many

of the same issues a storyteller contends with, such as achieving a sense of nowness (see page 26), use of body language and gestures, and it must be remembered that these are all forms of storytelling in the broader sense. Interestingly, there is debate among scholars as to whether the storytellers of The Odyssey in ancient Greek times would have memorised the epic word-for-word or whether they would have improvised around a structure, inserting familiar stock phrases and sentences. It has been suggested that an *aoidos* was distinguished from the later *rhapsode*, in ancient Greece, by not being limited by reciting an already written text.

When attempting to achieve fresh talk (see page 28) and nowness I suggest that making your own telling around a general structure is preferable to a word-for-word recitation, and once you achieve fluency with this approach, it is the best way to lift a story from the page. Unless you have a very good memory for lines, such as my wife, for the rest of us recitation can be very time consuming.

## WORD AND PHRASE-TICKS

When working towards fresh talk there is the ever-present danger of ticks. The most common is, of course, 'erm...' or 'errr...'. Children, when storytelling, often insert 'and then...' between just about every sentence, as they try to think of what comes next (see The Matches session plan on page 99 to help them with this). We all have ticks in normal speech too: 'basically', 'literally', 'actually', 'like' and 'do-you-know-what-I-mean?' are some very common examples. Mine, perhaps not so interestingly, is 'interestingly'. These will spoil your storytelling, and, arguably, they are not great for your normal speech either. Sometimes a listener will become so aware of them that he or she will start to involuntarily listen out for the next use of a tick, which can become a distraction from whatever it is you are attempting to convey. At first, this may require something of a Herculean effort to resist, like trying to eat a sugar-coated doughnut without licking your lips! But it will become easier and eventually naturalised. This is very helpful if you are a public speaker; and your speech in general may well benefit from this effort.

## STORY-MEMORISING AND MEMORISING STORIES

Take a brief look at the following list of ten randomly selected words then close the book and try to write them down, in order, on a piece of paper (no cheating!):

house	round
blue	Christmas
girl	loud
fish	chair
dice	bag

Most people can remember the first few words and the last few words but struggle with the middle ones. This is known as the recency / primacy effect. Many people also find recalling more than seven bits of information in their short-term memory difficult to do. The first thing to bear in mind when using memory techniques to help learn stories is that story itself is a memory technique. Stories are a very effective way of transferring more than seven units of information into the long-term memory. Look at another list of ten randomly-chosen words but this time read the 'story' that follows making sure that you fully visualise the scenes in your mind's eye:

frame	eyes
bear	bird
tea	heart
yellow	carriage
flower	shave

*Once upon a time there was a picture frame and within it was a picture of a terrifying bear but in the picture the bear was drinking tea, which wasn't so terrifying. Then along came a yellow flower and peering out from between the petals were two eyes. A passing bird swooped down to feed from the flower only to fall in love with the flower with all her heart. They got married and went off together in a beautiful carriage and while they travelled together they both had a shave.*

Close the book and recall the story's events and characters visually in your mind's eye, writing down the key words (above in bold) as you go. You should find it much easier even if you don't quite get it all right. The reason for this is that you have transformed the words into a sequential narrative structure with vivid images, all of which help to recall bits of information and in sequential order. Remember: the sillier and the more humorous (shave!), the easier you will probably find it to recall.

## KEYWORD LISTS

When learning stories all one has to do is to reverse this process, so, rather than using a story to recall a list of words, use a list of words to recall a story. In both cases visualisation (see page 48) is essential.

Whenever you want to learn a new story, first of all read it through carefully out loud. By ‘out loud’ I mean either literally out loud or as if reading out loud. The point is not to skim over words or phrases but to allow each image to fully form in your mind’s eye and to allow all the words to sound out. If your lips move while reading, this is a good sign that you are reading in the right way. Once you have done this you should read it again but this time create a keyword list. For each major event in the story try to find just one word – or at the most a short phrase – to help you recall that part of the story.

I have provided an example keyword list for the story The Patience of Trees (see page 118) and The Promise-Slippers (see page 123). However, I have deliberately omitted to do so for many of the other stories as that would discourage the reader from doing his or her own. Taking the time to create your own keyword list is vital if you are to properly process the story you are trying to learn. The fact of having done so will probably mean that you will not need to refer to it during your telling. However, the keyword lists will still be valuable later when you want to tell the story again, having not told it for a while. A quick read through of your keyword list is probably all you’ll need to recall the story once more. It does however repay to read through the fuller version from time to time to remind you of some of the finer details of the story. It is also interesting at this point to see if, or how much, your version has digressed from or embellished the original.

## CHUNKING

If you were to look at the following list of zeros and ones for ten seconds and then try to recall them you would probably find it difficult to do.

0 1 1 0 1 0101001011

However, if you were to look at this list (below) you are likely to find it much easier even though both lists are the same arrangement of zeros and ones.

0 1 1 0 / 1010/ 100/ 101/ 1

The reason for this is a phenomenon known as chunking. By dividing the numbers up in this way you will have turned fifteen bits of information into just five bits of information. Fifteen is well above what the short-term memory can hold but five is below. Many of us use this technique when we memorise phone numbers, for instance (though with the increasing use of mobile phones we learn phone numbers less often than we used to).

## THREE – THE MAGIC STORY NUMBER

A similar technique is used in storytelling to approach the learning of stories. Remember: a story can usually be broken down into threes (example: the long story, Sindbad and The Valley of The Diamonds on page 186):

- 1 How Sindbad arrives at the valley of the diamonds.
- 2 What happens in the valley of the diamonds.
- 3 How he escapes the valley of the diamonds.

And each part can be broken down into a further group of threes.

- 1 How Sindbad arrives at the valley of the diamonds:
  - 1 Accidentally marooned.
  - 2 Finds the roc egg.
  - 3 Transported to the valley of the diamonds.
- 2 What happens in the valley of the diamonds:
  - 1 Realises he is rich but trapped.
  - 2 Encounters the snake in the tree.
  - 3 Builds the cage.
- 3 How he escapes the valley of the diamonds:
  - 1 Sees the carcass.
  - 2 Hatches a plan.
  - 3 Saved by men.

And, of course, if you need to, you can break it down into further groups of three, though it would probably not be necessary to do so. Instead of a long, linear narrative that lies dauntingly ahead of you, you will have broken the story up into much more manageable, bite-sized chunks. If you prefer, when making your keyword list you could use the ‘in threes’ method shown above.

Some people, annoyingly, will read a story once and have the whole thing pretty much ready to go. If, like the rest of us, you need a little more preparation, then use whichever of these techniques affords you the best results. With practice I can almost guarantee that your ability to memorise stories will improve.

## STORY SEQUENCES

Much can and has been said about the difference between narrative and story that is as unhelpful as it is helpful. I shall not go into this in any great detail here, but, relevant to the aims and objectives of this book, it can be said that, for example, the stories of Sindbad are part of the grand narrative that is The Arabian Nights; stories are often understood to have a beginning, a middle and an end, whereas narratives are continuous and open ended.

Stories are also sequential. This is thought by some to be a central aspect of story; one event should lead naturally on to another. There are a number of reasons for this. A narrative may not necessarily be presented sequentially; a story, however, is. When you ‘story’ a narrative one of the things you do to it is that you put the events of the narrative into sequential order. This property of stories will serve the storyteller very well when it comes to memorising a story or navigating a

way through one. It should also be noted that this is particularly useful for storytellers who do not learn visually. A great deal is made of visualisation in storytelling but not all of us are primarily visual learners. If not, then the sequentialness of stories will play a vital role in your ability to learn them.

An abiding rule to bear in mind is that everything happens in a story for a reason. If anything is inexplicable or extraneous in a story, then it shouldn't be there. All features of a story, all the content, should tell the audience something; it should convey some kind of information. Notice that this is in contrast to reality, which has glitches. People say things that have no bearing on any significant events but stories do not behave like this. Stories have been shaped by necessity to include only the significant events, thereby signposting for the audience meaning and plot. It's as though the irrelevant material has simply been shaved off. When the storyteller says 'There was once a man and in his garden there grew a tree,' this tells you that the man and the tree are significant: they will both play a role in the unfolding of this tale. There will, of course, be other things in his garden but they will have been ignored by the storyteller because they have no role to play in the story.

## CHARACTER DESIRE AND MOTIVATION

Just as sequence helps to tell a story so too do the desires and motivations of the characters. Characters in stories are simplified versions of real people, containing only a small set of desires and motivations. The king wants to marry the queen, the prince wants to kill the king, the captain wants to return his men home and the witch wants to capture the captain and his men. When someone is thirsty she wants to drink, when hungry, she wants food.

Odysseus is proud and consequently he desires to do things that otherwise would not make sense in a story. He stands at the front of his ship and, when he is at a safe distance, he taunts the cyclops Polyphemus, endangering his entire crew. Only his pride allows an audience to understand why he does this. So, other than recalling objects and events in a story one must also make sure that, through good storytelling, the audience has a firm understanding of just why each character does what they do. Make sure you, as the storyteller, know what each character wants and what their character is disposed to do. An earlier promise will make a character do things at a later stage that would otherwise be inexplicable. In stories as in life, character desire and motivation makes the inexplicable explicable.

## TONE AND REGISTER

The tone and register of your voice when telling stories is very important just as it is when trying to lull a baby to sleep or when praising – or telling off – your class. A monotone is not going to be very engaging and a consistently high register will sound shrill and off-putting.

Find a comfortable, mid-range voice to use as your default storytelling voice. This will change when you adopt character voices or when varying your tone for gathering pace in the story as exciting episodes unfold. But if your default voice – the one you use for the majority of the time – is overly affected your voice will quickly tire and the audience will find the storytelling laboured and unnatural.

## TONE AND MEANING

It is amazing what you can do with the tone of your voice. A common strategy for showing the importance of punctuation is to take a sentence such as this famous example, 'eats shoots and leaves,' and then show how a comma can drastically change the meaning: 'eats, shoots and leaves.' (Truss, 2009) Think about that for a minute. But, of course, there is no punctuation – in this sense anyway – when storytelling.

## INVISIBLE PUNCTUATION

A less well-known example shows that meaning can be changed without the addition or subtraction of any written punctuation:

“  
(Copi and Cohen, 2008).  
‘We should not speak ill of our friends.’  
”

Notice how the meaning of the sentence changes considerably if you put a stress on a different word. 'We should not speak ill of our friends,' means that it may be okay for someone other than us to speak ill of our friends; or 'We should not speak ill of our friends,' implies that it may be okay to think or write ill of our friends. Carry on in this manner stressing a different word in the sentence each time and try to say how the meaning changes. (I have written a poem-version of this called 'Invisible punctuation' that can be found in *Thoughtings: Problems, Puzzles and Paradoxes in Poetry to Think With* by Peter Worley and Andrew Day, 2012.)

See 'Gestures' on page 43 for examples of physical punctuation.

## MATCHING THE REGISTER: ADAPTING FOR DIFFERENT AUDIENCES

I often used to use a series of little stories / thought-experiments about time and time travel from Martin Cohen's *101 Philosophy Problems* (1999), but I found that I could only use them with older children (age 11 and up) because Cohen's language and register were clearly chosen for teenagers and young adults. One day, however, I wanted to use one of the stories with a Year 4 (age eight to nine) class because the issue it addresses had emerged naturally from a class discussion. I didn't have the book with me but having read it with other classes on a regular basis I had it memorised, so I told it and found that I was adapting the story almost unconsciously to meet the register of my nine-year-old audience. I also noticed that this audience was laughing much more than the classes I had read it to before.

Not because Cohen isn't funny but because his tone of humour was somewhat over the heads of my primary school audiences. Through telling the story I was able to bring the humour to the level of my audience naturally. I realised that this insight would unlock a huge number of resources for a much greater number of age groups.

Conversely, if I were to turn up to a Year 6 class with a copy of Knuffle Bunny by Mo Willems (2005) under my arm they would feel patronised and annoyed that we were going to work with 'a baby's book'. However, if I were to simply tell the story I would be almost assured that they would respond appropriately. Given that the picture book Knuffle Bunny is such a rich resource for exploring the nature of language and meaning (unlocked so easily with the question: 'Is Trixie talking?') it would be a shame for a Year 6 class to miss out on what the book can offer just because it is seen as a baby's book. Storytelling is a simple way to side-step this particular barrier to the use of certain resources for thinking with stories.

## EXTENSION ACTIVITY: EXERCISES IN STYLE

See Matt Madden's 99 Ways to Tell a Story: Exercises in Style (2006) for some very creative inspiration about how to adapt a narrative for different audiences, itself inspired by Raymond Queneau's book, also called Exercises in Style (2008). These books should also provide some inspiration for you to devise your own extension activities to get your class writing their own story in a variety of styles. For example, set your class the task of writing a story in the following formats (and / or others):

- a report
- a list
- a mind-map
- a storyboard (pictures)
- different perspectives (see 'the Rashomon effect' on page 27)
- a story.

Then ask them to analyse what it is they think makes each form what it is, and what distinguishes it from other forms.

## EYES, EYE-TELLING AND EYE CONTACT

Your eyes will be a very useful and important tool for your storytelling; where you look and how you look will enable you to tell a great deal while enabling your audience to understand a good deal from what you tell them. Wide eyes and an earnest look tells your audience that this really matters, or it can say, 'Can you believe it?' Closing your eyes can communicate the oceans of despair a character may be feeling. Breneman and Breneman (1983) recommend simply changing the angle of your look to indicate different speakers.

When I tell the story Once Upon an If (see page 85) I use books as props, and when I reach the part where Zadie opens The Story Book only to find empty pages, I flick through the book and try to communicate to the audience that it is empty, only with my eyes. When I hear some of them whisper loudly, 'It's empty!' I then say, 'The book seemed to be completely empty (flicking through the pages some more)... except for one page!' A change in my eyes and facial expression a moment before I say this last clause tells them, before I say it, that I'm about to challenge the absoluteness of the first clause ('completely empty') in light of the character gaining more information. All this can be achieved in a second when I use my eyes to supplement any other storytelling devices I may be using.

Unless you are specifically doing so for a storytelling reason, you should keep eye contact with your audience as often as possible. There is a problem however: there are many eyes in an audience and you only have two. Try to share your eye contact with different parts of the audience as regularly as you can. If there are those sitting so that they are in your peripheral vision only, make sure you attend to them explicitly with your eye contact from time to time so that they know you are telling to them as well as everyone else.