

How to be a Good Storyteller

Rajesh Utsahi

All of us, particularly children, enjoy listening to stories. When I think back on my childhood, I recall my grandmother's stories. In our house, we would use a coal burner to keep warm in winter. All the children used to gather around the stove late at night to keep themselves warm. In the summer, we would meet on the cots stretched out in the courtyard of the house. This was when grandmothers (both paternal and maternal) would tell us stories. They used to have a great memory for stories. We would fall asleep while listening to the story and if a story was left unfinished, there would be a request to narrate it again the next day. This was the period when TV did not exist. Mobile phones were nowhere in the picture; in fact, landline phones were also not commonly found in households.

But, in recent years, the entire scenario has changed. Even regular TV programmes have been replaced by those on the OTT platform. Perhaps grandmothers are now narrating stories with the help of mobile phones or television. There are numerous channels, blogs, and websites where videos, podcasts, and audio stories can be found.

Vanya, my two-and-a-half-year-old granddaughter is with me at present. She listens to and watches numerous such stories and poems prepared specifically for children on *YouTube*. She also states her preferences and dislikes.

The value of reading aloud

Mobile phones are so easily accessible, there may not be a conducive setting for reading or listening to stories at home. However, even in this scenario, the value of storytelling in school remains unchanged and the art of storytelling has grown in popularity as a valuable tool in classrooms. Storytelling has also become a specialised field and there are professional storytellers who hold special sessions at schools. Eminent educationist Krishna Kumar, in an essay on the art of storytelling, writes that the problem of retaining children in school could

be solved to an extent if our primary schools had a separate storytelling session every day during the first two classes. He says that he envisions a day when every teacher teaching young children will be expected to master at least thirty traditional stories. By mastering, he explains that he means they should be able to recall these stories with ease and confidence. He further adds that for a society with an extensive heritage of thousands of stories, this is not difficult. Thirty such stories, which the teacher can tell whenever they like, will transform the mood of the first two periods of the primary classes. The sole need is that storytelling be given a respectable place in the everyday curriculum.

This view is also underlined in the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2022 for the elementary stage.

'Stories are a window to the world for children. They are fascinating, beautiful, enchanting!! Listening to stories is great fun and young children, particularly, love to listen to them. Stories told with feeling, with gestures and animated expressions are magical and take your breath away. Every word becomes an experience in itself.

Stories are a particularly good medium for learning about social relationships and ethical choices; understanding and experiencing emotions; and becoming aware of life skills. While listening to stories, children learn new words thus expanding their vocabulary, they also learn sentence structure and problem-solving skills. Children with very short attention spans concentrate for a longer time while engrossed in a story. Through culturally contextual stories, we can acquaint children with their culture, and social norms and create awareness about their surroundings.'

Classroom use of storytelling

Storytelling as a pedagogy is mostly used for children in pre-primary classes, who have not yet learned, or are learning, to read on their own. However, listeners can also be those who know how to read but have no desire to do so.

There are a few things to keep in mind, whether you are a teacher, (or a parent, or simply attempting to master the art of storytelling as a hobby). First and foremost, it must be determined why the story is being told and what its aim is. Broadly speaking, the goals can be:

- Keeping the children entertained
- Keeping the children interested in the story
- Arousing children's interest in reading
- Communicating a specific concept or value to children
- Helping children overcome their reluctance to speak
- Teaching children to come forward to ask questions and participate in discussions
- Promoting imagination and visualisation in children
- Helping them develop skills of presenting problems

Where can I get the story?

A story can be picked up from anywhere. However, your goal will also influence where you get the story from. Our traditional stories are the best resources. Folklore is the most abundant source of these. One of the unique characteristics of folklore is that it evolves in accordance with the environment and culture, while the basic text stays unchanged. As a result, it is easy to remember, and it does not follow any set pattern. Sources such as the *Panchatantra* and *Jataka* tales are good. Nonetheless, it is equally critical to understand what not to choose. Avoid stories that make fun of others, give moral lectures, promote ghosts and superstitions, or express disdain for constitutional values.

Where do I begin?

- Begin with whatever story you recall, have heard from someone, or read somewhere. See how the children react to it. You can think up the next story based on that reaction.
- Read a story from a book.
- Consult with the children. If they remember one, they can narrate it.

- Ask the students what they saw on their way to school or an incident that may have occurred the previous day that they would like to share with the others. This type of activity will help children develop their ability to express themselves.

Practice makes perfect

Storytelling is an art. You can gradually improve your storytelling abilities. You can modulate and change your voice when telling the story to fit its characters. You can create your own facial expressions. You can also tell your story while walking around if there is space in the classroom. Take care not to make any gestures or sounds that frighten the children. If the story is engaging, the children will pay close attention to it. If the children are not interested in listening to the story, you must devise a fresh technique. One approach is to narrate the story in a style that allows for dialogue with the children. Ask children what will happen next in the story. Another approach is to connect the story to the children's surroundings and daily lives.

There are some stories that children love to hear over and over again. It is easy to tell such stories. Every time, you can recount the story in a different way. It can also be expanded with new aspects and contexts. In this sense, I would like to offer an experience. I have two sons. My father used to make up stories for them when they were young. He created the character *Laat Saheb* and would narrate a new feat of this character every time. The interesting thing here was that his listeners, namely, my sons, tended to add something of their own in between. That means they used to imagine things based on the persona of *Laat Saheb*. You can also provide these possibilities to children.

Aside from that, it is crucial to note that though every story has a predetermined ending, it is not necessary that you adhere to it. You can leave the ending a mystery for the children by not disclosing it to them. Alternatively, invite children to come up with multiple endings. They do not have to do this right away; you can give them some time or ask them to come up with an idea the next day. Avoid phrases like, 'What is the moral of this story? Or 'What does this story tell us?' Even if something like this is mentioned in the story, allow the youngsters to experience it for themselves.

When you begin telling the story, the children's reactions will give you hints as to which story to tell the next time. You will also be required to

keep reading stories in order to select good ones. However, these are only preliminary points. To

become a good storyteller, you must constantly practise, learn, and experiment with new methods.



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Teachers should share stories from their region. To get more of these, they can ask the students to ask their parents to tell them stories of the region. Storytelling traditions of families should be recognised and encouraged before they die out completely. The gap created by a lack of good literature to engage with, is unfortunately being filled by 'news stories' that we are constantly bombarded with through TV and phones.

Valentina Trivedi, How Stories Nourish Children, page 3