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“GOOD TO THE LAST DROP:”

Making the Most of Stories to Enhance Language Arts Learning*

Extracted from Kendall Haven, *Super Simple Storytelling: A Can-Do Guide For Every Classroom, Every Day*. Libraries Unlimited, 2000.

Reading or telling a story to your class doesn't automatically teach the language-arts lessons available in the story. Simply modeling the sound and structure of effective oral language is a small fraction of the teaching potential you have set in motion by priming students with the energy and excitement of a powerful story.

The problem is that *too many* individual concepts and techniques are being modeled at the same time for students to pick out and critically assess each one, just as it's harder to assess the third viola's technique while the whole orchestra is playing. You want music students to hear and revel in the glorious totality of stirring orchestral arrangements. You also want them to appreciate and learn individual technique.

The same is true for stories in a language arts program. No one wants to pull out a string of modifiers, action verbs, out-of-context epiphanies, character profile information, similes, or foreshadowing clues as a substitute for sharing the whole story. Still, it is those very elements of the story, of story comprehension, and of creative writing that your students need to master.

What is needed is an orderly, logical progression of constructive activities to lead students through story architecture and assessment in a rational, positive, and exciting way; a progression that assists students in more deeply understanding and learning from the stories you read and tell.

THE PROGRESSION

The progression of activities I present here is a composite set of activities to use during and after story presentation. While there is a logical flow from one to the next, it is neither essential to employ all twenty-five activities for every story you share, nor to use them in strict linear order. Use those that are grade and topic appropriate for the concepts you want your class to address.

DURING-THE-STORY ACTIVITIES

It is easier to demonstrate how some elements of story information are structured and presented while that information is still incomplete. That is, *during* the story, while listeners and readers are still searching for some of the needed information, rather than after the story when all necessary information has been successfully delivered.

I have found four questions worth discussing during the presentation of a story. Luckily, teachers, like parents, routinely establish a pattern of momentarily interrupting a presentation for comment or analysis. Students won't mind as much when a teacher stops in the middle of an exciting story to make an observation or ask a question. Besides, these questions, themselves, are fun and allow listeners to keep at least one foot firmly planted in the land of the story. Don't interrupt *every* story with these assessment questions, but do use them. There is great value in these discussions.

Stop periodically during the telling or reading of a story to ask students one or more of the following questions. I most often stop three times during a story (once early on before any core information has been provided; once mid-way; and once just before the climax when resolution will be revealed) and ask the same one or two questions each time. Let students justify and debate their answers using story information to support their beliefs.

1. *Who's the main character? Why?* This question forces students to compare information on all story characters and decide for whom they have the most core story information. It is not always obvious. More specifically, it forces students to decide which story character has explicitly stated goals and conflicts which block them from that goal. This is the definition of a main character. The value

comes not only from *identifying* a main character, but from having students *justify* their answers with supporting story material.

2. *How will the story end? Why?* Stories end when the goal of the main character is either realized or forever abandoned. Students cannot answer this question until they identify the main character, and that character's goal. Character goals are routinely omitted from student thinking and from student stories. It is valuable to draw attention to this important element while there is still some doubt about the story's outcome. Note that if you ask this question before the main character's goal has been clearly stated, students will have little other than wild guesses to offer.

3. *What will happen next? Why?* This question calls on students to use cause and effect sequential logic to assess the flow of the recent plotting events. They must assume that past and current story events are the causes which will create the next actions in the story. Realizing how they rely on cause and effect sequencing in stories they read and hear, helps students avoid events that simply "happen" in their own stories.

4. *Is it a story yet? Why or why not?* This is, perhaps, the most valuable question of all. The first sentence of a story does not, itself, constitute a story. Somewhere along the flow of scenes and plot twists, sufficient information is provided so that a listener will say that it *has* become a story. Stop several times before that much information has been presented and, when most say that, no, it is not yet a story, ask them to identify what essential information is still missing. This question requires students to ponder what distinguishes a story from more general terms such as incident, prose, and narrative, and what elements and

information they really need in order to call something a story. In short, it will ask them to identify the core elements of a story.

POST-TELLING ACTIVITIES

The heart of student learning comes after the story is over and they have a chance to review and assess why the story was structured as it was and how the story achieved its effect. Before real analytical work can begin, however, it is important to cement each student's experience and personal images of the story in their head. Once they take full ownership of their version and interpretation of the story, evaluation and dissection of the story and of the associated writing techniques will be easier and more beneficial.

I recommend that this process start with verbal reprocessing activities to reinforce and revisit the story and let its characters and events sink in. Subsequent assessments should begin with whole story considerations and work down through major story elements to micro-assessment of individual images and words.

1. Verbal Reprocessing. Here are four quick activities to help students cement story events, characters, and images in their minds. Students need to be paired with a partner for the first three activities. For the fourth, they should be grouped into teams of four to six.

a. Each student tells their partner about their own *experience* of listening to the story. Allow 45 to 60 seconds per student. What went through their mind while they listened? What were they thinking about and picturing while this story was being told? Hold a general class discussion in which students share with the

class what they told to their partner. You periodically summarize what they say and show that their comments all fall into the following three categories:

- evaluation of the story (form, content, performance),
- comparison to other stories, or
- relating this story to their own life and experiences.

All three are valuable elements of a listening (or reading) experience.

b. Each partnership quickly (in 30 seconds for older students, in a minute or two for primary) draws or sketches the story. Only one picture is allowed for each team. Have them share what they drew. The time limit means that students can't worry about the quality of their drawing. The typical focus of these drawings will be on story themes, major plot sequencing, character relationships and feelings, and physical setting, all central elements of the story.

c. Each pair retells the story to themselves. One student begins and tells for 30 seconds. The other student takes over and continues the story for 30 seconds, then the first takes over again, and so forth. You time the tellings and call "Switch!" at 30-second intervals. If one student can't remember what happened next, they are not excused from telling. Instead of moving forward, they repeat the last scene during their 30 seconds. If one student is truly stuck, they can ask their partner for a hint. However, I recommend that you discourage partners from prompting each other. Part of the value of this exercise is for each student to remember and claim their own images and version of the story.

Typically this telling will focus on a left-brained, factual, plot summary and will omit much of the story detail, dialog, and character motive, feeling, and

characterization. Discuss as a class what aspects of the story students forgot in their telling, what they remembered, and what they changed.

d. In teams of four to six, students act out the story. One tells the story as the other three act out each of the mentioned story elements (sound effects, actions, setting elements, etc.). Discuss as a class if students were better able to picture the scenes, events, and characters after watching them be acted out.

2. Review and Analyze the Story. Review and assess the story as a whole and its most basic single component, the story characters.

a. Review the characters. Ask the class the following questions. Allow time for students to discuss and debate their answers.

- Who is the *main* character? Why? What makes a main character?
- Who do you think is the *most important* character? Why?
- Who is your *favorite* character? Why?
- If you could bring one character in to this room and grill them with questions, who would you bring? Why? Who should ask the questions (you or a character in the story)? What questions would you want answered?

Now do it. Bring one or more story characters into the classroom to answer questions. Have one student volunteer to be the story character who will be questioned. They must stay in character and their answers must be consistent with their understanding of that character. Questioners should also stay in character if they are asking as a story character. Appoint a story judge to ensure that neither questions nor answers violate any overtly stated information in the story.

Questions obviously focus on information not directly reported in the story. Students will have to make up, or infer, their answers by extrapolating their impressions of the character as reported within the story text. A few questions will act to *extend the story*. (What did you do next?) But the vast majority will focus on character motive and character history. (Why did you do what you did? What did you want? etc.) Your students will attempt to build a history (called a *back story*) for the questioned character, a valuable tool for student writers to use before they begin to write their own story.

b. Judge the Characters. Put story characters and their actions on trial. Hold real in-class courtroom trials. Appoint a judge (in charge of both procedural matters and ensuring that no direct story information is contradicted by witnesses), a jury (the class), teams of lawyers for defense and prosecution, and witnesses (story characters played by students).

Each trial will focus on whether or not the character on trial was *justified* in doing what they did. Factual matters (Did they do it?) are settled by the text of the story. Allow a day or so for each team of lawyers to build their case and decide on a list of witnesses. (Some witnesses will not have appeared in the original story but will either be outside character witnesses or unreported observers of story events.) Students love the courtroom drama and get a valuable opportunity to evaluate complex character behavior and motivation and its relationship to the students' own world.

c. Review the Story. Have students draw pictures, maps, and flow diagrams of the story, its characters, settings and major events.

d. Analyze the main character and their role in defining and shaping the story. What did they want to do or get? Why? Why didn't they already have it? What stood in their way? What did they do to try to get it? Did they succeed? How do these pieces of character information define the beginning point, ending point, and plot of this story? Use the classic set of reporter questions for this discussion. Ask Who, What, Where, When, and especially WHY for this character and this story.

e. Place this story. Compare and contrast this story with others of the same period, the same subject or theme, about the same character or type of character, or by the same author or culture. Have students search for aspects that are unique to this story, and those it holds in common with other stories. This will help students both understand basic story architecture and develop their own stories along classic plot lines.

3. Extend the Story. Before breaking the story into individual building blocks and writing elements, it is valuable to examine the effect of major, story-wide decisions an author made. Here are eight extension activities virtually any grade level can use.

a. Retell the story, *but* change the perspective and viewpoint character. Who else could tell this story? How would the story change? How would readers' view of the characters and events change? What is the importance of defining a perspective and viewpoint?

b. How else could this story have ended? Have students sift through early story information to detect other plausible endings or outcomes. Have them support and justify their ideas with story material.

- c. What happened next? Have students extend the story beyond its current ending point. Be sure they support and justify their extension ideas with information from the existing story.
- d. What happened before? Have students use story events and character attitudes and relations to build a picture of past events that could both explain and lead up to the story as told.
- e. Retell the story, *but* change the setting and/or time. Have students imagine (and justify) how they think these changes will alter the characters and sequencing of the story.
- f. Retell the story, *but* change character personalities and goals. Major story events must stay the same, but the character interactions and event outcomes all change. This is a classic way to alter fairy and folk tales. (How many version of the Three Little Pigs can there be?! {Answer: as many as anyone can imagine.})
- g. Have each student answer this question: If it were *my* story, how would *I* end it? Why? Is your answer consistent with existing story information? What would you have to change in the story to support the ending you want?
- h. Use "What if...?" questions to change the story. ("What if BB Wolf had a sore throat and couldn't blow down even a straw house?") Let students create a series of plausible what-if's for the story you read. Then let them rebuild the story from that point on in small teams and compare how the what-if questions changed and redirected their version of the story.

4. Dig Below the Surface. Now fine-toothed combing of the technical architecture and elements of the story is appropriate. This is the time to focus the

class on those specific techniques and concepts of successful story building you want them to master. But even this process of tearing into individual techniques and aspects of a story can be divided into three tiers.

a. Macro-Structure. Study the placement of major story information and its order of presentation. How and why did the first few paragraphs make you want to hear the rest of the story? What makes listeners (or readers) become interested in the characters and in their fate? How was tension created and maintained throughout the story? What is the story question? What information was held out to keep readers in suspense? What and when was the story's climax? How did the story build to that moment? How soon did students know what this climax would be? Why? How was this event foreshadowed?

b. Micro-Structure. (For this assessment each student needs a copy of the story.) Study scene structure. Where do individual scenes begin and end? What story elements define a scene? What information is provided in the story for each scene? Does each scene have a mini-climax and resolution of its own?

Study paragraph length and the variation in that length. Does paragraph structure correlate with anything else (like action or tension)? Study transitions—between scenes, between thoughts, across gaps in time. Study sentence length and variation and try to correlate it with other story parameters.

c. Micro-Micro-Structure. Study the effect of specific word choices in the story. How did specific wording affect the images students created in their minds? How were places, characters and events described? What forms of detail were used in this story? How did a select few bits of detail create whole vistas in readers' minds? Where do those mental images come from? Which kinds of

words create images? In general, nouns create images, modifiers provide visual richness and detail, and verbs create motion, emotion, and action to connect individual images. Which detail, and, in general, how much detail was included in the story? What was left out? Search for different kinds of descriptors (adjectives, adverbs, similes, metaphors, etc.). Study the verbs used in the story. How many were specific action verbs? How many were general or vague? How many were verbs of state? (is, are was...) Which were more effective in creating images of story events?

These are brief summary listings of the activities I use for story follow-through. It would take a book to fully describe each of these activities and their application to a language arts program. Still, even a summary is a valuable check list of how to maximize the language- and story-teaching you can accomplish with one story.

THE END # #

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Bio Summary:

West Point graduate and former research scientist turned award-winning author and master storyteller, Kendall Haven is the author of 25 books including ten collections of themed historical stories, and his four books that present his break-through systems for using and teaching stories, story writing, and storytelling in the classroom: *Write Right*, *Super Simple Storytelling*, *Get It Write!*, and *STORY PROOF: The Science Behind the Startling Power of Story*. Haven has 25-years experience as a touring, professional, master storyteller, and has performed for over four-million people in 44 states at schools, conferences, festivals, and theaters, and has won numerous national and regional award for both his story-writing and his *storytelling*.

He also has conducted workshops to over 40,000 teachers on the effective use of stories in the classroom and on better ways to teach creative writing, and to over 250,000 students on story-writing and story-telling techniques.