

Kindred Keepsakes: Inspiring Children to Write through Oral History Storytelling –
by **Lainie Levin** lainlev@yahoo.com and **Yvonne Healy** www.YHealy.com .

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Reluctant writer was Dominic’s middle name. Asked to compose a journal entry, he stared into space for twenty minutes, complaining, “*I have nothing to say.*”

Dominic’s typical final product averaged 18 disjointed words. After completing the program outlined below, he emerged with a 9-sentence story, averaging 15 words per sentence. Dominic’s comment: “*I didn’t know I was a writer!*”

Kindred Keepsakes is the family history experience teaching writing through storytelling and oral history. Children realize they have “something to say,” and teachers discover how important it is to incorporate oral storytelling into the writing curriculum.

The full unit as developed by a classroom teacher and a professional storyteller, Lainie Levin and Yvonne Healy, spans 3 months, averaging 1.5 class hours weekly. It streamlines successfully to fit 12-hour artist residencies. While Kindred Keepsakes works best as a whole, each component is valuable in its own context. Interviewing elders and playing additional games increases both the time needed and student’s development.

Content Addressed - Grades 3-5:

Social Studies – NCSS Thematic Strands Addressed:

- Culture
- Time, Continuity, and Change
- People, Places, and Environment
- Individual Development and Identity
- Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
- Science, Technology, and Society
- Global Connections

Language Arts – NCTE Standards Addressed:

Standard Number

- 4 Using language to communicate effectively.
- 5 Communicating with different audiences.
- 6 Creating, critiquing, and discussing texts.
- 7 Conducting research.
- 9 Respecting diversity in language use; Participating in literacy communities.

12 Using language to accomplish a purpose.

Learning Objectives: Students will:

- Learn active listening, questioning, and interviewing techniques
- Develop a story from an elder's anecdote
- Learn peer coaching methods for revision
- Transition between oral and written story
- Showcase oral and written story

Resources and materials:

Required: Professional storytellers (live or recorded), TV, senior citizens (preferably family).

Optional: Audiotape recorder, video camera, adult assistance.

Process:

1. *Interviewing.* Students learn from masters by observing professional storytellers sharing family stories and watching television talk shows. Children learn interview skills and practice creating questions that elicit stories before arranging interviews with family elders.

One game invented to develop interviewing skills is called "Mother May I" because students play by saying "magic words." In pairs, one student makes observations about the room using the senses of sight, smell, touch, and sound. The listener repeats the observations exactly. Switch.

After learning basic question starters, students learn kinesthetic cues for questioning. Counting each of five fingers, the child's "Handy Outline" reveals story elements: Someone / Wants / Something / But / Then. Counting the five senses on the second hand, students discover that sensory prompts encourage subjects to talk and to remember overlooked details. ("What did it smell/look/feel/sound like?")

2. *Recording.* Each child records a 30-60 minute interview with an elder. Ideally, this is recorded on audio or videotape. For families, this step is invaluable, providing a priceless keepsake. Regardless of access to equipment, this step is possible. Students can conduct interviews in another language, over the phone, even with written notes or drawings.

3. *Storytelling.* In this most intensive stage, students re-shape anecdotes from their interviews into a story. One method is to compose story "skeletons" by drawing or writing comic strips called storyboards. In the "Touch and Tell" game, students tell stories orally while touching each picture and explaining its action.

Students play the "3 Bears Game" for supportive peer coaching and editing. Rather than waiting for a teacher's critique, students revise in response to a partner's immediate feedback.

The coach/editor does not “fix what’s wrong,” but lets the teller/writer know what is likable. In both oral and writing coaching, feedback is given by offering:

- Twin Baby Bears: two things that are “just right” with the story.
- Mama Bear: what is “too little” in the story
- Papa Bear: what is “too much” in the story.

Begin peer coaching by teaching how to offer “Baby Bears.” When students can easily offer supportive advice, the class can be taught to offer “Mama and Papa Bears.”

4. *Transitioning from oral to written story.* If our brains are the “cheetahs” of our body, and our mouths are the rabbits, our hands are the snails. When teachers ask students to write, they essentially tell students that the cheetah and the snail must keep pace! Oral language levels the playing field by helping children organize thoughts effectively. Reluctant writers excitedly discover the connection between their thoughts and written language.

Students record stories onto audiotape, then transcribe them using pencil or keyboard. While not critical, adult assistance expedites transcription. Using the “3 Bears” model, students peer edit written work.

5. *Showcasing.* Students publish for families and community via hand, computer or copy machine printouts, local newspapers, website posting or by entering a contest. Students perform stories in family or school concerts.

Assessment:

Rubrics are the ideal assessment for the interview, performance and written story. They document measurable progress and specifically address curricular expectations. Ideally, teachers allow students to help create rubrics and share them before each step is completed. Students find greater success because they know what they need to accomplish.

Conclusion:

Kindred Keepsakes affected our students in very real ways.

Maya was a painfully shy girl. Never speaking above a whisper or seeking companionship, she endured school alone, unnoticed. Not once did she smile. Her parents didn’t realize the depth of Maya’s unease in social situations. Teachers’ reports were incompatible with the energetic sprite they knew. Inspired by love for her grandfather and pride in her work, Maya willingly volunteered to perform publicly at a springtime concert. Perched on folding chairs in the gym, her parents saw Maya as she was at school – a scared child retreating within herself. They helped Maya receive professional counseling. The next fall, she returned to school ready to play, ready to participate – smiling.

Perhaps most precious is the undying keepsake which families gain. By each project's end, one of the families lost its elder. Through listening to elders, children opened windows into a life unknown and treasured stories that endure.

About the authors:

Yvonne Healy is “*an Irish pixie of a performer!*” Mythology, history, an outrageous family and a theatrical background converge in her high-energy performances. Healy's audio/video recordings and writings have earned Gold Awards from National Parenting Publications, Children's Music Organization and America's Story Festival.

Educated through Swarthmore College, Tufts University and continuing professional studies, Healy completes the cycle by teaching in elementary and secondary school residencies nationwide and near her Michigan home. A gifted educator, Healy has been chosen as a resident artist-educator for MI-AEYC, Wolf Trap Arts in Education, Michigan Humanities Council, and as Visiting Artist for the University of Michigan. In college classes, international professional conferences, keynotes and workshops, Healy trains others to use her unique methods to foster literacy and explore history. Information is online at www.YHealy.com. Email: Stories@YHealy.com

Lainie Levin - www.storytelling.org/Levin - has been a storyteller since the ripe old age of ten. Drawing from her Jewish heritage, world cultures, and her own experiences, Lainie crafts stories that “tickle the funny bone and touch the heart.” Career highlights include Jack and Jill Storyfest, Fox Valley Storytelling Festival, the Detroit Art Institute, and the Missouri River Storytelling Festival. As a veteran teacher and versatile storyteller, Lainie is no stranger to teaching workshops. She has high expectations for workshops, especially her own. As a result, attendees leave inspired and empowered to act. Topics presented include “Kindred Keepsakes” and “the Busy Teacher's Guide to Storytelling.” Email: Lainie@yahoo.com

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