



Story writing with young children: “How Does Your Story Start?”

Sad is the man who is asked for a story and can't come up with one.

-Li-Young Lee, poet

I have a soft brain
because I watch too
much T.V.

My mommy wants my
daddy to go to bed.
My mommy wants my
brother to go to bed.
My mommy wants
me to go to bed.

When I grow up I
will go to work
and then I get to
wear those special
clothes.
Like stripes.

No one is going to debate the importance of seeing the spoken word translated into the written word, or the obvious link to a growing understanding of letters and words, of reading and writing, but the rationale for story writing goes beyond that. Recent over emphasis of print and reading has overshadowed the importance of recounting personal narrative.

The spoken word comes first. Without a full experience in **orality** a person cannot truly embrace **literacy**. Jane Healy, PhD reminds us that children need experiences to attach to words!

From the interwebs: Generally, “literacy” is understood as the ability to read and write, while “orality” describes the primary verbal medium employed by cultures with little or no exposure to writing. And, (emphasis mine) **children**.

Orality provides the rhythms, intonations, pitches that find final expression in writing. Bettelheim often stated that the dialogue that preceded play can be the most important part of the play (orality). Children need to hear language in order to learn language! If we want articulate children, they need time to exercise their voices!

This is the story writing process taught to me by ECE expert, Bev Bos (R.I.P.)

- Ask a child (start with the talker!) “How does your story start?”
- Then write what they say VERBATIM on paper you have handy on a clipboard.
- Read it back to them when they are finished.
- At the end of the *day*, keep a copy for yourself and send a copy home. At the end of the *year* assemble all their stories (like in a book) and give them to the child.
- Before go-home time Bev would read all of the day’s stories out loud, calling out the name of the child who wrote it, “Where is Lisa? This is her story!” She’d read it out loud while making eye contact with the author - who often was the only one listening!
- If so inclined, take a page from the work of Vivian Paley (R.I.P.) and assist children in acting out their stories. After they have dictated their story to you, you might ask, “Who will you be when you act out your story?”
- The dictated story is but a half-told tale, Vivian Paley says, “to fulfill its destiny it is dramatized on a pretend stage with the help of classmates as actors and audience and the teacher as narrator and director.”
- Vivian was a kindergarten teacher and had story dictation time and then later in the day, story acting out time. There really is no right or wrong way to do this! You might hold up the dictated story saying something like, “THIS is Lisa’s story. She will be the **bird** at the top of a tree; she will need a **tree**, a **mama bird** and a **fish** down in the pond.”
- Then the children decide who is who, the teacher reads the story (narrator) and the children act it out. Sometimes twice.

The story was the bushman’s most sacred possession. These people knew what we do not, that without a story you have not got a nation or culture or civilization. Without a story of your own to live you haven’t got a life of your own. An attribute that distinguishes humans from animals is our ability to tell our own story.

-Laurens van der Post

Points to remember when taking dictation:

- Start with the “talker”!
- You are the scribe not the author!
- Do not correct grammar, syntax or anything else! (Of note: children benefit less from adult correction of their speech errors than from straight conversation. They learn the “right way” while talking and learn faster when not being constantly corrected and interrupted, *A is for Ox*, Barry Sanders)
- You do not need to “like” or understand the story!
- Do not edit, change, modify, rewrite or doubt their stories!
- Give them the pen if they say they can write their own story!
- When the child appears “done” PAUSE for a sec. You might ask, “Anything else?” or “And then?” or “What’s next?”
- When they *are* done, read it back just as they told you!
- There might be edits, they might ask you to change it, read it again for clarity!
- Changes are OK!
- Be gentle and understanding with children who tell you that they don’t have a story or those who then dictate the entire plot of the latest TV show or animated feature. They will soon realize they too have a story... you must remember what Jane Healy tells us, children need *experiences* to attach to words, first.

A story, no matter how interesting, needs an audience to be effective.

-Barry Sanders

RESOURCES

A Child’s Work: The importance of fantasy play

Vivian Gussin Paley, 2004

A is for Ox: The collapse of literacy and the rise of violence in an electronic age

Barry Sanders, 1994

Tumbling Over the Edge: A rant for children’s play

Bev Bos & Jenny Chapman, 2005

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YouTube: OoeyGooleyLady

Podcast: “Child Care Bar and Grill” (free wherever you like to listen) I pod with Jeff Johnson of Explorations Early Learning <https://playrevolutionhq.com/>