



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.

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**. Without a full experience in **orality** a person cannot truly embrace **literacy**. Orality provides the rhythms, intonations, pitches that find final expression in writing.

But we get it out of order! Our overemphasis on reading and writing has overshadowed the development of <and embracing of> the spoken word and the ability to recount personal narrative.

Jane Healy, PhD, author of *Endangered Minds: why children don't think and what we can do about it* reminds us that children need experiences to attach words TO! And Barry Sanders, author of *A is for Ox*, tells us that children need to *hear* language before they can *learn* language.

If we want children to be articulate, they must have plenty of opportunity to exercise their voices - LIKE A MUSCLE! Whether via their own spoken voice, sign language, communication assistance devices, photo cards...

Stories give both voice and life to the child's inner-world whether we assist in making it visible via print, story acting, or maybe both. Either way, what is most important is that it is being *heard*. The idea is to go *beneath the skin and capture the essence of the child's individual narrative*:

Which might be about:

- a school experience
- an experience away from school
- complete "free association"
- a home event
- perhaps pure fantasy
- or - depending on the child - a 15 minute monologue that blends all of the above!!!

Regardless, and, whether dictated, spoken to the air, shared only with a peer, or acted out in front of a group, it is an opportunity for self-expression, to recall events, to use their imagination and to give voice to the pictures they see on the walls of their mind.

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, you haven't got a life of your own. -Laurens Van der Post

The more children have *heard* stories (and finger plays and chants and rhymes) the more eager they are when the time is right for reading and writing.

Children don't read and write the way they used to, but without a literacy rooted in orality there can neither be self, or self-consciousness... TV still plays a villain, but it works its evil less by displacing reading than by replacing verbal interactions with parents and peers. -Jonathan Franzen, *The New Yorker*

As I've said, no one is going to debate the importance of seeing the spoken word translated into the shapes and symbols of the written one, but the rationale for story writing goes waaaaay beyond that. And any goal or objective related to "learning how to read and write" is 100% secondary to the whole process!

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

- Have clipboards with sharpies ready to go. Maybe adults are walking around with them, maybe the clipboards are up on the wall, on a shelf near the door...
- Start with the “talker” and ask, “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.

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

-Barry Sanders, A is for Ox

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! Barry Sanders, author of *A is for Ox* reminds us that 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.
- 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, if so, makes the changes and read it back again.
- 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... Remember Jane Healy’s quote: children need *experiences* to attach to words, first!

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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**DVDs and BOOKS: All of Lisa’s materials are available from Redleaf Press
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