

Step by Step to Choosing, Learning, and Telling a Story

By Markey Duckworth

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We are all storytellers; we do it every day. Now, don't look at me that way. We tell stories about ourselves and our families each time someone asks us what we did over the weekend or what happened at school today. Storytelling is something that just comes naturally to human beings, and it's a good thing. After all, before there were televisions, videos, compact discs, Gameboys, and computers, and even before there were books, people found that they had free time in the evening. Usually, someone in the family would start to tell a story, maybe a funny tale or a spooky one, and before long, everybody became quiet and sat down and listened. Storytelling is as old as time and as new as the best story you heard today.

The invention of the radio almost destroyed the art of storytelling. People gathered around the radio to listen to stories. Luckily for us, in 1973 a teacher from Tennessee visited a place called Jonesborough with his students and invited some Mountain storytellers to join them. The tellers stood on the back of a hay wagon and on porches and told stories to about sixty listeners.

Today, Jonesborough, Tennessee, attracts about ten thousand people worldwide to the annual National Storytelling Festival. Large, colorful tents have replaced the wagon and the porches. The festival has become a three-day event with a ghost storytelling for two nights, and a Sunday morning telling of sacred tales. Each year, a special invited group of young people performs at the "Youthful Voices" program. These kids have already competed in the National Storytelling Youth Olympics, held on the campus of East Tennessee State University in Johnson City.

Now, to begin to tell a story, you must first choose a tale. When you first start storytelling, you may be more comfortable using stories you already know, such as "The Three Little Pigs" or some other folk- or fairy tale. It is easier, I think, to start by choosing a story you already "kind of know." When I am learning a story, I read it over and over. Then I go to a quiet place and try telling it to myself. The more you practice, the more comfortable you become. Remember, storytelling is not memorization. You do not need to learn the story word for word from a book.

Storytelling should look easy . . . as if it just came to you. The story may change a little each time you tell it. I think of it almost like putting on a new pair of sneakers. You have to break them in a little until you like the way they feel. You add your own touches to each story so that it becomes your own. Some people learn things better if they hear

them, and if you are one of those types of learners, perhaps you can ask a friend or parent to read the story to you at first.

It is not always easy to find a story that suits you. Remember that a great book does not always make great material for a storyteller. *Charlotte's Web* is a wonderful story, but it would be very difficult to tell. There are so many characters, and the story is quite long. It is best to start with a picture book or a story from a collection of folktales.

Beginning storytellers should be careful about trying to use different voices in their stories. It is tempting to give each character his or her own special voice, but it can lead to mistakes when one character uses another's voice. I have been storytelling for twenty years and still prefer to use body language for characters, rather than different voices. I use gestures, but some storytellers prefer not to move about while talking.

Every storyteller draws a blank from time to time. I once got up to tell and could not remember the name of my story. Now that is scary! Since then, I have always carried a slip of paper listing the titles of stories that I might tell. I rarely use it, but it makes me feel better, sort of like a security blanket.

So go ahead, pick out that story, and tell it. After all, nobody but you knows what you are going to say, and nobody tells the story exactly like you do. And best of all, you will find that most people want you to do well, and they are on your side. That's how I learned to tell stories, but I will share a secret with you: For a very long time, I took off my glasses so I couldn't see the audience! Good luck!

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At the time of this article's publication, Markey Duckworth worked as a children's services coordinator with the Granville County Public Library System.