



Storytelling learning activities

Ideas and activities to help you use storytelling with your class

Age 3-13

CFE Early to Third Level

Resource created by storyteller Mara Menzies

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About this resource

Storytelling is one of the oldest and most exciting art forms in the world. It is how people have always communicated and entertained each other, and passed down knowledge and information about how to live with each other. Storytellers don't memorise their stories, they don't use books, films or any other props because the magic of their story is in their words.

The activities in this resource are intended to help children improve their storytelling skills. These include among others, firing the imagination, learning the steps to create a story and, importantly, different ways to engage their audience. These activities are adaptable to suit any age and number of children.

If you are taking part in [Reading Schools](#), the activities in this resource could support delivery of Key Area 2.2.2: Interdisciplinary book projects.

Top ten tips for storytelling

Everyone is a storyteller and the more we listen to other storytellers, the more we can develop our own style. Here are Mara Menzies top ten tips!

1. Eye contact with the audience

The audience members will feel as if you are speaking to them directly and they will love you for it.

2. Love the story you tell

If you love the story, then you will know it and be comfortable telling it in lots of different ways. Avoid stories you don't like as the audience will pick up on it.

3. Prepare, prepare, prepare

Make sure you know your story well, have some water handy and try to be familiar with the storytelling space so you can figure out the best way to deliver your story.

4. Be confident

Even if you are terrified, try not to let the audience see it. Breathe in deeply before you start, hands out of pockets and find a friendly face in the audience who will support you through the storytelling.

5. Use your physicality

The way you use your body and face can really help bring a story to life. Make sure each movement has a purpose and avoid doing too many actions, as it can distract from the story. Feel free to exaggerate your facial expressions- the audience will love that!

6. Use your voice

Have fun with your voice. Experiment with accents and sounds. Bring characters to life by giving them different voices.

7. Use the audience

The audience want to have a good time. They will happily answer questions, clap their hands and roar if you ask them to.

8. Take your time

It is easy to rush a story so just slow things right down. Pauses are really useful and help the pace of the story

9. Listen to other storytellers

The best way to develop your own style is to see other storytellers wherever possible. If you like the way they move or sound, take it and make it your own.

10. Practice whenever you get the chance

Tell stories to your family, your friends, and your pets, to yourself in the mirror. Try different ways of storytelling until you find the way that works best for you.

Learning activities

Activity 1: What on earth is this?

LIT 0-09a/LIT 1-09a/LIT 2-09a/ LIT 3-09a, LIT 0-10a/LIT 1-10a/LIT 2-10a/LIT 3-10a

Ask the students to sit in a circle. Take an object such as a stone, a piece of fabric, a feather, and pass it round the circle. Each student must describe the object using just one word. For example, hard, soft, smooth, cold, etc. How many words can be used to describe the object?

Once the object has reached its starting point again, keep it going round the circle but this time let the students begin to think of associated words. For example, a feather might inspire words such as bird, fly, sky, wind.

Keep the object going round the circle but this time ask “what could it be used for?” For example, a piece of fabric could be a flying carpet, granny’s picnic blanket, an invisibility cloak. The children cannot repeat the same word.

Activity 2: Off you go! Sequencing activity

LIT 0-09a/LIT 1-09a/LIT 2-09a/ LIT 3-09a, LIT 0-10a/LIT 1-10a/LIT 2-10a/LIT 3-10a

Place the students into pairs consisting of one storyteller and one listener. Taking it in turns, they must each imagine that they have been given a task by the teacher. For example, showing a visitor round the school; taking something to another teacher; preparing a room for a sports event; asking the nurse to come to the classroom.

The storyteller then begins and using his/her imagination proceeds to tell the listener exactly how the task was accomplished. This includes what the task is, the journey the student must take to carry out this task, a description of the task itself, and the return to the classroom having completed the task.

Example

My teacher spilled a glass of water and asked me to fetch a mop. I decided to go to find the janitor. I left the classroom, turned right, and walked past the library. I went through the cafeteria and past the nursery towards the school office. The janitor was sitting there and I asked him for a mop. He gave it to me and I returned the same route I had come. When I got back to the classroom, I helped the teacher mop up so that nobody could slip and fall down.

Extension activity

Repeat the exercise, but this time expand the description. What does the student see in the hallway, were there any smells in the cafeteria, did they hear anything in the corridors, what was the expression on the janitor's face?

Activity 3: Fortunately/unfortunately

LIT 1-01a/LIT 2-01a/LIT 3-01a, LIT 2-02a/LIT 3-02a, ENG 1-03a/ENG 2-03a/
ENG 3-0a

Pupils can work in pairs for this activity. Gather the students together and share a brief story where a scenario is introduced and regardless of what happens, the story must continue by continuously introducing positive and negative consequences (see

example below).

Having demonstrated the format, introduce a scenario and allow the pupils to work in pairs. Together they must tell a story where one takes on the 'fortunately' and the other the 'unfortunately' perspectives. How long can they keep the story going?

Example

There was once a poor man who had only one son and one horse. Unfortunately, the horse ran away and left the old man with nothing.

Fortunately, the horse returned and brought 5 others with it so the old man became rich. Unfortunately, as the son was training the new horses, he fell and broke his leg.

Fortunately, as the son was recovering, the army passed by and took all the young men to fight a war but left the son behind as he had a bad leg. And so on...

Activity 4: Stories hidden in art

EXA 0-07a/EXA 1-07a/EXA 2-07a/EXA 2-07a, LIT 1-07a/LIT 2-07a, LIT 1-09a/LIT 2-09a/LIT 3-09a, LIT 1-01a/LIT 2-10a/LIT 3-10a

Find a range of famous paintings with plenty of colour, pattern, texture and style to choose from and ask the children look at the paintings in detail. Pose questions to the pupils including: What do they notice about the painting? What can they see or recognise? How is the picture arranged? How does the painting make you feel? How do you think the picture was made? You can find artworks in local museums and collections using the [ArtUK website](#), or search collections such as the [Tate](#) or [The National Gallery](#).

Next ask the pupils to select the one painting that attracts their attention. They must consider why the artist decided to paint that particular painting. What happened to them that day? What were the emotions involved? If the painting gives off a particular aura (sad, happy, nostalgic) then what may have happened to the artist in the previous days that may have inspired his/her work?

Once they have got a rough idea of the structure of the story, they can then share the story about the artist and the artworks creation with their partner.

Extension activity

Pupils can also create a story inspired by the content of their chosen painting. For example, selecting a figure or object depicted and creating a backstory around it. Questions they can pose are: Who are they? Why are they there? How did they get there? What are they doing? How do they relate to other people or objects in the picture?

Activity 5: True or untrue

LIT 1-04a/ LIT 2-04a/LIT 3-04a, LIT 1-08a/LIT 2-08a/LIT 3-08a, LIT 1-09a/LIT 2-09a/LIT 3-09a, LIT 1-01a/LIT 2-10a/LIT 3-10a

Find a story that may or may not be true. The headlines below may help you choose one:

- Once I was late because...
- The funniest thing that ever happened to me
- The scariest day of my life
- I was with my friend when....
- A story that took place at night

Then gather the class together and inform them you are going to tell them a story that may or may not be true. They must listen to the story and think about what questions they could ask to figure out whether it is true or untrue. In pairs they must decide on one question to ask to help them decide. Answer the questions as convincingly as possible then provide a summary of the story again for them to make the decision. Were you able to convince them?

In pairs, they can use the above list as inspiration for their own true or made up story to tell their partner. They should consider the following elements to make their story as convincing as possible:

- When did the story take place?
- Where did the story take place?

- Characters that are clearly described and have a clear purpose.
- Plenty of description to make the story as realistic as possible.

Extension activity

You could use a speed dating format where the students move round the class and tell their story to three or four classmates. The class can compete to see who is able to tell their story most convincingly.

Activity 6: Sensory stories

LIT 1-09a/LIT 2-09a/LIT 3-09a, LIT 1-10a/LIT 2-03a/LIT 3-10a, HWB 0-29a/HWB 1-29a/HWB 2-29a/HWB 3-29a

Bring in a range of items that will stimulate the senses and lay them on tables around the classroom. The list below is adaptable:

- **Taste:** Pomegranate, Maltesers, grapes, Jaffa cakes, Marmite, grapefruit
- **Smell:** coriander, basil, rosemary, perfume, air freshener, malt vinegar, smelly cheese
- **Touch:** sandpaper, stone, sand, feathers, leaves, bubble wrap, a book, a shell

Place the items in different stations and ask the pupils to walk around and taste, smell and feel the items. Bring the group together and ask them discuss their experiences. What words would they use to describe the different items? What did the tasting items feel like in the mouth? What did the scents remind them of? Can they think of any stories where senses were used? For example, Alice drank the potion in Wonderland, the giant sniffed out Jack and the Beanstalk, Aladdin rubbed the magic lamp.

Place the students in groups and ask them to choose one item from each table. In their group, they must discuss how the items could be used in a story. If they were to eat/smell or touch any of the items, what could happen? For example, they could

become invisible, turn into an object, assume a power of some kind, or bring something into existence. The groups can then take it in turns to tell their story to the class, holding up or referencing the items involved.

For more sensory storytelling ideas, see our [Getting started with sensory stories](#), [Turning picture books into sensory stories](#) or [Make your own sensory story](#) resources.

Activity 7: Out and about

EXA 0-01a/EXA 1-01a/EXA 2-01a, EXA 0-02a/EXA 1-02a/EXA 2-02a, EXA 0-05a/EXA 1-05a/EXA 2-05a, LIT 1-09a/LIT 2-09a/LIT 3-09a, LIT 1-10a/LIT 2-03a/LIT 3-10a

Use the natural environment of the school to inspire stories. Go out into the playground/garden/green space and identify several 'spots' of interest. Perhaps there is a tree, a stone, outdoor play equipment, a branch or a sandy patch of soil. Ask the students to imagine what kind of setting these could be for a story by using exaggeration. A tree could become a forest. A sandy spot could become a desert. Tarmac could become a rugged alien terrain on a distant planet. Divide the class into groups of three to four pupils and ask the students to select a preferred 'spot' on which they could create a story.

In the groups, pupils can explore the characters which could be found in their chosen setting. They could create their own characters using stones, chalk, leaves, twigs and locally found materials.

Inspired by the characters they have created or discussed, they can create a story about the characters- what they look like, how they got there, where they came from, the reason they are there, what they sound like, what they do in the story.

Conduct a story walk where the whole class move from spot to spot, and hear the different stories in their rightful place.

Examples

- A smuggler buried treasure under the old gnarled tree in the middle of the forest.
- A police officer places a traffic cone on the ground to investigate an oozing, green goo seeping from a crack in the earth on a distant planet.
- The rock in the sandpit of the playground is actually a rock monster who lives in a sandy desert and wakes up at night to find lost travellers.

Activity 8: Creating a plot

LIT 1-06a/LIT 2-06a, LIT 1-09a/LIT 2-09a/LIT 3-09a, LIT 1-10a/LIT 2-03a/LIT 3-10a
Print and cut out the character, setting and time elements from worksheet 1 and the plot cards from worksheet 2. Put them into envelopes (you should have eight in total) and ask the children to randomly choose one or more characters, one setting and time card, and then one of each of the plot cards. They must then create a story that used all the chosen elements. They have 8-10 minutes to create and practice their story, before sharing it with the rest of the class.

Further resources

Scottish Book Trust resources

Find [all our resources on storytelling on the Scottish Book Trust website](#), including:

- [Oral storytelling with Claire McNicol](#)
- [Getting started with sensory stories](#)
- [Turning picture books into sensory stories](#)
- [Make your own sensory story](#)

Where to find more stories

Stories come from a huge variety of sources- books, television, the internet, stories from other people and of course the stories we make up. If you would like to read up on lots of different stories from around the world and which cover a variety of themes, then follow the links below:

- [Mike Lockett Storytelling](#)
- [World Stories](#)
- [Stories to Grow By](#)
- [Short Stories for Children](#)
- [Free Children's Stories](#)
- [African Fables](#)
- [Storybird \(for creating stories\)](#)