



Ideas for writing stories

Use folk tales, their themes and characters as a spur to writing.

One common theme is the granting of a magical gift to the hero or heroine, and what the person does with the boon once they have it. Sometimes they use it wisely; sometimes they blow it. After the introduction of several tales of this type through reading or storytelling, have the children write a story about how a character receives a magic gift, and what happens to him/her. It may help to make a list of things on the board that could become magical gifts (e.g., pencils, dogs, umbrellas, ear muffs, elephants).

Use characters which reappear again and again in folk tales and have children use these characters in a story.

Many tales in America, England, and Ireland have to do with Jack, the lazy fellow who somehow always manages to save his neck, get rich, and marry into royalty. (Especially good are *The Jack Tales* by Richard Chase, probably in the school library.) There are dozens of stories in every culture about the "trickster" character outwitting his enemies and friends (e.g., Brer Rabbit - see two good, short simple stories in *Knee High Man* by Julius Lester, an excellent book for storytellers.) After introducing several stories about one of these stock characters, have the children write their own stories about that character. *Except for cases where the written language is crucial to the story, memorizing a story word for word is generally not the best way to learn a story. When you know the story, start to tell it to yourself in your own words. If you get stuck, go back to the book, but when you've read the difficult part over, put the book down again. Describe what you see in your mind's eye.

Begin a story either by telling it or distributing a printout so that they can read it, but stop at a certain point and have the students finish it.

This is a good starting point for writing stories, since it gives definite direction to their work, and helps in their grasping the concept of story line. On the next page, I give an example of the start of a story which leaves the child with the opportunity of defining the conflict and resolving it. (See "Barnak of the Forest".)

Act out the story.

After telling a story, or after a group of children has read a story, I often have them break up into groups and develop the story into a short skit. The skit re-emphasizes the story line and characters, and gives them the opportunity to speak out in front of a group.

I hope this all helps. If there are particular activities related to storytelling which you use and find to be effective, I'd love to hear about them.

BARNAK OF THE FOREST
an unfinished story
by Bill Harley

Once upon a time there was an old man and woman. They were very poor and lived in a small house near the woods. The old man gathered bundles of wood each day to sell in town.

One day, he took his bundle of wood into town, sold it, and then saw some old friends. They all went to a tavern, where they talked for a long time. Finally, the old man decided it was time to go home. When he went outside, the sun was setting in the sky. He had to hurry home because it was his turn to cook dinner and he didn't want his wife to worry.

He walked as fast as he could to a turn in the road near the dark forest. There the old man stopped and decided to take a shortcut on a path through the woods. He did not like the forest because all kinds of stories were told about it. He was most afraid that he would run into the bear who was the ruler of the forest, known as Barnak.

The old man walked down the trail into the forest. The sun got lower and lower in the sky, and finally set. The trail became hard to see. He stopped to look around. He could not see any trail ahead of him. He turned around to go back the way that he had come, but could see no trail behind him.

"Where is the trail?" said the old man. "I must be lost."

The old man saw what looked like an old log and sat down to think. Soon, he became quite angry with himself. He began to hit the log again and again saying, "Why did I go this way? Why was I so foolish? Now I'll never be home in time to fix supper, or eat it."

Then, right under him, he heard a grumble. The log began to move. It shook him to the ground, and then it let out a long, loud roar. What he thought was a log stood up on huge legs. It was not a log, but a bear.

"OOOOOWRRRRRR", said the bear. "What do you think you're doing, sitting on me like that?"

"I thought you were a log," said the man.

"I'm no log. I'm Barnak, ruler of the woods. What do you want in my forest?"

"Oh, I'm sorry to bother you, but I'm quite lost, and I don't know what to do about it."