

## Storytelling Tips

By Ken Bradbury

Let me begin by telling you that I love storytelling. I *believe* in storytelling. I think that the addition of storytelling to many states' contest series has been an extremely valuable idea.

So...What is storytelling? In short, it's something we've done all our lives, our parents were storytellers and there's something about a being a grandparent that seems to automatically qualify you as a teller of stories. However, a person need not reach the age of 70 or 80 to be a storyteller.

I'll direct my comments to the rules of the Illinois Elementary School Association, although the storytelling event can be found in a variety of forms in several states. **The rules no doubt vary a bit, but the essentials remain the same.**

My Grandpa Ralph was missing the two fingers on his right hand....the ones opposite his thumb. As a young boy these smooth, rounded stubs fascinated me, and I'd often crawl up on his lap and say, "Hey Grandpa! Show me those two fingers you ain't got!" He'd smile and hold up his right hand displaying two normal fingers, a thumb, and those two abbreviated digits. Again, there was nothing gory or hideous about them. They simply looked like two tiny fingers without fingernails. Grandpa would then tell us the story about how he was cutting wood on a below-zero Illinois winter day, using one of those buzz saws attached to the flywheel of a John Deere tractor by a long, rubber belt. According to Grandpa, it was so cold that he didn't notice he'd lost his fingers. According to him, he came in for lunch, took off his gloves, and noticed the tips of two fingers fall out onto the floor. Okay, I realize there's a problem with logic here. How did he cut off the fingers without cutting the glove? Author's note: *truth* is not a requirement in good storytelling. *Interest* is, that was a by-golly interesting story! ....and thus great fodder for storytelling.

My mother tells me of the day when I was a baby and she had taken me to the basement where her washing machine was located. According to Mom, I was reclining there in my baby basket and suddenly started smiling, laughing, and pointing toward the pipes in the ceiling. She looked up and saw a very large blacksnake coiled around the pipes, looking down hungrily at the baby below him (assuming the snake was a "he.") Mom panicked and ran up the stairs, momentarily forgetting that she'd left her son in the basement...with the snake. She was faced with the dual fears of snakes and having her baby boy eaten by a snake. My dad owned a John Deere dealership just two blocks away, so she made a panicked call to his shop, screaming something about snakes and babies. Dad sent his head mechanic down to our house to kill the snake, calm the mother, and save the baby. Frankly, I'm glad he did.

Such things are the fodder for good storytelling. **They're interesting, they're fun to tell, and they're true.**

According to the rules of most state organizations, **stories may come from the student's life, tales told by their family, or tales from our own folklore.** And of course the material is not limited to these three areas. The stories may quite literally come from anywhere. I personally prefer stories from a child's family since it will likely be a new tale to me, but if your student chooses instead to tell the story of Paul Bunyon, Casey Jones, the Little Mermaid, or Johnny Appleseed, that is equally acceptable.

## Storytelling

### **So...What's the difference between performing a monologue and telling a story? It's mainly a matter of delivery:**

---A monologue is memorized; a story is paraphrased. It may change a bit from telling to telling.

---A monologue has a few hard and fast rules; storytelling is more pliable.

---In a monologue the speaker often speaks as if he or she is playing another character; a storyteller most often plays himself.

---Monologues are often limited in the amount direct dialogue that may be used; in storytelling there are no such limits.

---A monologue is basically an acting event; a storyteller has a conversation with the audience.

The rules in Illinois and several other states say that the event of storytelling may include audience participation. At least in Illinois, this is not a requirement. After all, some stories simply do not lend themselves to audience response. The old shaman sitting around the campfire or the village chief used audience repetition as a teaching device, but your student need not include audience participation unless it seems appropriate. In fact, I've judged storytellers who asked the audience to respond with certain sounds or phrases and it has seemed very forced and awkward. Let your common sense guide you on this.

As a teacher/speech coach, it's your first job to explore the story possibilities with your students. Encourage them to plumb their memories...the funny things, the exciting events, the dangerous days (that came out well), the family vacations, the embarrassments, and most importantly, those stories that their parents or grandparents have told them over the years. Clay was the first young man I ever worked with in storytelling. He wanted very much to try this new event but couldn't come up with a story that excited him. One night he shared his dilemma with his mother at the supper table. Clay came to me the next day and said, "Man, she just took off and talked all night!" When Clay began to prepare his story, he had a whole pocketful from which to choose. The family is a gold mine for storytellers. Once your young speaker has chosen his or her material, then you can help them "fluff it up," add details, come up with a definite beginning, middle and ending.

**A few final thoughts:** Let me again stress the importance of this event being conversational rather than overtly memorized. The words need not be the same from presentation to presentation. When your class comes back from a holiday or a long weekend and you ask them if they did anything interesting, note the adlib quality with which the students tell their stories. This is what you're shooting for as a storyteller.

Despite Facebook, despite text messaging, despite any sort of medium to carry our stories onward, it's still the story itself that's important. Storytelling just happens to be the medium you're using and despite any advances in technology, it's a form of oral expression that will live as long as we have breath to tell our stories.