



Make the Stories You Tell Your Own

Robert (Max Tell) Stelmach
Freelancer; storyteller
White Rock, British Columbia
Canada

Meeting:

85. Literacy and Reading in co-operation with the Public Libraries and Library Services to Multicultural Populations

Simultaneous Interpretation:

Not available

WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 74TH IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL
10-14 August 2008, Québec, Canada
<http://www.ifla.org/iv/ifla74/index.htm>

Abstracts

Why tell rather than read stories to young people? Reading to children is a valuable tool, but telling stories makes it easier to take words off the page and to turn them into vivid pictures in the minds of young listeners, who will often turn those stories into imaginary movies. By telling stories, you not only encourage eager readers to read more, you also give reluctant readers the tools to begin to enjoy and perhaps love reading. To capture the attention of young listeners and hold it, you must tell a story well, and the first step to telling a story well is making that story your own.

Build on your own experiences as a young reader or listener. As a child, what were your favourite stories? What stories touched your heart or stirred your imagination? Which ones did you want read or want to listen to over and over again? Find these stories. Reread them. If they were family stories, passed down to you orally, search your memory and resurrect them. If you are lucky enough that the teller is still alive, ask her to tell those stories to you again. If necessary, look them up in anthologies. These favourites to your own heart are the first stories you should tell.

Allow your inner child to be reborn. The child who read or listened to these stories is still alive in you. This child may be hidden, even buried, but with caring effort, you will be able to free your inner child, who, in time, will become the true teller of your stories.

As you reread a story you loved as a child, or as you recall it from memory, allow yourself to go back to that time. See the place in which it was read or told. Recall the face of the teller. What did she wear? Think of the sound of her voice. Were there sounds, smells, faces? If you read the story to yourself, take yourself back to that moment and create as clear a mental picture of that experience and your surroundings as possible. Then relive those experiences as you rehearse and later tell your story. Allow yourself to feel the fears and giggle the giggles.

Share stories with others as much as possible. For most of us, it takes practice getting use to standing in front of others to tell a story. For some, the early stages of telling can be frightening. In either case, choose safe listeners to share your stories with. I started with my own children. Now that they have grown up, I tell my stories to my wife. Choose a friend or the children of friends. Whoever you choose, make it someone who is caring and supportive of your process of growth as a storyteller.

Plot out your stories. Particularly when working on a new story (one new to you) or one with a complicated plot line, it is helpful to plot out the story, the main ideas (or beats) of the introduction, the body of the story, and the ending. Plotting out the story will not only help you to visualize its structure and moment to moment progress, it will also help when it comes to memorizing your story.

Many popular fairytales, not only traditional ones but modern ones as well, are built in the form of a triad. There are often three protagonists (main characters) and three main actions that lead to the conclusion. And within each of these three main actions are a series of smaller beats.

For example, in *The Three Little Pigs*, the three pigs are the main characters. In one version, the three main actions of the story focus on two of the pigs escaping from the clutches of the wolf, and the third pig punishing the wolf. When it comes to the number of beats within the main actions, the number increases to 1) along comes a wolf, 2) he asks to be let in the house, 3) his request is refused, 4) he blows the house in, then 5) chases the little pig to the next little pigs' house. However, during the third main action, the story changes at beat 5, when the third little pig who built his house out of brick punishes the wolf for his bad deeds.

In the case of *The Three Bears*, the story is about three bears. The three main ideas revolve around three bowls of porridge, three chairs, and three beds, each with similar beats within.

All the stories you tell will not fit so perfectly into a triad pattern; however, if you can discover the pattern to a particular story you are planning to tell, it will help you both in the memorization of that story and its telling. It will also help your young listeners to better understand that story and to create their own stories in their minds.

Familiarise yourself with the time, the setting, and the characters of the stories you tell. What makes them different and unique from those in other stories? Who is the speaker? Who is the story written for? Go beyond your childhood experience as a reader or listener, but use the

same questions as above (Allow your inner child to be reborn) to create as clear a picture as you can. If time allows, research the times and customs upon which your story is based.

Character voices come easy for some storytellers, not so easy for others. And although character voices help tellers to create clearer pictures in the minds of their listeners, they are not necessary. Many highly successful storytellers do not use character voices at all.

Those wishing to experiment with character voices may do as follows. First think of your natural voice as your narrative or narrator's voice. Listen to your own natural voice. Get use to its pitch, how high or low it is. Now, ask yourself what a giant would sound like? Create a giant's voice, let your voice go lower. A large body goes along with a large voice, so while talking like a giant, think of yourself as having a large or perhaps even a huge body. Think so large that you feel that both your body and your voice fills the room.

Now think of yourself as a tiny mouse. How small is a tiny mouse? Think of yourself as being that small or smaller. Think of a voice that goes with that tiny body. Try out that voice. Now experiment with your three voices, that of the narrator, the giant, and the mouse. Once you feel comfortable with these three, you may wish to go on and create more voices to suit other stories. Be careful, never strain your voice. If you feel any strain in your throat at all, or tension in any part of your body, stop, relax that tension, then try again.

Search out the key words: the real power of a story is in its nouns and verbs; then come the adjectives and adverbs. Learn them well. Creating clear pictures of both people and things and their actions is the key to making a story your own and passing it on to eager listeners.

What is being said between the lines? One of the clearest examples of reading between the lines is in the following dialogue between Little Red Riding Hood and the wolf, when the wolf is in grandma's bed. What is being said between the lines is set off by brackets.

“Grandma, what big eyes you have,” said Little Red Riding Hood. (I'm a little surprised and afraid.)

“Better to see you with, my dear,” said the wolf. (What a tasty meal you'll make.)

Discovering what is being said between the lines will give you the tools to create needed layers to the story to make it that more vivid for both you and your listener.

What is your story trying to say? I am not talking about telling the moral of a story. A story may or may not have a moral. If it does, however, focusing too much on that moral can actually get in the way of telling a good story, can even destroy it. Make yourself aware of what your story is trying to say and its moral, if it has one, but then focus on the story. Let it tell its own story. Told well, a story and its moral will live longer in the minds of listeners, because of the place it has made in the hearts of listeners.

Should you memorize a story? For some, memorization comes easy. For many, however, memorization takes a lot of time and effort. When it comes to poetic stories, there is no choice, memorization is a must. But, when it comes to prose, even modern fairytales, it is acceptable for non-professional tellers to paraphrase, though it is a must that the original author be mentioned.

Stories that are built on a triad structure are easier to paraphrase. For those stories that are not, plot them out. Create sub-titles for the main ideas, and sub-sub-titles for the beats within each main idea. Memorize key phrases if you like, along with key nouns, verb, adjectives, and adverbs. Be concise, stick with your plot outline and the key words, and the story will tell itself.

In conclusion, when making any one story your own, you may wish to work with all or a few of the above suggestions. Either way, take one at a time. If you are a beginner, be gentle with yourself, especially if you are nervous about standing up and speaking in front of an audience, even a small one. Take one step at a time. And try not to work alone. Find others like yourself, those with a love for story and interested in learning more about the craft, others you can share both your problems with and your successes. You can learn far more from each other than you think. If you cannot meet face to face, conference call, or meet on the web. Share your experiences. Help each other, not only to make the stories you tell your own, but also to give them as a gift to your young listeners.