

Storytelling Basics:

How to be a natural on the stage



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PART I: INTRODUCTION

About This Manual

This is the official “beginner’s guide” for you, the aspiring novice storyteller. Although the information presented in this book is useful for storytellers of all levels of expertise, it is designed primarily as an easily accessible source of information to help you get up-to-speed with your more advanced colleagues.

How To Use This Manual

Delve Into The Basics of Storytelling begins with a history of storytelling in general, then shows you:

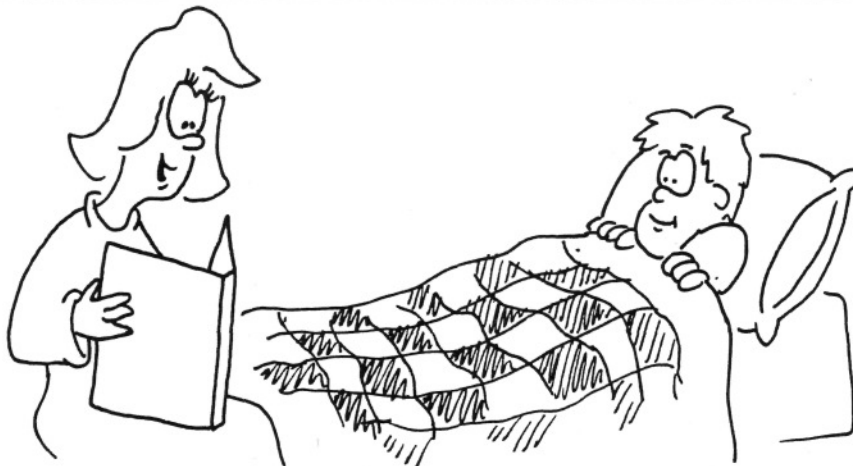
- How to choose a story to tell
- How to practice the story
- How to tell the story in front of an audience
- What opportunities exist in storytelling in your community

Since this manual was written with you in mind, we want you to be able to customize it as you see fit. Feel free to scribble your own notes in the margins, or use a highlighter to mark whatever parts seem most interesting to you.

What Is Storytelling?

As soon as people opened their mouths, storytelling was born. Many people do not realize how old the art of storytelling is as even the earliest cave paintings were most likely pictorial accounts of hunters’ tales told after a successful romp through the forest. The epic poems of the Greeks were originally passed on through oral tradition. Native American storytellers still perpetuate the legends of how mighty heroes did such deeds, or how certain animals acquired their distinguishing characteristics. Parents have a long heritage of telling stories to their children at bedtime.

Noted Australian storyteller, Daryll Bellingham, defined storytelling as “the act of telling a story in an entertaining, impressive, or dramatic way.” Since the first National Storytelling Festival was held in 1973, this art has grown once again in popularity. Storytellers are in relatively high demand at campouts, summer library programs for youth, and at church social activities, to name a few. Today, storytellers are often organized into local or regional clubs, to provide a network of support and to promote the art of storytelling in their communities.



PART II: GETTING STARTED

Selecting A Story To Tell

The first thing you will want to do, naturally, is to choose a story. There are many places to find stories, and many things to consider in making a choice. A good starting place would be at your local library in the children's section. The Internet, also, contains many downloadable on-line stories—any good search engine will bring up an abundance of links for you.



Once you find a reasonably large collection, either on- or off-line, you must decide what flavor you want your story to take. There are more kinds of stories in existence than there are varieties of ice cream. The library contains a wide selection of stories from specific countries and cultures. Perhaps you remember a favorite storybook from childhood—chances are good you can find it at the library. Be sure to give credit where credit is due. If you take your story from a book, be sure to give the book's title and author to your audience.

You may want to consider using a story you've written yourself. It is often easier to learn and improvise on a story if it came from your imagination in the first place.

Three Considerations For Choosing A Story

Once you have a candidate story, there are three basic considerations to keep in mind: the age of your audience, the setting in which you are telling the story, and your overall purpose in telling the story.

Age: What are the main interests of your targeted age group? For example, a story about someone getting a job or about rekindling a long-lost romance may be uninteresting to youngsters, since they generally cannot relate to those kinds of experiences.

Setting: Are you telling the story in a public or a private gathering? Formal or informal? For example, a religious story may be appropriate for the children at the church you attend but may not be appropriate at a public elementary school.

Purpose: Do you want to educate, entertain, provoke thought? If your intent simply is to amuse your audience, then sharing the story of Watson and Crick's discovery of the helical structure of DNA may be less of a match than, say, *The Little Engine That Could*.

In short, age, setting, and purpose are all inseparably linked and you cannot think of one without the others.



The Story Is A Reflection of You

In addition to the three primary considerations listed before, there is another important item to remember: what you represent. Your audiences will judge you by both your behavior and by the stories you tell. Please make sure that the stories you choose do not encourage practices that are not in harmony of what you believe. Usually, this will not be a problem, but we choose to repeat it anyway for emphasis.

Finally, you must LOVE the story you choose to tell. Learn it so well that its characters seem like old friends to you. If you can repeat the story to yourself a dozen times without getting sick of it, that is a fairly good indication that you love the story. If the story's characters are not well developed in the story itself, make up your own little biographies for them. This extra effort will help you tell the story naturally and conversationally because you already know the characters' history and personality. This is one thing you can do to truly make the story "yours," whether you've gleaned it from a book or wrote it yourself.

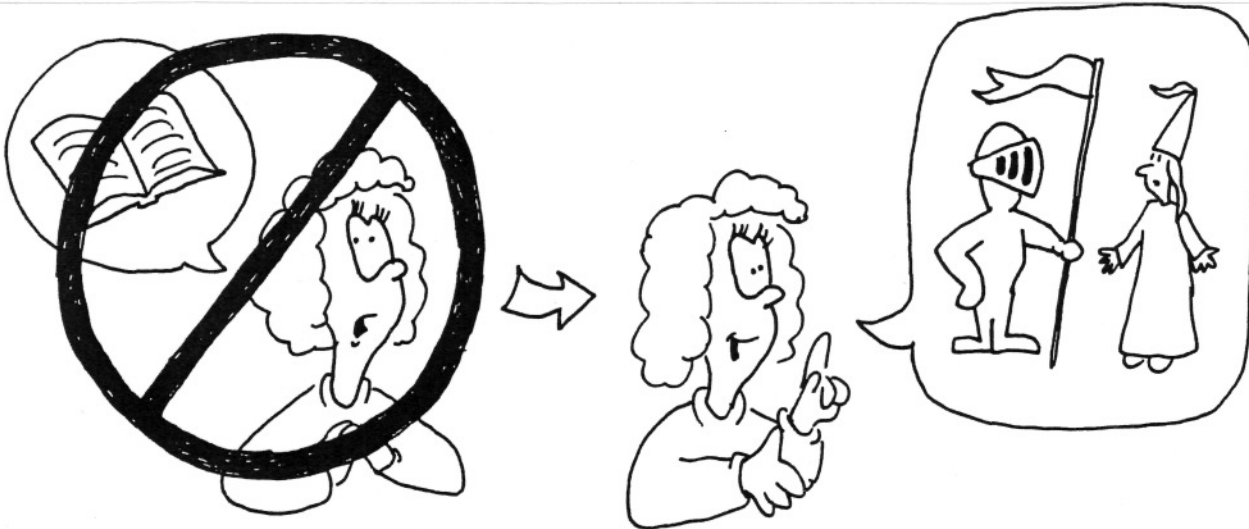


PART III: PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

Know Your Story

Now that you have chosen a story, you will want to work on the actual presentation. Although you should be extremely familiar with the story you tell, do not make the mistake of trying to memorize it, unless there is a part that needs to be quoted exactly. The stress of performance can make even the sharpest of memories dull; it is no fun at all to be up in front of a crowd when your mind goes blank. However, if you immerse yourself thoroughly in the story without memorization, then you are more likely to successfully improvise when you do lose your place.

As you internalize your story, not only will your appreciation for the story grow, but your ability to transmit a love of that story to your audience will also show. When they see that you care for your story by knowing it well, they will also want to know it.



Control Your Voice

The primary instrument for transmitting your story is your voice so use it well. Be animated and enthusiastic. If you are not excited, then your audience will not be excited. A monotonous voice shows them that you haven't practiced very much: your effort is going towards remembering the plot rather than towards communicating effectively.

Often, your story will feature more than one character, and when the plot calls for conversation between two or more characters, you may be tempted to differentiate who is speaking by using such words as "he said" or "she replied." Avoid such phrases whenever possible. These clauses are necessary when you are reading printed text to yourself, but when speaking aloud, they tend to disrupt the flow of the narrative. In general, the intonations of your voice should be sufficient indications of who is speaking.

Develop Your Own Style

Your own style is something you will inevitably develop on your own as you gain experience with storytelling, but here are a few things to consider:



Stand-up or Sit-down? Would you rather stand up as you tell your story, or remain seated? There are advantages to either approach. Standing gives you greater freedom of expression. Your whole body can become part of the story. For example, if the main character sets off on a journey, you too can begin walking in place as a physical demonstration of the story's action. However, sitting down can set a more conversational, relaxed tone for your story. You can still communicate mood with your hands, vocal intonations, and facial expressions; however, your ability to communicate subtle nuances with your whole body will of course be limited. Or perhaps you could alternate between standing and sitting as you tell the story—as long as you don't do it too much. No need to make the audience seasick.

Straight Telling or Dramatic Reading? When one speaks of professional (or really experienced amateur) storytelling, one usually refers to telling a story directly, without reading it from a book. This is not the only option. An audience can also derive much benefit simply from hearing you read a good story aloud. Children especially enjoy this, since almost every children's book includes colorful illustrations to look at after every page. Remember that the book is a storytelling tool and not a crutch. Read the story through several times before telling it to an audience so you don't have to read it verbatim. Do not slip into monotone just because you are reading from a book. Your enthusiasm and expressiveness is equally important to your success, whether you are reading the story or telling it directly.



Humorous or Serious? Naturally, the story itself will dictate whether you opt for a primarily humorous or serious tone. Nevertheless, even a serious story can be enhanced with an occasional moment of lightheartedness. Likewise, a story of nonstop silliness can quickly wear the listener out, unless it is balanced by at least a tinge of solemnity. Use your own personality to determine how much humor to use, and when. Find a balance between the two extremes.



Other areas you may wish to develop (but which we will not treat in-depth here) include the use of:

Dramatic pauses: stopping the narrative for a few seconds to heighten the suspense.

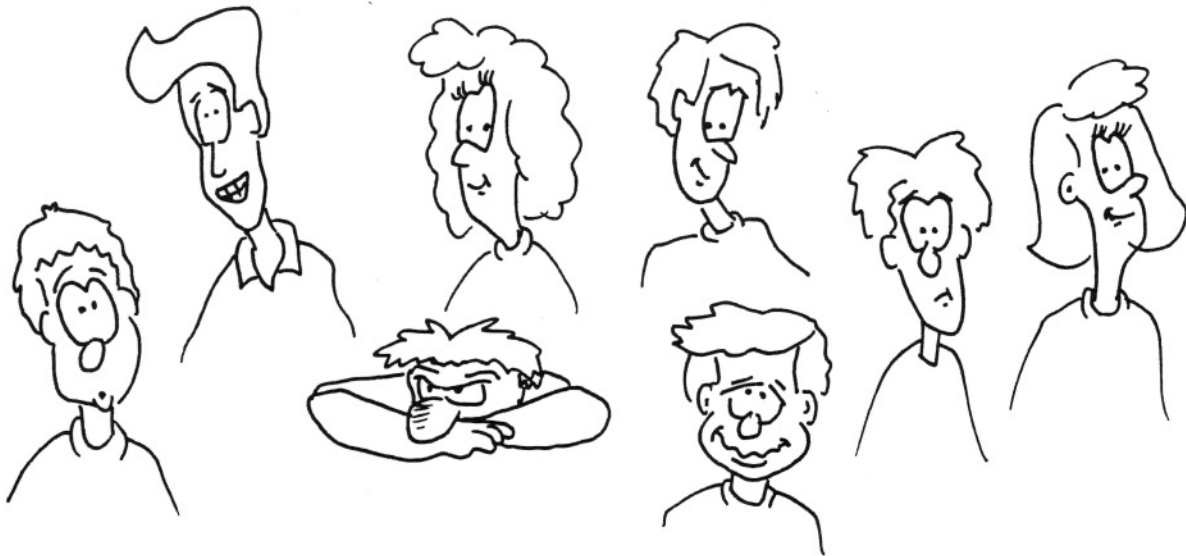
Verbal sound effects: ROAR! WHOOSH! CRUNCH! POP!—if you need advice in this area, talk to any eight-year-old.

Poetry: enhancing the story by giving your words a consistent rhythm: Dr. Seuss was especially good at this.

Let your personality dictate what style you develop for yourself, and do not be afraid to experiment. Even if you mess up, there will always be another audience to which you can improve upon your past mistakes.

Feel Your Audience

Eye contact is important. If you look your audience in the eyes, you will better judge their reaction to what you are telling them. Your audience's eyes can give you automatic nonverbal feedback such as "This is very interesting; I can't wait to hear what comes next," or "I'm bored out to my skull; I wonder what I'll have for lunch." You can thereby either emphasize a certain part of the story that your audience seems to particularly enjoy, or shorten it if their eyes tell you the story is dragging.



Knowing the interests and expectations of your audience can allow you to tailor fit the story just for them. For example, if you are telling a story for a Boy Scout troop, and the story provides some chills and frights then you can add about a urban legend of your area. Such a reference would be unnecessary if you were telling the same story to a group of second-graders—at that age they will likely respond to simply the presence of a ghost and do not need the extra details to create a vivid picture in their minds.

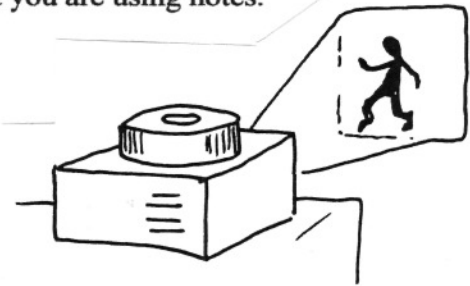
Consider Using Multimedia

Disclaimer: The options and implications of multimedia storytelling are vast and complex. A full treatment of the subject is easily beyond the scope of this manual. Our intention here is to provide a few ideas to pique your interest in this ever-growing field. Check out the annotated bibliography at the end of this manual for resources on using multimedia in your storytelling.



Perhaps the most obvious way to include multimedia in your stories is to use illustrations. This is most often done in dramatic readings, when you show the pictures in the book to the audience after each page. This is not the only way you could include visuals in your story. Have an artistic flair? You could draw a series of illustrations to accompany your story. If you'd like, you could even write notes to yourself on the back of the illustrations to prompt you along in the story—as long as you do not make it obvious to your audience that you are using notes.

Another twist to the “illustrations” motif would be to prepare a slide show of photographs or a computerized presentation corresponding to parts of the story, much like hand-drawn pictures. Showing them as you tell your story can be an effective way to stir your audience’s imaginations.



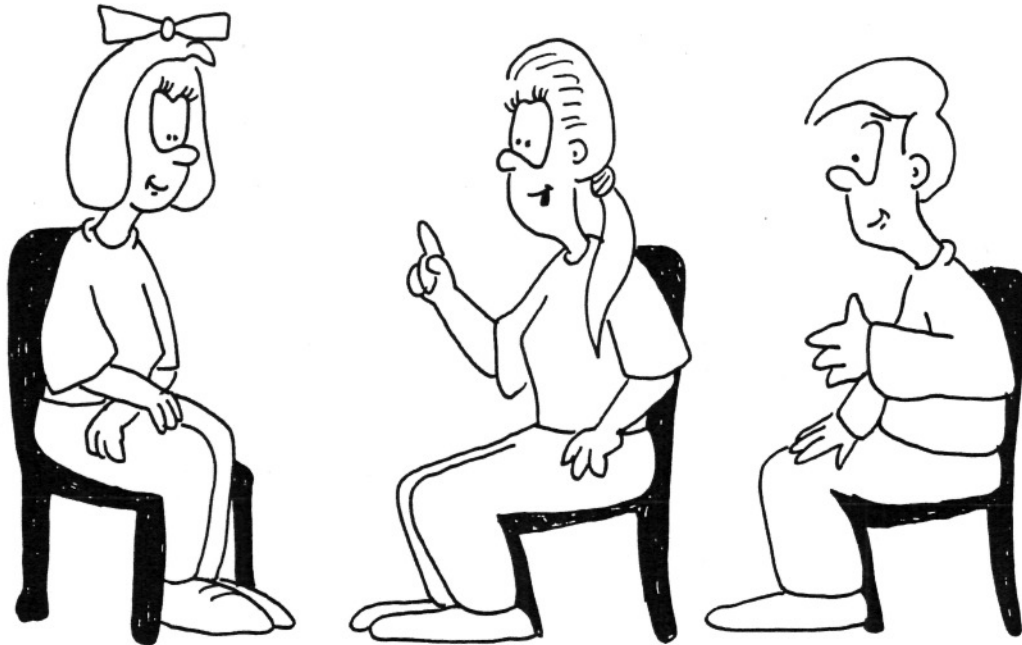
Visual stimulation is not the only way to enhance your storytelling. You may want to consider playing a bit of music softly in the background as you tell the story. Music is the great language of pure emotion. The difference between ordinary storytellers and extraordinary storytellers is their ability to connect emotionally with their listeners. Music can help you accomplish this experience.

Although not multimedia in the traditional sense of the word, letting your audience participate in your storytelling adds another dimension to the experience. If you are telling a melodrama, for instance, encouraging the audience to “boo,” “hiss,” and “cheer” at appropriate moments lets your listeners feel a part of the action. A common form of audience participation is to have the audience recite a commonly repeated line of the story along with you. For example, in the Asian folktale *The Freedom Birds*, the phrase “Nya nya nya nya nyaaaa” occurs about a dozen times. The audience almost always chants this along with the storyteller, thereby drawing them into the story itself. As effective as audience participation is, use it sparingly. Sometimes, all the extra “work” involved, especially if they were expecting simple passive entertainment, can annoy the audience.

How And Where To Practice

Practice telling your story as often as you can before you go before a “real” audience. These need not be “formal” practices—you can recite the story to yourself as you walk along the sidewalk, ride your bike, or drive in a car. A commonly used approach is to sit on your bed and rehearse your story to the wall or to a pet. Telling the story in front of a mirror is even better; you can perfect your facial expressions and gestures. You may want to record yourself telling the story onto audio or videotape and then pretend to be your own audience. If you feel comfortable doing so, you may also want to perform for your friends. Depending on how honest they are, you can get some very useful feedback from them.

In addition to all these “on your own” practice-ideas, you have an excellent chance to practice your stories with your family. When you practice in front of your family, you have the benefit of receiving candid feedback. They are sources of invaluable wisdom.



PART IV: THE BIG DAY OF PERFORMANCE

No Longer A Rehearsal

You've been practicing your story for weeks now (hopefully) and the day to perform your story is now upon you. Perhaps you are visiting an elementary school. Perhaps you are performing at a Scout event. Perhaps you are participating in a large-scale community activity. If this is your first (or second, or third. . .) time telling a story in front of a live audience, it is only natural to be nervous, even frightened.

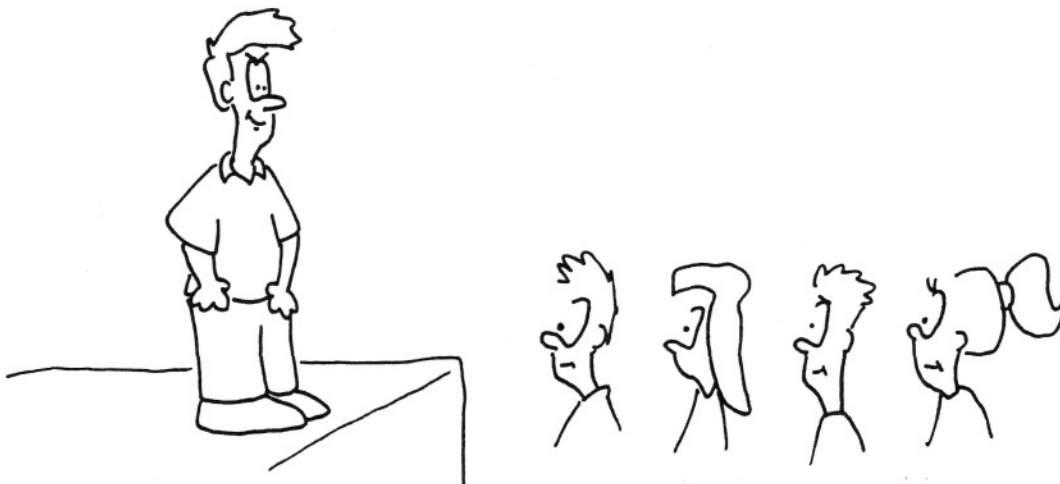
Handle Fear Constructively

A few minutes before telling your story, look over an outline of the story, then try doing some relaxation exercises. Take deep breaths. Bend over to touch your toes, and then raise yourself up again slowly. Sometimes the extra adrenaline in your body can make your mouth go dry as you present your story, so drink some water before you begin. Most importantly, do not be afraid to draw upon the support of family and friends to help overcome your fear. They are keenly interested in helping you develop your talents.

Just Do It

Luckily, you have little left to learn about telling your story. All the strategies discussed in **PART III** apply not only to practice, but to performance as well. Now you simply need to do it.

Someone, known as an emcee, should greet the audience by sharing a little about you and whom you represent. When it's your turn to go, you may want to briefly introduce your story (tell who wrote the story, what country the story came from, and if it is based on any historical incidents) before telling it. Then just go right into it!



Go Easy On Yourself

As you tell the story, and afterwards as you contemplate your performance, you will probably notice things that you wish you had done differently. Make note of them, and incorporate those changes into your future practices so that they will become part of your next telling. Never let your inexperience bog you down. Remember one fundamental rule of human relations: people are easily amused. What you consider to be a major flub may have gone unnoticed by the majority of your listeners.



Furthermore, if you are performing for elementary schools students, chances are good that their classes are being interrupted to listen to you—so no matter what you do, the kids will be grateful that you have broken up the monotony of their day. This does not mean that you should not strive to do your best when telling a story; it simply means that you should not take yourself too seriously.

PART V: BEYOND THE BASICS—WHAT'S NEXT?

Storytelling In Your Future Communities

As unlikely as it may seem sometimes, you will reach beyond the basics of storytelling and can turn to more advanced practices. Hopefully, you will be inspired to continue your storytelling habits wherever you live. There is a myriad of opportunities out there, both for professional and amateur storytellers. A full treatment of the topic would be beyond our present purposes; refer to the annotated bibliography for a list of more complete resources on this subject.

Public libraries are always looking for storytellers to come speak to children. Hearing stories aloud helps children develop their imaginations, and encourages them to read on their own.



Informal storytelling opportunities may abound in churches or campouts. If you become a youth leader, you can integrate instructional stories in enjoyable way when showing skills necessary in life. Stories are also ways of illustrating moral teachings. Many rowdy children have been subdued once the teacher announces that a story is forthcoming. You can find ideal teaching moments around the dying embers of an evening campfire. As you tell stories to youth, remember that your audience is very impressionable. Do not succumb to the temptation to pass on urban legends based on little or no documented historical evidence.

You may want to join a storytelling guild in your area. Local storytelling clubs are excellent resources for learning storytelling strategies and storytelling opportunities specific to your community.

Most importantly, even if you never go into public storytelling, you can create a heritage of storytelling within the walls of your own home. Children will always remember that their father or mother took the time to share their love of literature and imagination with them. The bond created with your children through storytelling will be worth more than any material things you might buy for them.

PART VI: CONCLUSION

You are on your way now to becoming a fine amateur storyteller. As you continue to practice and share your talents, you will continue to learn more and more about storytelling, and you will find increased opportunities. Do not hesitate to call upon your family and friends for advice and feedback. Remember, though, your greatest learning will come from yourself. You will be amazed at what you already know. That is why you are needed. You can fill the unwritten chapters in the storybook of your life.



ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

This handbook was intended to give you a first look at the art of storytelling. There are many resources available that go into much greater detail on every aspect of storytelling. Below are books and on-line resources that impressed us. As you grow in experience with storytelling, you will doubtlessly find other books that you will want to add to this list. Feel free to mark up this page as much as you want and add additional pages as necessary. This is your book, after all.

Association for Library Service to Children. The Newberry and Caldecott Awards: A Guide to the Medal and Honor Books. Chicago: American Library Association, 1993.

If you're looking for either an exceptionally well-written or an exceptionally well-illustrated children's book, this is the authoritative place to find it. This resource lists the titles and plot summaries of all Newberry and Caldecott winners and honorees up till 1993.

Bauer, Caroline Feller. Handbook for Storytellers. Chicago: American Library Association, 1977.

A down-to-earth, "how-to" reference. It's loaded with practical ideas to make your storytelling more enriching. Of special interest, this book contains a 100-page section on multimedia storytelling—the most thorough treatment yet seen.

Briggs, Katharine. A Dictionary of Fairies. London, England: Allen Lane, 1976.

Fascinating! Not only does this book contain hundreds of story snippets about every European mythical creature of lore, but the historical backgrounds and illustrations are enough to inspire you to make up your own fairy tales, as well.

Freeman, Judy. Books Kids Will Sit Still For. 2nd ed. New York: R.R. Bowker, 1990. *Thick, in-depth reference about almost everything. This book has it all. The excellent table of contents lets you quickly find exactly what you want to know.*

Lamme, Linda Leonard, Suzanne Lowell Krogh, and Kathy A. Yachmetz. Literature-Based Moral Education. Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1992.

A good reference for helping you to instill values into kids through storytelling. The chapters are devoted to different themes such as self-esteem, responsibility, sharing, and so forth.

Lima, Carolyn W., and John A. Lima. A to Zoo: Subject Access to Children's Picture Books. New Providence, New Jersey: R.R. Bowker, 1998.

You can find almost any book you want in this enormous bibliography, indexed by subject, title, author, and illustrator. All you need is a vague notion of what you want and this reference can help you find it. There are many editions of this book.

MacDonald, Margaret Read. The Storyteller's Start-Up Book. Little Rock: August House, Inc.: 1993.

This is a good "next step" reference which covers much of the same material as in this booklet but goes in more detail. It also includes twelve ready-to-tell stories.

McWilliams, Barry. "Effective storytelling in Church settings." 1996. Online posting.
(30 March 1999).

Highly informative site about religious storytelling. The information presented herein is applicable to all Christian denominations.

National Storytelling Association. Homepage. Online posting.
(22 March 1999).

The official site of the National Storytelling Association. Contains links to information about storytelling festivals and regional clubs.

Russell, William F. Classic Myths to Read Aloud. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1989.

Looking for a mythical tale? This book contains re-tellings of most of the great myths of the ancient world, complete with pronunciation guides for those tricky-to-say Greek names. Estimated "reading times" are given for each story.

Sierra, Judy. Storytellers' Research Guide: Folktales, Myths, and Legends. Eugene, Oregon: Folkprint, 1996.

This book presents, in more detail than you ever thought imaginable, how and where to find stories to tell.

Storytelling Investigations

Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How

Who am I as a Storyteller?

What kinds of stories do I love?

Where have I told stories? **Where** would I like to tell stories?

When have I told stories? **When** do I plan on telling stories?

Why do I tell stories?

How am I different from any other storyteller? **How** do I share stories?

Circle the one(s) that apply to you. If you have filled out this form before, you may see that your answers may change with time.

Style

Dramatic, Conversational, Solemn, Didactic, Animated, Intense, Bold, Peaceful, Humorous, Serious, Natural, Formal, Informal, Stand-up, Sit-down

Use

Props, Musical Instruments, Accents, Juggling, Gestures, Expressions, Voices, Puppets, Song, Poetry, Rhyme, Dance, Multimedia, Participation, Chants

Story Types

Folktales, Fairy Tales, Historical, Scary/Ghost Stories, Jump Stories, Personal, Original, Tall Tales, Trickster Tales, Healing Stories, Creation or Natural Stories, Pourquoi Stories, Quest Stories, Cowboy Poetry, Impromptu, Fantasy, Spiritual, Wisdom Tales, Fables, Myths, Legends

Audience Types

Preschoolers
Elementary kids
Middle schoolers
Youth
Teenagers
High schoolers
College students
Higher education students
Young families
Mature families
Young adults
Middle-aged adults
Older adults
Senior citizens
Women
Men
Children
Toddlers

Places/Groups

Schools (Elementary, Middle & High)
Colleges/Universities
Libraries
Museums
Work/Corporations
Family Reunions
Festivals (Storytelling, Music, etc.)
Prisons
Churches
Hospitals
Nursing Homes
Day Care Centers
Scouts (Cub, Boy & Girl)
Associations
Women Groups
Men Groups
Clubs/Guilds
Shelters