

A Beginner's Guide to Storytelling



How do storytellers get started? Where do they find their stories? How do they learn them? How do they make stories sparkle? Gathered together in one volume, some of the finest storytellers in the country guide you through the basics. You'll learn how to

Choose stories

Develop stories

Find a good place to start

Put a program together

Set the stage for storytelling

Cope with stage fright

Deal with a microphone

Take care of your voice

Mind your storytelling manners

Plus an extensive, annotated bibliography

Notice

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National Storytelling Network
101 Courthouse Square
Jonesborough, TN 37659
Toll Free: 1-800-525-4444
Direct: 423-913-8201
E-mail: nsn@storynet.org
Website: www.storynet.org

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO STORYTELLING

NATIONAL STORYTELLING PRESS

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TAMING THE WILD BEAST: FAMILY AUDIENCES AND SURVIVAL

by Bill Harley

About sixteen years ago, I made the decision to focus more of my work on family audiences. The switch was not easy. Working with broad age spans requires a flexibility and ability to work on several different levels, which is challenging even for seasoned performers. Some of my early shows were nightmares. Some still are. It took me a long time to develop a sense of balance - to learn how to speak to adults while still honoring children, and vice versa. It took me a long time to learn what I needed to ask for in order for the show to be a good one. I'm still learning.

The rewards for working with multi-age groups are large. As a performer, one of my central goals through my entire career has been to build community. A community usually involves someone who is different from you. A multi-age audience fits the bill.

Everyone there has different needs. The ten-year-old needs something of relevance. So does the four-year-old. So does the forty-year-old. But they're all in different places. The four-year-old needs some physical activity and repetition. The ten-year-old needs some goofiness, and thumbing of nose at authority. The forty-year-old needs some thoughtfulness, and knowledge that their four- and ten-year-old are enjoying the experience. The four- and ten-year-old desperately want their parent to like the thing they like. They all need to be reminded of things they hold in common. When I can bring all these elements to my performance, the group as a whole shares something, and leaves not quite the same.

Here are some things I've learned (and relearned) about multi-age shows:

Environment

There is nothing more important than making sure that the performance environment is conducive to your work. You have to demand certain things.

- The audience has to be able to hear you. If you don't have your own portable system, you should get one. Keep it in your car – it will save your life. Or get very good at telling people exactly what you need. If they are having trouble getting the sound to work, be willing to wait until they have it figured out. They will not remember that the sound system didn't work – they will remember that you couldn't hold the audience.
- The audience should be able to see you. This requires that the sight lines are okay – make sure people in the back can see you. If it is a big place, you need to have some lights on you. Generally, it helps if the lights are brighter where you are than where everyone else is. I don't have a hard and fast rule about lighting the audience. Sometimes it seems to work, sometimes I think it's better off dark. Having the house dimmed at least a little tends to cut down on the distraction of movement in the audience, which will happen when there are very young kids.

Carry with you the idea that the performance space is your home – a place the audience is being welcomed into. There should be a feeling of specialness about the space. When lights are down and the stage is lit, it adds to the excitement for kids. It still works for me.

- Don't let there be too large a physical space between you and the audience. There is an inverse, exponential relationship between the distance between you and the first row of people and how easy it is to get your audience involved. If you perform in one of those dumb high school auditoriums that has forty yards between you and the first permanent row of seats, get them to put folding chairs in between. Which leads to:

- Do not, do not, do not allow four-year-olds to sit at your feet and forty-year-olds to sit in the back. That is a cute idea, and cute ideas are almost always very stupid. Is this a family show? Then have the families sit together. Let the parents be the disciplinarians, and let families enjoy each other's company during the show. I almost always refuse to perform if there are sixty kids in the front and a bunch of parents in the back. It is the single most common reason for a bad show. You may copy this page and bring it with you to show the sponsor. I give my permission – not that I count for all that much.
- Get rid of distractions – listen when you go into the space. Is there a blower on? Get the custodian to turn it off. Is there a spotlight focused far stage left? Get them to turn it off. Did they set you up next to the Balboni Family Fireworks display at the outdoor festival? Or Santa? Tell them you need a quieter place or you can't work.
- Ask that someone else be in charge of monitoring the hall. Sometimes you have to address outrageous behavior, but it's better to put someone else in charge of being the bad cop and impress upon them how important their job is.

As far as environment goes, there are two things to keep in mind: a) Tell them early what you need, when you first talk. Send a list. When you get there, it's usually too late, and b) arrive early so you can do some damage control.

Remember "But we've always done it this way" is not a reasonable answer. Changing the environment changes the rules, and you will be more in charge. We should change the rules all the time.

Material

Finding the right material for a family audience is hard. Even when you find the material, it can take dozens of times performing it to learn how to use it so it reaches everyone. Here are some rules of thumb to keep in mind.

- Pay attention to each age group. All ages will tolerate something not aimed at them if they know that someone

else is truly being entertained and the performer is going to get back to them eventually. I don't mind taking a digression in a story to aim a joke at the adults as long as it's not too long, and it's not patronizing or dishonoring children. Kids will wait while you direct a line to adults; adults will wait while you do something completely silly. And remember kids learn through context and inference more than they do through direct instruction – if you use “abomination” in a story more than once, the kids will figure it out, or ask the parent next to them (if you've insisted the parent be there). Kids love the word “abomination.”

- Vary content and style. I am committed to using music in my performance because I think people use a different part of their brain with music than with spoken story. Music is one option, but there are many ways to tell a story. Whether it's a string story, or something in verse, or a participation story, it helps to mix approaches. Of course, this is just good advice generally, but it's especially true for family audiences.
- Be aware of the lowest common denominator. I suspect that most ships in the family performance world are wrecked upon the rocks of three- and four-year-olds. They always come, because it's not fair to leave them at home with a baby-sitter and bring just the ten-year-old. They will determine how long the show goes. If they are not served, by giving them a simple line that they can repeat, or a story that is very closely related to their lives, or a physical action they can do, they will be in the aisles, not paying attention to you. Arrrrrrgh! It's the way it works, and this is where you can get into trouble by not being flexible. You can go out on the sea of story for four or five minutes at a time, but you have to come back and give them something, or you'll be sorry. If you hate that, family audiences aren't for you. This is not true if the audience goes to about seventy percent or more adult – then all the rules change – but it is true for anything below it. Find out how to add material for the older kids and adults to the songs and stories that are especially aimed at young ones. The real story of the

five little ducks! Repetition for the little ones, sibling rivalry and fratricide for the nine-year-olds, and the ironical view of the duck mother for the adults.

The Art of Performing

In addition to material and environment, there is the actual art of performing – establishing a relationship with the audience. Developing that relationship is an art form, and it requires relaxation and presence.

- Learn to put up with a little white noise. There will be some kids in the aisle. Some baby will cry out. Some wise guy nine-year-old will make a comment when it's quiet. Roll with the punches. Stay focused in your performance. And learn to decide when those distractions have become part of the performance. When the four-year-olds are charging the stage, or the baby is still crying after five minutes, that's when you have to address them. You can do it honestly and openly if you're direct, lighthearted, and kind.

One of my favorite stories about performance is being hit twice by two nine-year-olds with spitballs in front of five hundred people. Nobody else noticed. They loaded up a third time. I tried to shake my head at them, but they paid no attention. I was very tired, and didn't want to be hit again. I stopped mid-sentence and said, “Don't you dare shoot those spitballs.” The audience gasped, the culprits gagged, and I went right back into the story like nothing had happened. It was great. I bet they still remember it.

Usually, something a little less direct suffices. (“Suddenly, the king heard a baby cry in the distance...”)

- Know when to get off. More is not better, even when it feels like it. I aim for an hour. Sometimes I quit right then – if things are going well, I might go an extra ten minutes. Leave them wanting more. This is very important. Less is okay, as long as you're clear with the presenter about what they can expect. At the forty-minute point in the show, I begin the race for the curtain and tend to incorporate more pieces that require participation. I try to end up with everyone doing something together.



CARING FOR YOUR INSTRUMENT: THE VOICE

by Bonnie Greenberg

Your voice is part of a larger system – your whole body – that requires careful maintenance to perform at its best. Remember: your voice is your instrument. The more you care for it, the better it will sound. Think of yourself as being in training. Like most athletes, you want to keep yourself tuned up for peak performance.

Your Body

The body responds well to getting plenty of rest, good nourishment, lots of water (eight glasses a day if possible), and proper attire (neck scarves and earmuffs in cold climates in winter).

Exercise regularly to improve breath control and overall body tone.

Learn relaxation exercises so that you can use them for warm-ups and general stress reduction at any time. Invest in a good relaxation tape.

Eat nourishing foods. On performance days, don't drink whole milk or eat dairy products as they can cause mucus to form near your vocal folds. Check herbal remedies for their effect on vocal folds. Don't smoke, and avoid secondhand smoke.

Avoid caffeine and alcohol. Caffeine is dehydrating, and both caffeine and alcohol can activate gastro-esophageal reflux disease (GERD). Avoid eating foods that activate GERD.

Avoid mentholated drops or medicines, as they can dry out your vocal folds. If you must take antihistamines, increase your water intake to compensate for dryness.

Keep your drinks at room temperature: not too hot and not iced.

Your Vocal Mechanism

Your vocal cords are tiny muscles residing in the larynx. They aren't much bigger than the nail bed on the pinky finger of your hand. If they get inflamed, it can wreak havoc with their ability to produce a clear tone. Inflamed, enlarged, mucus-covered cords sound like piano strings with cotton wrapped around them, or worse. If you have GERD, your vocal cords could become engorged, and callous-like nodules could form. All of that would cause a different voice quality – hoarseness, for example.

Avoid abusing your vocal mechanism: don't cough excessively, yell, scream, or talk at the end of your exhalation. Breathing at regular intervals avoids straining the vocal cords.

Don't use your voice for extended periods of time without a rest. Even the best cared-for vocal mechanism will weaken with fatigue and overuse. Then you will be prone to hoarseness or vocal nodules. Take frequent voice breaks throughout the day.

Use diaphragmatic breathing and projection of the voice to increase volume. Don't strain the tiny muscles in and around the vocal mechanism. Use amplification if you will be in large spaces with poor acoustics.

Know your material well. This will help you avoid stress and tension before performances.

Use relaxation warm-ups and gentle vocalizations with an open throat. You can achieve an open throat and better resonance by yawning deeply and feeling the back of your throat open and extended.

When Things Go Wrong and You Wake Up Hoarse

Rest and drink plenty of fluids.

Bundle up before going outside in cold or damp weather.

Give your voice vocal rest. This means *no* talking. Not even a whisper (which is actually worse than talking, because it puts more strain on your vocal cords). If you must speak, try speaking in a lower or higher pitch. Your best recourse is vocal rest.

Drink soothing liquids: tea with honey or slippery elm.

Suck non-mentholated cough drops or hard candy.

If you are still hoarse after one week, see a doctor to rule out strep throat.

Have some chicken soup. It can't hurt.

A Short Warm-up Routine

You can do this daily and before performing.

Reach up high, gently lower your body towards your toes, then gradually raise your body one vertebra at a time. Do this two or three times.

Sit comfortably in a quiet place, feet planted firmly about ten inches apart. Breathe deeply five times, lengthening each exhalation just a little bit. To avoid dizziness, always make the exhalation longer than the inhalation.

Gently bend your neck, breathing out as you relax your head in each of four directions. Don't roll your head. Rolling your head can be harmful to your vertebrae.

Lift your shoulders up to your ears, hold for five seconds, release.

As you exhale, imagine a lovely wave traveling downward through your body from the tip of the topmost hair on your head to the bottom of your feet, through imaginary roots down into the ground. Feel your breath and pulse slowing down.

Yawn. Open your throat and practice reciting the first part of your story in an overly open throat manner. Switch to a tight throat. Switch to optimum open throat. Feel all the muscles around your vocal folds open. Yawn several times. Repeat this exercise again.

Practice counting on one breath while enunciating each sound precisely in an overly exaggerated manner. Keep your body in a relaxed state at all times.

Use acupuncture-type hand massage, especially between your thumb and forefinger and in your palms. Relaxation is a key component of producing a good voice. Exercises that relax the body also relax the area surrounding the vocal mechanism as well. The tiny musculature associated with the production of voice is very vulnerable to tension and stress.

Practice the last line of your story in an open throat, relaxed mode. Practice the first line of your story the same way.

Smile. Go on stage. Take in your audience with your eyes. Tell your story. You're ready!



EET! I HAVE TO USE A MICROPHONE

by Katy Rydell

Don't panic. The microphone is your friend. Repeat: Friend. It's there to help bridge the distance between you and your listeners.

Try to find out in advance what kind of microphone you'll be using. Clip-on mikes are terrific because they let you move freely, but you might want to take a minute to think about what you're going to wear. Lightweight, gossamer skirts that can be dragged down by a heavy battery pack until they lie in a twisted clump around your ankles are probably not a good idea. Something with a belt might be better.

If you use a standing mike, it will restrict your ability to move around the stage. A hand-held mike will restrict the use of one hand. Be prepared. Practice at home. Practice standing in one place while you tell your story. Or, for a hand-held mike, plug an extension cord into the wall, hold the plug in one hand, and practice walking around like that, speaking into the plug. It will give you an idea of what it's like to move about with a cord dangling around your feet. You'll also have the chance to practice your gestures using only one hand.

How far does your mouth have to be from the microphone? There's only one way to tell. Show up early enough so you can do a mike check.

Adjust the height of the microphone so it's comfortable for you.

Sometimes microphones emit a high-pitched whining sound that can drive you and your audience crazy. It's called feedback. It happens when the microphone is placed in front of the

EET! I HAVE TO USE A MICROPHONE

speakers and the signal your voice sends into the microphone is duplicated by the signal bouncing back from the speakers to the mike in an ongoing loop. What should you do if that happens? You may need to move the microphone back. You may need to turn the speakers slightly away from the microphone. Experiment with what works. This is one more reason to show up early enough to do a mike check.

Don't blow into microphones; they don't like the moisture in your breath.

While you're learning how to adjust the height of your microphone, locate your microphone's on/off switch. Every mike has one. Learn how to use it. If you're wearing a clip-on mike, remove it, or at least turn it off, before you leave at intermission and go to the rest room. Otherwise the audience will have a treat neither you nor they bargained for.

Like all friends, microphones get more comfortable the longer you're with them. Learn where you need to stand, where you need to put your mouth, how loud you need to speak, and you'll be fine. Even more important, your audience will be happy. They'll be able to hear you.



STORYTELLING ETIQUETTE

*Compiled by Barbara Griffin,
Olga Loya, Sandra MacLees,
Nancy Schimmel, Harlynn
Geisler, and Kathleen Zundell*

Stories are to share and tell. While we encourage the art of sharing stories, we also want to encourage respect in our community. You deserve respect. Respect other tellers.

A storyteller's personal, family, and original stories are her/his copyrighted property. It is unethical and illegal to tell another person's original, personal, and family stories without the permission of the author/storyteller.

Folklore and folktales are owned by the public, but a specific version told by an individual teller or found in a collection is the teller's or author's copyrighted property. If you like a folktale a storyteller has told, ask that teller for a reference of where it can be found. Research the story by finding other versions, and then tell it your way.

Published literary tales and poetry are copyrighted material. They may be told at informal story swaps, but when you tell another's story in a paid professional setting, you need to request the publisher's/author's permission. You need to research copyright law. When telling anywhere, it is common courtesy to credit the source of your story. Pass stories, share stories, and encourage respect within the storytelling community.

Please feel free to copy this etiquette statement and pass it out or read it at storytelling events.



MY STORY, YOUR STORY, WHOSE STORY?

by Olga Loya

My story, your story, whose story? The question of who owns what story has been an issue and a struggle in the storytelling community for many years. I belong to a group of storytelling women who have been meeting for at least fifteen years. (We can't quite remember how long.) This subject first came up over ten years ago. How should we handle the problem when we learn that other people are telling our stories? From our discussions, we sat down and wrote that simple statement of Storytelling Etiquette. I think we wrote it more to clarify the issues for ourselves than for any other reason. Then Harlynn Geisler sent the statement to NAPPS (now the NSN) and the Storytelling Etiquette statement took on a life of its own. Now it is everywhere.

Yet, although most people agree with the statement, many people still use other people's stories without permission.

I haven't had the experience of actually hearing someone tell one of my personal stories or my version of a folktale. But I have had friends tell me that they have heard other people tell one of my stories. When I hear that, I always feel so strange. Should I be so possessive of my story? Darn right I should feel that way! I work hard on my stories. It's my blood, my sweat, and my life that go into my stories.

When people ask me about my version of a folktale, I always refer them to sources and suggest that they find a way to make the story their own. I also ask them to give me credit if they are doing a story from my book. Credit is important. It is a way of showing respect for the originator of the story and for the art of storytelling.

One of the worst things that a storyteller can do is to tell someone else's story in the first person, as if it were their own experience. There is a wonderful exchange of trust between the teller and the listener. That trust is destroyed when the storyteller lies to the listener. And make no mistake; it is a lie when a teller tries to pass off someone else's story as his or her own. It is important for us to tell our own stories because that is how we touch each other in the deepest way. When someone breaks that trust, the listener is not going to be so willing to be carried away by a story again.

I think that people tell other people's stories either because of naiveté or laziness. The naïve ones think "It's everybody's story," or "It's a compliment to the teller if I tell his or her story." The lazy ones don't want to pay their dues. It is much easier for them to tell someone else's story. Then they don't have to do the research and the thinking about the story and the constant messing with it until it is just right. They are in a hurry to go out and be a "storyteller" and make money. What they don't realize is that there is an amazing reward to putting your own story together, to shaping the story into your style and with your own heart. If new tellers just take other people's material, they will never have that sense of triumph and joy in telling their own stories.

In essence, this is all about respect. Respect for the story. Respect for other tellers. Respect for the audience. Respect for ourselves. I think we storytellers need to stop being so polite. There is a general belief that stories belong to everyone. Yes, they do, but not the original stories, and not the folk tale a storyteller has worked very hard on, seeking just the right tone for a character and for the story. When we hear someone telling someone else's story we need to go up to the performer and make it clear that we know it is not their story. It doesn't have to be a hostile interaction. Maybe it could be, "You know, I thought that was so-and-so's story. I don't think I heard you give credit." We need to stand up and protect our stories, our fellow tellers and ourselves.



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT COPYRIGHT LAW

by Aaron Shepard

Here are the basics for work originally published in the U.S., for anytime up through the year 2018.

1964 or after

Anything with a copyright date in this period is still protected.

1923 to 1963

Anything copyrighted in this period may still be protected, depending on whether the copyright was ever renewed. The only way to find out is to conduct a copyright search. (Get the Copyright Office's Circular 22, "How to Investigate the Copyright Status of a Work.")

1922 or before

Anything published in this period is definitely out of copyright. Fair game. Free and clear.

Many people believe that folktales cannot be copyrighted. It's true that the tale itself is in the public domain, but how the tale is retold belongs to the author. For instance, the author is likely to have named a character, created a dialogue, or modified a plot incident. Original elements such as these are covered by copyright, and for as long as the story is legally protected, you're not supposed to use them.

To avoid problems, work with at least one version that is no longer in copyright and that you can use as your primary source. If that's not possible, you might work with several distinct versions – retellings from different firsthand sources – in order to reconstruct the tale in generic form.

Excerpted from *The Business of Writing for Children* by Aaron Shepard, Shepard Publications, 1999. Also available on Aaron's website, www.aaronsherp.com/storytelling



THE ABC'S OF STORYTELLING

by Yvonne Young

- a** Allow yourself to tell a story you don't think is perfect yet.
Appear to be calm and confident.
Ask for advice when you need it.
- b** Begin with one story.
Believe in yourself and your story.
Breathe deeply from your diaphragm.
- c** Capture the attention of your audience.
Collect stories.
Communicate through stories.
- d** Deliver in dialects only if they are authentic and consistent, and you're certain no one will be offended.
Discipline with eye contact.
Discover the best way for you to learn a story.
- e** Eliminate unnecessary gestures.
Enliven your stories with energy.
Evaluate stories for ease in learning and telling.
- f** Figure out ways to get feedback.
Find wonderful material in folklore.
Forget about forgetting; you won't if you know your story so well it's part of you.