

Jump Start Storytime!

Using Tradition and Change Effectively

BY HEATHER MCNEIL



Photos courtesy of Cheryl Parton Photography.

I don't know about you, but the best part of my day is storytime. Singing songs, being silly with my sheep dog puppet Winston, reading aloud books I love, and listening to a room full of toddlers giggling while pretending to be goldfish riding bicycles fills me with energy and gratitude.

Of course, we all know it isn't always fun. Chatty parents, pre-schools that arrive late, crying infants, and toddlers who will do anything to be the center of attention while a parent adoringly looks on are just some of our challenges. I think sometimes these challenges can be avoided by shaking up the routine a bit, adding a new component, and giving a jump start to your storytime. It will give you fresh enthusiasm, as well as refocus their attention.

I believe that it is absolutely necessary that the presenter put him- or herself into the program by designing it in a way that is comfortable and flexible enough for success. Some like puppets; some find them awkward and inhibiting. Some enjoy dancing; others prefer less motion and more conversation. Some have huge crowds; others have small audiences whom they know intimately. It is essential that *you* structure *your* storytime to fit *your* abilities, knowledge, and comfort.

Now I'm a proponent of a more traditional storytime, that is, sans technology. I've been at this long enough to see the addiction, the loss of attention, the lack of human contact. Parents *need* to know that there are times in each day when they can put away the gizmos, look into their child's eyes, and make a memory.

So, from more than thirty years of experience, plus excellent suggestions from trusted colleagues, here are the design components I recommend for a warm and enriching quilt of stories, songs, rhymes, early literacy skills, and fun for ages two to five.

Why Storytime?

Consider why you are offering storytime. The simple answer is because it is expected; that's what librarians do. But, of course, it's more than that. Storytime should be an effective presentation of early literacy skills and activities, it should be entertaining and heart-warming, and it should promote interaction between adult and child. It should also be an opportunity for the audience to be exposed to quality literature that builds vocabulary, creativity, awareness of self and others, and knowledge.

The Physical Space

This is the piece that I most frequently see as passive and uncreative. Librarians use a space the way it's always been used without thinking about the impact. Consider what you prefer when you enter a room to hear a concert. Do you want to climb over others to get to your seat? Have to sit on the floor when there are chairs in front of you? Stand in the back of the room because there's no room—except there's lots of room in the front, but you don't want to interrupt the program by going up there.



Heather McNeil is Youth Services Manager at Deschutes Public Library in Bend, Oregon.

When a parent walks into the storytime location, there needs to be unblocked space ahead. Chairs should be set up to the side so that the audience can easily enter and choose where to sit, without causing a lot of disruption. As much as possible, families should sit together on the floor because chairs keep people formal and less physically responsive. Of course, you need some chairs for those who are unable to get up and down easily. But be sure to set up the room so that it's clear you welcome people to sit on the floor. Before storytime, while people are entering, invite them to move forward; so the back of the room is left open for latecomers.

Eliminate as many distractions as possible. Have your back to a wall, so open space or a window won't catch the eyes of curious children. Put away library manipulatives until after storytime, except for the ones you demonstrate. If your storytime is out in the open library, rather than in a separate room, try to create a space with rugs or movable shelving so there is some sense of containment and bystanders will honor your space.

Storytime Tip #1: Parents should be sitting with their children in order to best receive your tips and to have fun with their children.

The Welcome

Does your audience know your expectations? When you introduce yourself, gently remind them of what makes for a successful storytime. Or put your guidelines on the back of your rhyme sheet.

Every week, I remind attendees, "If your child needs to get up and move about while I'm talking or reading, it's absolutely fine. But please make sure they stay in your space. At the end of storytime I'll invite them up to my space, and that's when they get to explore all the toys, books, and puppets I have up here."

By letting them know there will be a chance later to play with toys, the parent will be more likely to be considerate about keeping their child from coming forward until the end.

Make sure every parent or caregiver has a rhyme sheet that includes the songs, rhymes, and books you are using that day, plus an early literacy tip. Refer to the sheet throughout storytime so that the adult is involved and interacting with the child. This will also keep them from doing side chats!

The Opening

I'm sure all of you know the importance of beginning and ending your storytimes with the same songs or rhymes each week. But have you done the same opening for the past five years? Why not shake it up a bit? Search for new songs or make up your own. Think about the words you really want to include, such as the early literacy activities recommended by Every Child Ready to Read, 2nd edition—read, sing, play, talk, and write. Choose a familiar tune, and make it all fit and rhyme.

Storytime Tip #2: Don't be afraid to have friendly boundaries and guidelines for a successful storytime.

If singing is not comfortable for you, consider playing a CD or just doing a clapping/stomping/jumping rhyme, such as:

Jump for songs, (*jump three times*)
clap for rhymes. (*clap three times*)
Give a cheer, it's storytime! Yeah!
Jump for songs, clap for rhymes.
Sit back down, it's storytime.

The Story Song/Rhyme

This makes a huge difference in crowd control. About three years ago, I added a song before each story. It's the same song, so if I read my usual three stories, I am going to sing this song three times. This is not your opening or closing song, but rather one that gets the children ready to look, listen, and sit. The "Story Song" lets them know it's time to settle down for the next story. It should be very short, and, ideally, should have some minor movements to keep them engaged.

For instance:

My ears are ready to hear (*clap, clap*)
My eyes are ready to see. (*clap, clap*)
My hands will clap (*clap*)
Then in my lap (*hands in lap*)
It's storytime for me.¹

Storytime Tip #3: The more you are prepared and have a well-structured schedule, the more comfortable and attentive your audience will be.

The Stories

- Choose stories you love.
- Choose stories that have excellent vocabulary and expand the imagination.
- Choose stories that show diversity and variety.
- Choose stories that are fun.
- Choose stories that invite audience participation.
- Choose stories that introduce math and science concepts.

Here are the components that allow for the best participation:

- **Repeating simple words or phrases**, such as the word "Jump!" in the book of the same title by Scott M. Fischer. Point to the word, and read it the first time. The next time say, "Remember this word? Say it with me." Or explain before you begin the story that you want them to join in each time you point to the word. If there are longer phrases, I write them on the white board so that the parents can join in. For instance:

Tip-tip tippy tippy
 Went her little mousie toes.
 Sniff-sniff sniffy sniffy
 Went her little mousie nose.²

Storytime Tip #4: You are the expert in how to present books to children. Be proud and let them see how expert you are.

The parents say the words with me from *Little Bitty Mousie* by Jim Aylesworth, and the children and I do the actions. In this way, you are role modeling one way to keep the child's interest. You're also teaching print awareness when you point out the word in the book or write the rhyme on the board. And you're setting the stage for a simple way that a parent can play with the child. All of this leads to the child having the desire to read.

- **Doing actions.** When you share a book like *Look Out, Suzy Goose* by Petr Horacek, have everyone join in on the *flip-flop* and the *tip-toe* and the *pad pad* of all the animals. It makes the story even more exciting, and the listeners are filled with anticipation. When you read *Jump!* by Fischer, not only say the word but invite everyone to jump at the same time. Have the children walk with *Grumpy Bird* by Jeremy Tankard. One of my longtime favorites is *Dancing in My Bones* by Sylvia Andrews. I sing it to the tune of "If You're Happy and You Know It," and we have great fun bouncing our knees, shaking our hips, and tapping our heads and hearts.
- **Answering questions.** Asking, "What do you think will happen next?" when you're reading *Edward the Emu* by Sheena Knowles will bring excited responses of, "He's going to pretend to be a lion!" Of course, asking open-ended questions to a huge crowd must have some control so it doesn't result in vocal chaos. But, again, you are role modeling for the parent how to engage children and make them curious to know more, read more, and use more words. So select your questions carefully, and avoid ones that require individual answers because feelings will get hurt if everyone doesn't get a turn.
- **Reading aloud.** The comment I receive more often than any other is, "I love all your voices!" Both children and adults enjoy and remember hearing a buck-toothed voice for beaver, a growly voice for wolf, a big, huffy voice for bear, and so on. It also makes the story just that much clearer to the listeners. If you're not used to figuring out different voices, think about cartoons and the kind of voices traditionally used for various animals. Practice in the car or at home. The main thing is to be consistent throughout the story, so the mouse doesn't gradually change from sounding squeaky to sounding just like the librarian.

Keep the pace moving along, but give everyone a chance to see the

Storytime Tip #5: The more you encourage interaction between child and parent or care provider, the more you are role modeling its importance in brain development, bonding, and growth of prereading skills.

pictures and clearly hear the words. Allow time for occasional discussion. Throw in some silliness with facial expressions, gestures, hats, and so on. If at all possible, have someone video record you while you are presenting storytime. It will reveal all sorts of talents you didn't realize you had, as well as areas for improvement.

The In-Betweens

After each story, get the children moving. A finger rhyme is fun, and definitely use them, but they do not get the wiggles out. If you have three stories, kids should have two chances to get up and dance, jump, wiggle, twirl, and so on. It can be as short as three repeats of, "Hop, hop, stop!" ending with "Hop, hop, drop." Or it can be a longer song on a CD such as Jim Gill's "Silly Dance Contest" or Laurie Berkner's "Goldfish." Some librarians like to repeat the same action song or rhyme every week, and I think that's fine—for a while. Children love repetition, and they like knowing all the words. But, at least every six months, change the routine and introduce them to something new so their undivided attention is back and they are exposed to different vocabulary.

I also recommend that you have an activity that repeats each week, with modifications. Mine is "Here's My Bag."³ I sing the song I made up, then pull out items from the bag that either match the theme of the day, or the letter of the day, or that rhyme, or that relate to a science concept. So I might have a dog, frog, and hog inside, or a frog and a snake to represent reptiles and amphibians, or a goose, gorilla, and goat for the letter "G."

I give hints, always stressing the concept I am presenting. Sometimes I do the entire bag, sometimes I scatter it throughout the storytime. This activity is a miracle worker as far as grabbing their attention and encouraging conversation between care provider and child as they try to guess from my hints what is going to come out of the bag.

Other in-betweens are lap bounces, tickles, and rhyming games. Try each and see what makes for the best storytime for *your* audience.

Storytime Tip #6: With preparation, flexibility, and playfulness, plus the guarantee of tried and true traditional techniques, your storytime will be a gift that improves the lives of young listeners and those who love them.

The Closing

By now it might seem like storytime is going to be three hours long. Not so! Each of these components is brief, sometimes no more than a few seconds, so you should be done within thirty minutes. The closing is another song or rhyme that repeats each week, and lets everyone know it's time to say good-bye. If you've been doing the same one for years, try something new.

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2. Start with your state. Ready to make someone's day? Contact the NLLD coordinator (www.ala.org/advocacy/advleg/nlld/coordinators) for your state. Once you start receiving news and updates from this key contact, you'll feel like you've got a new best friend and personal NLLD guide.

3. Explore Everyday Advocacy. Created by ALSC members for ALSC members, the *Everyday Advocacy* website (www.ala.org/everyday-advocacy) will help you stay informed, engage with your community, speak out, get inspired, and share your advocacy story.

4. Delve into District Dispatch. The official blog of the ALA Washington Office, *District Dispatch* (www.districtdispatch.org) is your one-stop shop for the latest on library legislation. Sign up for text alerts, view issue briefs, and

link to the Legislative Action Center as part of your NLLD 2014 prep. You'll be ready to talk with legislators in no time flat!

5. Touch base with Twitter. New to social media? You might consider [Twitter](#). Once you set up your free account, you can follow your US senators and representatives as well as the ALA Washington Office (@ala_wo) for quick NLLD updates. Don't forget to use #nlld14 when sending your own tweets.

6. Invest in Virtual Library Legislative Day (VLLD). Can't make it to Washington, D.C., this year? Join other library advocates as they contact Congress from home during the first week of May. Five minutes are all it takes to make a big difference for libraries and the children you serve. Visit United for Libraries (www.ala.org/united) to get the 411 on VLLD 2014.

7. Connect with your community. Remember, you're not in this alone. Imagine a chorus of community stakeholders bringing your library message to Capitol Hill. Why not invite trustees, friends groups, and foundation members to join you? Call or email a few colleagues to say, "Hey, let's do this thing!" Make your enthusiasm irresistible.

Counting Down to Capitol Hill

See? You've got an abundance of tools, resources, and support for your NLLD efforts. As you count down to Capitol Hill and boost your confidence with these Everyday Advocacy quick wins, I hope you'll keep one thing mind—there's simply no better advocate for children and libraries than you. The Cowardly Lion you're not. You're Aslan all the way, baby. Now let 'em hear you roar! 🦁

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If you've been doing the same one for years, try something new. It will keep you on your toes, which means new energy!⁴

I began this article by stating how important it is to put *yourself* into the storytime. Will that happen when you're also trying to fit in all these components? Yes!

It will happen because *you* choose the stories, *you* choose the rhymes, songs and movements, *you* set the tone for how silly, nurturing, informative, supportive, and imaginative your storytime will be. The important thing to always structure into the storytime is your love for children and for wonderful books. 🦁

References

1. The tune for this can be found in Heather McNeil, *Read, Rhyme, and Romp: Early Literacy Skills and Activities for Librarians, Teachers and Parents*. (Denver: Libraries Unlimited, 2012), 132.

2. Jim Aylesworth, *Little Bitty Mousie* (New York: Walker & Company, 2007), unpagged.
3. McNeil, *Read, Rhyme, and Romp*, 111.
4. Additional opening, closing, and in-between songs can be found in McNeil, *Read, Rhyme and Romp*.

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