

Making up a story

Talk for Writing Trainer Kathryn Pennington explains two simple, well-known ways for making up stories with children – either at home or at school.

1. Story strings or story mountains

This guides you through these tried and tested way of supporting young children in structuring stories.

What you need:

- Story language card – you can find this on the last page of this article. If you don't have a printer, you could just copy mine onto a piece of paper and cut it up into bits.
 - Either string, chalk or a pen
 - Small toys or any small objects that could be part of a story.
- a) Lay your string out in an S shape or in the shape of a mountain on the floor. If you do not have string, you could draw the S or the mountain shape outside using chalk, or use a pen to draw an S on a piece of paper.

Split the story language card into different groups. It is best to colour code them if you can. I have made mine:

- red = opening
- blue = build up
- green = problem
- black = resolution
- purple = ending

By selecting the story language cards, you have a story structure. The prompts help form the 'architecture' and shape of the story. For example:

Once upon a time, there was ... [insert a character]

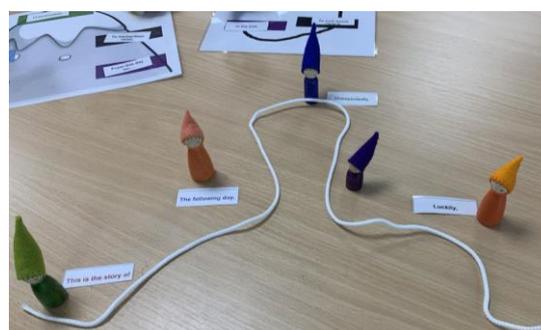
Early one morning, ... [insert something that happens e.g. character goes for a walk]

Unfortunately, ... [meets a dragon in the forest]

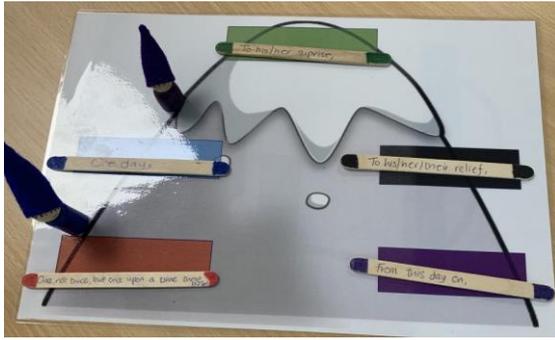
Fortunately, ...[saved from dragon]

And they all lived happily ever after.

Once upon a time there was	Early one morning,	Unfortunately,	Fortunately,	And they all lived happily ever after.
In a land far, far away lived	One day,	At that moment,	Luckily,	From this day on...
Many years ago, there was	Late one evening,	Suddenly,	To his/her/their relief,	In the end,
Once, not twice, but once upon a time there lived	That night,	To his/her surprise,	At that moment,	Finally,
Deep in the heart of a forest lived	Next,	Unexpectedly,	As luck would have it,	And so it was that they all lived happily ever after.
Long, long ago there was	The following day,		Without warning,	Now our story is coming to an end...
This is the story of	First,		To his/her amazement,	
There once lived	Then,		So,	
	As the snow began to fall,			



b. Select some characters. Children could select their own from any toys that they have at home.



Don't over think the creation of the story. Get the structural language in place, some small objects and get inventing. It will most likely take a few attempts for the child to get the story they want. Once they have come up with a story, ask them to retell it. The more they tell it, the more embellished and stronger it will get – just try to have fun with it.

Here are some images from schools to show how opportunities to invent stories are woven into their daily provision.



TfW Trainer Jane Ralphs has also written an excellent related article on guided story invention with young children. I strongly recommend reading it here [a new invention](#). It also features in several of the units free Talk for Writing units that have been produced here:

<https://mailchi.mp/talk4writing/home-school-booklets>

2. Story Sticks

This is another tried and tested favourite based on a long tradition of gathering objects from real walks on sticks to help you retell the story of your journey when you return. This also features in [\[link to Sue's reception unit round 2\]](#)

What you need:

- Any string, wool or ribbon etc
- Scissors, glue

To create a story stick:

a. Start by showing children images of story sticks like the picture here so that they get the idea of what they look like. Go outside if you can or to a local park and make it an adventure to find a stick.

b. Once you have got your stick. Take your child or children on a walk. Take scissors, string, and glue with you.

c. Stop at key moments on your journey, either directed by you or the children or stop and allow them to 'notice'. Look at the things around you. Take in and talk about the place where they are.

d. Once you have stopped, ask the child to select something to attach to their stick. Alternatively, they could paint/mark their stick with a pen.

The idea is that whatever is added to the stick is used to represent a natural feature or place e.g. you could add some bark to the stick to indicate walking through a forest or a small feather for the place where they saw a bird's nest. Encourage children to put other objects, drawings or carvings on the stick to represent the weather, events that took place or something you were talking about.

e. When you are back at home, ask the children to look at their stick and the objects they have attached to it or markings they have made. Younger children will use the objects collected to visualise the order and retell the story of their journey. The stick becomes a scaffold to the children's thinking. You could even use the story language card at the back from the first part of this article to help structure the children's story or words such as *first, next, after that, ...* etc.

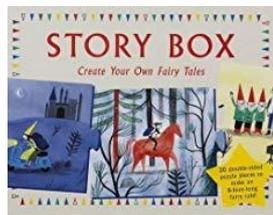
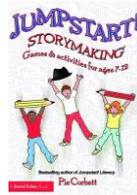
f. If the children are older, encourage them to think more metaphorically. Move them into the world of story creation by imagining what the things they have attached could represent. Whilst on your walk, you could ask the children questions such as: If we were in a story, who could live here? If this is the setting for your story, what characters would be involved? If this was a story, what do you think might happen next?

The stick then becomes an idea generator which started in a personal experience, but now provides a stimulus for their story.



Top 10 Story Invention and Telling Ideas

- 1) **Make a puppet theatre** to perform and tell your new story – lolly stick and sock puppets are always a hit here! Keep your old boxes to make the stage.
- 2) Make **story spoons** for the characters in your story.
- 3) Make **story stones** for the characters, settings and objects in your story (a smooth pebble and a Sharpie pen works wonders).
- 4) **Story dice** can be a great way of randomly selecting characters and settings – you can make your own (tes.com and Twinkl have lots that you can download) but you may also want to try something like story cubes <https://www.storycubes.com/en/>
- 5) Make a **story invention corner** e.g. ensuring children have access to small world, story mountains, paper and pens to record the story they invent.
- 6) Make a **story telling/performance area** in your home/classroom – you don't need a lot here but an area marked off with some masking tape and /or twinkle lights will often do the trick. You could place your puppet theatre near here too.
- 7) **Keep old story resources** such as the puppets and store them in a shoe box so that, over time children can keep returning to them and playing with them.
- 8) Use **pictures from a story book**, cover the words and make up a new story.
- 9) Choose a character or a set of characters and as a teacher or parent tell/**make up a series of stories** about them. E.g. maybe there is a family of little people/fairies/pixies etc that live in your classroom or home which come out at night and do naughty/silly things. Children will love hearing all about their adventures.
- 10) **Jumpstart Story Making** has a fantastic wealth of ideas and can be purchased through our Talk for Writing website. I also recommend the resources: **Story Box** and **Story Telling Card Games**.



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