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Games, worksheets, and art activities help to create an interactive storytime, a storytime that breaks from the traditional way to read to a group of children.

The Art of Storytime

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As a teacher, mother, children's book author, and grandmother, I have adapted the art of storytime. And yes, I do believe there is an art to storytime.

Anyone can pick up a book, read it to a child, and be finished. It's better than nothing, right? But it's not too difficult to go from just reading the words to reading a story in an interactive way that engages both the reader and the audience. When the interest level is high, the audience is more likely to reap higher benefits: language development, stimulation of cognitive skills and imagination, along with an encouragement for the love of books.

As a child, my home was filled with books, but no one read them. My interest in books was nil. I spent the majority of my free time climbing trees or riding my bike with my best girlfriend. Our bikes became our horses, and we created our own adventures. Not so bad, but imagine how my mind could have been enriched if someone had read to me and encouraged my interest in books.

My own interest in books, especially for children, grew rapidly in college as I studied to become a teacher for children with special needs. As a student on a scholarship, my studies included working twenty hours a week at a private school for the deaf. Storytime became a daily event, and I began to see the joy, enthusiasm, and skills the children were gaining just from having an interactive story read to them. Hearing-impaired children tend to be particularly animated with their facial expressions, so their excitement was great positive reinforcement

for me. I became a voracious reader of children's books, and I loved selecting them. I looked for books with simple language and wonderful illustrations. I looked for books that opened a child's eyes to places around the world, and I looked for books that were fun! I became more expressive as I read, and I followed each reading with a quick game or craft related to the story. For example, if we had read a story about animals, I might adapt the game of Simon Says. "Simon Says, swing your trunk like an elephant." "Roar like a lion. Oops did I fool you? I didn't say Simon Says."

When I became a mother, I couldn't wait to start storytime. Beginning when my children were as young as four months, I had storytime multiple times a day. I was naturally taking my storytime to another level. It was fun to read a book, but it was

even more fun to add an activity along with it. *Pat the Bunny* led to pat your head, pat Mommy, pat your tummy. I took my children to the public library frequently. With their own library cards in hand, they became part of the art of storytime. At the dinner table, I extended storytime. If we had read a book about going to school, I might start a discussion about friends, how to make them, how to be one. I carried my experiences with storytime at home back to the classroom, and vice versa. My children grew to be strong students with a great love of books and reading. My students thrived and enjoyed the activities that were spun off from storytime. Games, worksheets, and art activities help to create an interactive storytime, a storytime that breaks from the traditional way to read to a group of children.

After twenty years of teaching, I decided to pursue a dream that had been percolating in my mind since my first teaching job. I wanted to write for children.

Ideas? Where would I find them? In reality, they began bouncing into my mind like a kid on a trampoline. My book *If an Armadillo Went to a Restaurant* was "born" from a game I played with my four-year-old grandson. While waiting for our food in a restaurant, I said to him, "If a bear walked into this restaurant, what would he order?" Glancing at the menu, I said, "Macaroni and cheese?" Giggles galore as my grandson shook his head. I said, "Actually a bear might order salmon and blueberries." Bingo! What a cute idea for a children's book!

When I write, I think about how I want children to learn and have fun. I want them to say, "Can we read it again?" I want them to carry to others the knowledge gained. "Grandma, do you know what
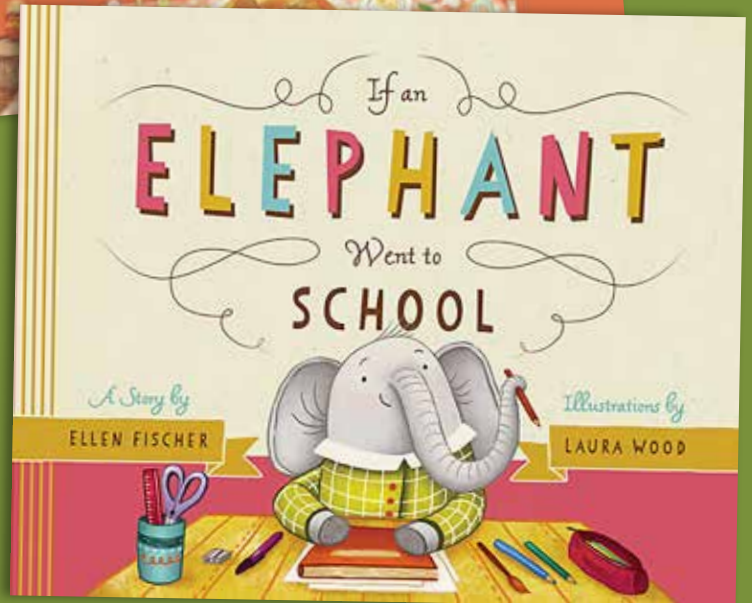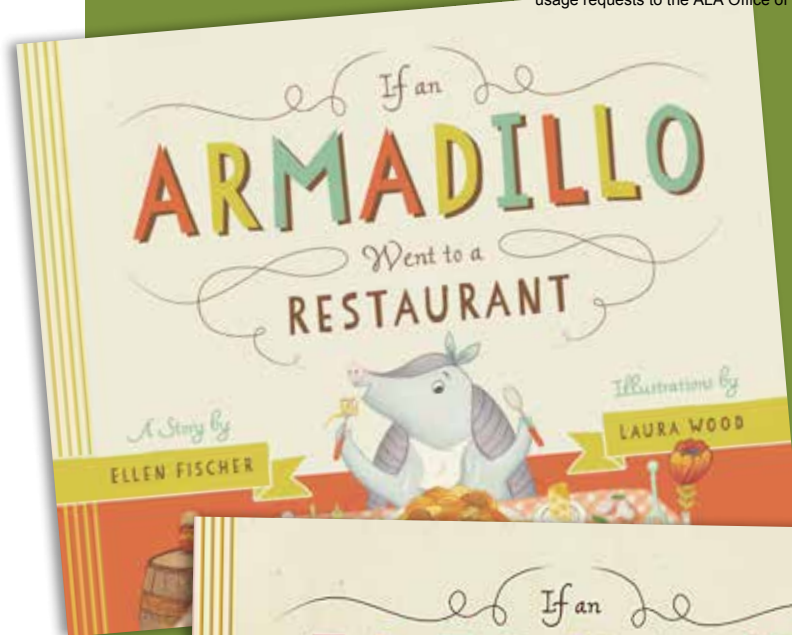
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armadillos eat?" "I do! Ants and worms and beetles. Yuck!"

I want readers—and listeners—to giggle at the silliness and use the language to answer questions. When Mom asks, "Would you like peas for dinner?" the answer is, "Improbable." As kids carry their knowledge forth, *they* have learned to expand storytime. Pint-size experts!

I want them to smile when they see the illustrations, and I want them to be excited when they read the companion book *If an Elephant Went to School.*

Now my storytime has gone back to the classrooms, the libraries, the bookstores, and on to Skype in the Classroom. When I do a presentation, I always have a hand puppet with me. It engages the children as soon as they enter the room. The chosen hand puppet is the star of the story I will read. I bring large laminated animal cards too so I can reinforce the facts I have taught. I suggest follow-up activities for the children after the reading, and I engage them in a Q&A. Big groups? No problem. I can digitally project my books onto a large screen.

Computers are creating educational opportunities for children in reading and writing. And the digital world is here, so children need to be technologically skilled. It would be a very sad day if digital books replaced traditional books, but I feel there is plenty of room for both. A nice example of this is the Reading

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Rainbow app. Cleverly, it narrates and animates the books, effectively engaging little ones. Use of the app can enhance reading, especially for reluctant readers. Children can work independently at their own pace. I am very proud to say that my book *If an Armadillo Went to a Restaurant* is now available on the Reading Rainbow app.

My journey into the art of storytime is still evolving. There are more books to be written, more storytimes ahead. There are more creative ways to enhance storytime. And I always find time to shop for those deliciously wonderful books to read to my grandchildren for snuggle time and for storytime.

Ellen Fischer *grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, but has been a North Carolina Tar Heel for over thirty years. She has taught elementary-age children for over twenty years and is the mother of three. She is also the author of* If an Armadillo Went to a Restaurant *(Scarletta Kids 2014),* If an Elephant Went to School *(Mighty Media Kids 2015),* Latke, the Lucky Dog *(Kar-Ben 2014), and several Sesame Street books, including* Grover and Big Bird's Passover Celebration *(Kar-Ben 2013),* It's a Mitzvah, Grover! *(Kar-Ben 2013), and* The Count's Hanukkah Countdown *(Kar-Ben 2012).*