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Using Oral Storytelling Techniques in Reading Sessions

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My connection with stories began as a child in India when my parents and grandmother narrated fascinating tales from Indian mythology. I was also fortunate to have access to a tiny library that nurtured my curiosity and provided hours of reading fun.

Imagine my amazement when I moved to the United States and discovered public libraries filled with thousands of books! I was delighted to spend hours there, both as patron and volunteer. Fast forward to motherhood, and the library became a favorite haunt for the entire family. I told my children all kinds of stories—new and old, from near and far—with and without books.

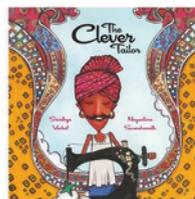
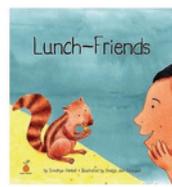
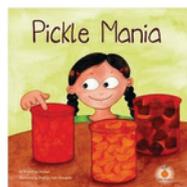
My Personal Connection with Oral Storytelling

I am now a children's author and oral storyteller living in Singapore. Since I became involved with oral

storytelling five years ago, my life has changed. I've learned how to cater stories to my audience both as a storyteller and a writer. Oral storytelling has helped me overcome my fear of public speaking. I have performed storytelling at schools, libraries, and literature festivals, including the 398.2 Storytell-

ing Festival in Singapore and the Bookaroo Festival of Children's Literature in India. I've discovered how stories transcend borders and cultural differences.

One of my picture books, *The Clever Tailor*, is the product of my experiences with oral storytelling. It is based on a Yiddish folktale that I loved so much that I decided to tell it. As I began preparing for the telling, I decided to create my own version of the story (as oral storytellers often do)—an Indian adaptation that I told several times. It was so well-received that I wrote it as a picture book story and sent it to a publisher, who accepted it! *The Clever Tailor* is about a poor tailor who reuses the same piece of cloth multiple times to make something special for each of his family members. In the end, he is left with something everlasting.



Using Oral Storytelling Techniques

Oral storytelling refers to telling a story without a book. The teller does not memorize the story verbatim but must know it well enough to tell it by maintaining eye contact with the audience.

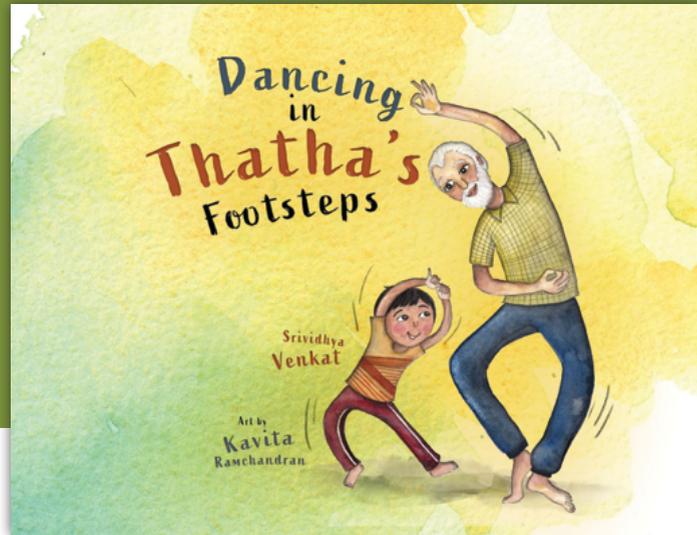
Though oral storytelling may seem overwhelming to some, it is important to remember that all of us are already storytellers. We talk about our day at school or work, a recent vacation, or perhaps an interesting news report.

Employing one or more of the following basic techniques of oral storytelling can help make storytelling collaborative and more engaging:

- Gestures and/or facial expressions
- Voice manipulation
- Repetitive phrases, rhymes, songs, and/or music

Gestures and/or facial expressions can be used to better explain a character's movements and/or emotions. When I read my picture book *Pickle Mania*, a story about a little girl who dislikes spicy Indian pickles and resolves to make a non-spicy pickle of her own, I put on facial expressions to convey different tastes (sweet, spicy, and so on). I also invite children to suggest their own expressions.

Voice manipulation can be effectively employed to distinguish between multiple characters in the story and to convey different emotions. When telling *Lunch-Friends*, a story about a little boy's intent to make up for the loss of a mango tree that is home to several birds and other animals, I use a soft voice for the child protagonist, my normal voice for the grandmother, and a deep voice for the vegetable-seller.



Repetitive phrases, rhymes, songs, and/or music (whether or not included in the book) make storytelling more enjoyable and give listeners a chance to participate. When telling *Pickle Mania*, children eagerly join in with the repetitive phrase (in the book): "Dippy-dip Licky-lick!" With *The Clever Tailor*, I invite my audience to join me in chanting the following phrase in its different forms (not in the book): "He wore it here, he wore it there, he wore it everywhere!"

In addition to the above techniques, I cannot emphasize enough the importance of a pause. Placed at strategic moments of the oral storytelling, a pause can enrapture the audience and make them eager to find out what happens next. When I tell *The Tree Boy*, a fantastical story about a lonely boy whose wish turns awry when he turns into a tree, I use pauses to corroborate moments of sadness as well as the turning point in the story.

Finally, using puppets, props, and art/drawing also makes storytelling sessions more enthralling. I use costumes and other props when telling *The Clever Tailor*. As I pull out each prop from a bag, I can sense the audience's anticipation about what prop will emerge next.

Benefits of Oral Storytelling

Using the basic techniques of oral storytelling and making the experience collaborative are beneficial in a number of ways:

- It makes the session more fun and engaging.
- It gives children a chance to open up and participate.
- It helps reinforce the message in the story.
- Role-playing, if used, fosters language development and self-confidence.
- The storyteller enjoys a fulfilling experience.



My Experiences at Storytime

Oral storytelling is different from reading aloud. When reading aloud, the storyteller reads the story from the book, occasionally turning to the audience. On the other hand, oral storytelling involves telling the story without a book. The storyteller uses his or her own words to tell the story while maintaining complete eye contact with the audience.

As a volunteer storyteller at Singapore’s public libraries, I have experimented with oral storytelling in different ways:

1. Reading aloud followed by oral storytelling. Oral storytelling becomes a recap of the story after it has been read from the book. I involve children in the oral storytelling, using one or more of the basic techniques mentioned earlier. If time permits, I also engage them in role-playing. Since the audience already knows the story from the read-aloud, they participate with great enthusiasm.
2. Oral storytelling followed by reading aloud. Oral storytelling gives the audience a chance to imagine the characters and

the story’s setting. During the read-aloud, audience members compare their imagined characters and setting with the illustrations in the book. This often generates excited comments.

3. Blending oral storytelling with reading aloud. As I part-read, part-tell the story, the audience is usually more involved in the listening process. They participate when prompted, often stopping to ask questions or make observations about the illustrations.

How do I decide which of these to use? Well, it depends on the average age and size of the audience, the complexity of the story, and time available.

Srividhya Venkat *hopped, skipped, and jumped careers until she came upon her most cherished one: writing for children. A former early childhood educator, she discovered her passion for oral storytelling five years ago. Srividhya is an active member of Story Connection, Federation of Asian Storytellers (FEAST), and Society for Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI). She has published seven picture books and contributed to a couple of folktale anthologies. Her picture book, The Clever Tailor, won the SCBWI Crystal Kite Award 2019 and is among the 101 Great Books for Kids (2019) listed by Evanston Public Library and Best Children’s Books of 2019 by Kids Stop Press, India. Her next book, Dancing in Thatha’s Footsteps, releases in fall 2020. She lives with her family in sunny Singapore.*

As I think about the storytelling session for my next book, *Dancing in Thatha’s Footsteps* (releasing fall 2020), I’m excited to think about the possibilities. The book is about an Indian classical dance, so it will certainly include music, gestures, and facial expressions. What else? You’ll just have to wait to find out.

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Knowledge Quest, Publication No. 483-860, is published five times per year by the American Association of School Librarians, American Library Association, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611-2795. Annual subscription price, \$50. Printed in U.S.A. with periodical class postage paid at (Illinois). As a nonprofit organization authorized to mail at special rates (DMM Section 424.12 only), the purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes have not changed during the preceding twelve months.

EXTENT AND NATURE OF CIRCULATION

(“Average” figures denote the average number of copies printed each issue during the preceding twelve months; “actual” figures denote actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: September/October 2019 issue). Total number of copies printed average 7,640; actual 7,303. Sales through dealers, carriers, street vendors, and counter sales: none. Mail subscription: actual 6,961. Free distribution actual 110. Total distribution average 7,256; actual 7,213. Office use, leftover, unaccounted, spoiled after printing average 384; actual 90. Total: average/actual 7,640/7,303. Percentage paid: average 96.4; actual 96.5.

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