

GEORGE LUCAS EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION

LITERACY**Encouraging Students to Be Storytellers**

Students in kindergarten through second grade can develop the ability to share original stories, strengthening their literacy skills.

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I started my career in first grade, many years ago in London, and now I've returned to it in a public school in Oregon. What remains the same is the magic of this grade: The children discover the power of reading and writing as that secret code of lines unravels on the page. In my early days as a teacher, I developed an interactive method of storytelling in my first-grade class that inspired reading and writing. I discovered then, just as I am rediscovering now, that first graders have the capacity and desire to become storytellers themselves.

This process brings a host of learning benefits to the classroom.

MAKE TIME TO START THE DAY WITH A STORY

In my first-ever Edutopia article (<https://www.edutopia.org/blog/storytelling-in-the-classroom-matters-matthew-friday>), I outlined my particular methodology for storytelling. The key takeaway is that this isn't a one-person (adult) show, but an interactive process that involves the students as participants. There is very little preparation—students don't need it. You'll require a story to tell, but there's no rule that says you need to learn it by heart. The process works just as well with you reading from a sheet, which I do for a new story. In fact, this is really just a version of reader's theater—a strategy commonly used in classrooms.

The biggest challenge for any teacher when taking on a new skill is to find time in their already overstretched schedule, particularly as many are under additional pressure to deliver new curricula to address post-Covid gaps in learning. So, what I propose is using the first 10–15 minutes of your day for community storytelling. I don't manage this every day, but at least three times a week, either I or the students are telling a story.



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FROM TEACHER-LED TO STUDENT-LED STORYTELLING

While the imaginations of students are filled with stories, they won't arrive in your class knowing how to stand up in front of their peers, recruit actors with on-the-spot auditions, tell a story, and direct actors at the same time. These are all presentation and stagecraft skills that take many months to hone. The result is akin to a very short play where the "actors" repeat the lines of dialogue you say as the storyteller or narrator. This has the double benefit of guiding the students and assisting those with less English. More confident students will ad-lib, which can be amusing for everyone—as long as it's in small amounts and sticks to the story.

Here is the eight-step process that I'm currently working through with my first-graders.

1. In the first one to two months: The teacher tells stories and models all the required skills, reminding students that they can also be storytellers if they want.
2. Follow the golden rule: Students must write their story down at home and bring it to share in class. There is no fixed rule on length. At the start of the year, the stories were brief: a few sentences across a couple of mostly drawn pages. When I taught narrative writing across multiple pages with a clear beginning, middle, and end structure, I found that the stories students wrote at home reflected that format.

Importantly, you're creating a space that inspires extracurricular writing and creativity. Yes, you can use this model for sharing stories in any writing and reading lesson, but this community time is something special. It doubles up as my "morning meeting" and social and emotional interaction time that many schools are focusing on, post-Covid. Storytelling is such a great and ancient way to explore human behavior, feeling, motivation, and consequence.

3. Keep a dress-up box: Offer materials like masks, colored linen, hats—all of which certainly inspire students to want to use them, but they aren't essential for storytelling.
4. Take it slowly: Don't place too much emphasis on the quality of writing done at home at first. The initial stories that students write will be brief. Think of this as a snowball that starts out as little flakes of snow.

5. Be flexible with the pace: The rate of stories that students bring to class is unpredictable. I've found that they come in flurries, as friends of the last storyteller want their turn. Then there are dry patches, especially near holidays or special events when the children are thinking about other things. During this time, I step back in as the storyteller.

6. Give direction: I usually support the student storyteller/narrator by encouraging a louder, clearer voice or helping to manage the actors, encouraging the audience to contribute sound effects, or even helping a student flesh out a story. Doing this only serves to further encourage the literacy skills you want to develop.

7. Connect with other classes: If you have confident student storytellers—and you will—you can then link up with a kindergarten class and send the students to share their stories there. This is now regularly happening at my school. The students love seeing their old kindergarten teachers, and the younger students are inspired by the first graders' creativity. My first graders grow in confidence as role models and understand that writing a story is a rewarding process of community sharing.

Honestly, this connection can be made with any grade. In a previous article, I detailed how my fourth-grade students were *Young Storytellers* (<https://www.edutopia.org/blog/young-storytellers-the-tale-begins-matthew-friday>) working independently in a first-grade class.

8. Capture the moment: Get permission to take pictures and films of the stories, and share them on any platforms that parents see. We use Seesaw to share stories and classwork. At my teacher-parent conferences, parents praised this activity and asked how to support writing at home.

STORYTELLING BENEFITS LITERACY AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Engaging with storytelling is especially crucial for first grade, because it's important for students to see literacy as a fun-filled, imagination-packed act of communication. It also acts as a counter-balance to the hard work of learning how to read and the dominance of prescribed and factual forms in the writing curriculum. Additionally, I've found that storytelling can also *help students acquire English*

(<https://www.edutopia.org/blog/storytelling-inspires-children-learn-english-matthew-friday>).

Storytelling develops communication and presentation skills that are often neglected. With continued practice, the growth in students' oral and emotional confidence is incredible. One of my shyest students has been a regular storyteller in kindergarten, amazing us all. Students can find their voices in the real world by using that most powerful of gifts they bring to you: their imaginations. Lastly, as a teacher, you get to tell and be told stories, and see your students progress. It's truly one of the best parts of the school day!