

# Introduction

Come in! Come in! Would you like to hear a story? It's Friday afternoon and there are more than 300 students, teachers, and parents gathered in the school gymnasium. There is a line of children eager to perform the stories they have written about Alaskan animals. Pamela, a smiling, animated, and confident fourth grader begins.

“It was a foggy day and the wind was blowing. It was the day of the Iditarod, the great sled race. All the dogs were ready. But Musher, the dog who always lost, was determined to win. Then, BANG! The starter's gun fired, and off they went...”

Across the ocean, a similar gathering of “yarn spinners” takes place in a British school. Kids are enjoying themselves; getting up in front of their peers, teachers, and communities; and engaging in literate behavior. One particular “star,” David, is a boy who, up to this storytelling performance, had been withdrawn and disruptive, seldom participating in speaking, reading, or writing. When asked by his teacher if he needed help telling the story, David replied, “No, I want to do it myself.”

During our combined forty years of teaching children around the world—from remote Alaskan Native villages, international schools in different countries and Irish working-class towns to American inner cities and inclusive suburbs—we observe a universal truth. Children love to tell stories if we provide encouragement and take the time to listen. A lesser known truth is that storytelling can be part of the daily curriculum, prompting powerful lessons about language and literacy.

Traditionally, storytelling has had a very limited role in classrooms and is most often used for entertainment. It occurs in a school or language arts classroom perhaps once or twice a year, if at all. Teachers might invite a storyteller to perform at a school-wide assembly. Maybe students are asked to create a story based on the American Indian unit they're working on in class. Without adequate time to rehearse, many of the students choose not to tell the story. They are too shy, feel embarrassed, or don't think their story/storytelling is “good enough.”

In contrast to more traditional storytelling applications in schools, the performance literacy process uses storytelling to develop all components of literacy, encouraging both academic and social growth that is accessible to all students. Simply put, performance literacy is the process of teaching students to write and perform stories. But the phrase, coined by Brett Dillingham (2005), encompasses much more. Performance literacy is a powerful educational approach that increases students' language development, vocabulary, and comprehension; internalizes an understanding of the writing process; integrates learning across the content areas; develops speaking and listening skills; and deepens the connection between home, school, and community.

Through performance literacy,

- students are taught to consciously use sound, expression, and movement to tell stories with an impact.
- story ideas are elicited from the students themselves, supporting the use of prior knowledge, a critical component of writing and motivation.
- students tell and retell stories to one another before turning in a written first draft. This provides a safe environment in which students verbally create and “fill in” their stories.
- students are taught how to critique each other in a non-threatening manner, encouraging respect while providing suggestions for improvement.
- final performances, with a real audience of other classes, parents, and often community members, are a much more satisfying way to showcase students’ abilities than telling stories to just their own classmates.

This practical guide is for busy K–8 teachers who want to know how to use storytelling to motivate and engage reluctant readers and writers. Mini-lessons at beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels help teachers weave storytelling into the fabric of today’s standards-based classroom and construct their own skillful literacy lessons.

### **Why Teach Storytelling?**

The development of children’s language skills begins at birth, and children become more proficient with language by using it. Adult interaction with children through conversation, play, reading aloud, and storytelling are essential in early childhood education. Children of all ages, especially the very young, learn through contextually rich stories.

Research indicates that children’s school success is highly influenced by the frequency of listening to stories read to them. Children under four who tell and hear stories at home are most likely to learn to read easily and with interest once they get to school. By age eight, most children can tell a well-formed narrative. Our minds are literally wired to comprehend reality through stories. We make sense of our lives by organizing life’s events in the story format.

Children’s storytelling skill development evolves, too, proceeding through five levels: labeling, listing, connecting, sequencing, and narrating. The early phases of young children’s narrative development revolve around conversations about immediate, familiar objects. For example, in labeling and listing, a child points and says, “That is a fish. That is a blue one. That is a gold one.” Later, through adult-centered activities, especially with books, children become more sophisticated. They are able to tell more abstract stories about imagined events from the past in which they connect, sequence, and narrate, such as retelling a familiar folk tale, for example.

For children to become literate storytellers who can connect, sequence, and narrate, caregivers and teachers must provide encouragement and multiple opportunities to experience language from different venues. Children must learn to write and tell their own stories.

When children have opportunities to perform their own stories, they often develop an increased interest in writing, reading, listening, and speaking. Children who tell stories learn to put their own voice down on paper. By retelling and rereading their stories again and again, children develop reading, oral and listening fluency. They begin reading like they speak and speaking like they read.

The National Reading Panel (NRP) advocates a comprehensive approach to literacy education, calling for instruction in five areas and informally known as the “five pillars of effective reading instruction”: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—along with early and continued exposure to rich literature and writing opportunities. Performance literacy supports a much more comprehensive literacy approach. Too often in the zeal to teach skills and prepare students for high-stakes tests, teachers don’t use storytelling properly or to its full potential. A comprehensive literacy approach requires more than just teaching the skills. With storytelling you can meet standards-based expectations while also developing imagination, fostering powerful communication, and motivating students to step outside of their comfort zone.

The International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) advocate that teachers tap into the power of storytelling. Although educators know that oral-language development is the most important foundation and component of reading and writing, often not enough is provided to stimulate early literacy growth. Older students have better retention when content knowledge—in science and history, for example—is delivered as a story.

State standards always involve building reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. These skills are naturally embedded within storytelling, improving students’ literacy skills and, subsequently, their test scores.

Teachers from around the world have tried our methods for developing literacy skills through storytelling in their international or national standards-based curriculums, and the results speak for themselves. Storytelling

- increases opportunities for writing.
- develops self-expression and confidence.
- is accessible to all children and easy to use in any class.
- forges positive home/school connections.
- works across the content areas to make subjects come alive.
- builds engagement and enjoyment in reading while building reading skills.
- supports standards and raises test scores.
- helps English-language and striving learners acquire language, vocabulary, and listening skills.

It does not matter if teachers work mostly with mainstream students or with students from high-poverty situations, in special education classes, or with behavior problems. The performance literacy approach works well with children who aren’t expected to engage in high-achieving social and academic behavior because it allows any child to experience success. Storytelling changes the expectations of both students and their teachers for the better.

Once students hear a good story and understand that good storytelling involves using sound, expression, and movement, they see how easy it is to create a visual portrait of a story. Then they can produce their own stories and realize how accessible this literacy art is to everyone, including themselves. Once students tell their story to a real audience, they learn to believe in themselves because they have accomplished something significant and challenging. As children gain confidence with telling and writing their own stories, they advance their communication abilities by connecting and collaborating with the literate community. Students learn to create stories from stories by modeling the language patterns of the rich traditional literature of folktales and children’s books they read, study, and retell.

### **What You Will Find in This Book**

All of the stories and teaching strategies in this book have been field-tested with children, educators, parents, and diverse communities. Included in the field testing were three predominately African-American magnet schools for the performing arts in Jacksonville, Florida. In these schools, pre-service and experienced teachers used storytelling strategies to teach reading and language arts methods classes. Field testing also included students in remote Alaskan villages; poor neighborhoods in Ireland and England, International schools in Europe, Asia, and Africa; and the inner-city “hoods” and barrios of America. Storytelling is particularly valuable in print-poor environments, where children have limited access to books.

This resource includes:

- **Full-length stories** and useful excerpts by premier authors for reader’s theater, storytelling, and skill development, selected as excellent read-aloud models. Many educators, storytellers, and performers contributed their work to this book.
  - **Karen Alexander** is a children’s author, poet, and published storyteller (*Chicken Soup for the Soul*) who masterfully combines rhyme, rhythm, and repetition for enthralling audiences.
  - **John Archambault**, award-winning author of *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*, and **David Plummer**, British recording artist, use melody and song to carry words along in foot-stomping storytelling and story-dancing.
  - **Ben Brenner**, a performance educator, is a heavy metal recording artist who is in the storytelling duo ER—Entertain Reading with Nile Stanley.
  - **Brett Dillingham** offers storytelling at its best—timeless and entertaining with the tone of campfire intimacy and the drama of theatre. His original folktales of wonder, trickery, and adventure enthrall with his rich vocal collection of animal sounds and other interesting effects.
  - **Heather Forest**, award-winning recording artist, offers a unique minstrel style of storytelling, blending folk guitar, prose, and poetry.
  - **Brenda Hollingsworth-Marley**, “the Storybird,” specializes in African-American tales and is an exuberant, spirit-filled performer, librarian, actress, dancer, drummer, and vocalist.
  - **Jason Ohler** is a speaker, writer, teacher, researcher, and one of the foremost authorities on digital storytelling.

- **Nile Stanley**, “Nile Crocodile, the Reading Reptile,” is a professor, poet, musician, and digital storyteller, who teaches literacy and literacy educators through the arts.
- **Joy Steiner** tells nature stories with a sense of adventure. She has leapt into icy, high-mountain lakes green with glacier dust and snorkeled with barracuda in the warm gulf waters of Mexico.
- **Jeff Trippe** is a musician, educator, and freelance writer. He lives in Yarmouth, Maine, with his wife, Laura, and daughter, Alex.
- **Allan Wolf** is an author, poet, performer and past education director for Poetry Alive! Allan’s writing has earned many honors, including a *School Library Journal* Best Book.
- **Highly engaging, standards-based mini-lessons** focusing on the essential literacy skills for beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels.
- **Research-informed teaching strategies, activities, and tools** for developing literacy through storytelling.
- **A 70-minute CD of stories and songs** performed by renowned storytellers for encouraging performance and multimedia learning, such as digital storytelling.
- **Information for using the companion website** at <http://www.unf.edu/~nstanley/links.htm>, with supporting videos, articles, mini-lessons, and resources.
- **A list of resources** for optimizing success with reading, writing, and performing stories; assessment tools; and connections to traditional folk literature and relevant children’s books.



Storytellers and their stories are diverse, but all good storytellers use the same foundational skills and strategies found in this book. We want children to know that they can write and perform their own stories. We want them to know what a story is and what it looks like when written down and acted out. Most importantly, we want children to master the valuable life skill of communicating through story. Communication is all about stories.