

Bill Harley



Ideas For Writing Stories

Use folk tales, their themes and characters as a spur to writing.

One common theme is the granting of a magical gift to the hero or heroine, and what the person does with the boon once they have it. Sometimes they use it wisely, sometimes they blow it. After the introduction of several tales of this type through reading or storytelling, have the children write a story about how a character receives a magic gift, and what happens to him/her. It may help to make a list of things on the board that could become magical gifts (e.g., pencils, dogs, umbrellas, ear muffs, elephants).

Use characters which reappear again and again in folk tales and have children use these characters in a story.

Many tales in America, England, and Ireland have to do with Jack, the lazy fellow who somehow always manages to save his neck, get rich, and marry into royalty. (Especially good are *The Jack Tales* by Richard Chase, probably in the school library.) There are dozens of stories in every culture about the "trickster" character outwitting his enemies and friends (e.g., Brer Rabbit - see two good, short simple stories in *Knee High Man* by Julius Lester, an excellent book for storytellers.) After introducing several stories about one of these stock characters, have the children write their own stories about that character. *Except for cases where the written language is crucial to the story, memorizing a story word for word is generally not the best way to learn a story. When you know the story, start to tell it to yourself in your own words. If you get stuck, go back to the book, but when you've read the difficult part over, put the book down again. Describe what you see in your mind's eye.

Begin a story either by telling it or distributing a print-out so that they can read it, but stop at a certain point and have the students finish it.

This is a good starting point for writing stories, since it gives definite direction to their work, and helps in their grasping the concept of story line. On another sheet, I give an example of the start of a story which leaves the child with the opportunity of defining the conflict and resolving it. (See "Barnak of the Forest".)

Act out the story.

After telling a story, or after a group of children has read a story, I often have them break up into groups and develop the story into a short skit. The skit re-emphasizes the story line and characters, and gives them the opportunity to speak out in front of a group.

I hope this all helps. If there are particular activities related to storytelling which you use and find to be effective, I'd love to hear about them.