

Storytelling tips for the novice and the expert.

It can happen in almost any class. Kids are engaged in learning through hands-on experiences, and then it hits. The class forms a circle for story time and the mood sours. Active learning turns into glazed looks and restlessness. The teacher reads through the story in a flat monotone voice. And kids endure one more boring story from the Bible.

Christianity is a story-based faith. The stories of the Bible are crucial to our children's growth, but we teachers often spend an abysmally short amount of time preparing to teach it. And it shows. If we want kids to grow, we must reform our Bible story preparation and delivery.

Meaning

Read the story for yourself. What does it say to you? Do you find it interesting? What could it say to your children? What questions would they ask about it? How can you make it interesting to them? How can you help them understand what it's saying?

Look for ways to connect with kids' everyday experiences by emphasizing certain aspects of a story. A pastor once told the story of the prodigal son to an urban Bible club. He explained that the boy wasted all his money on things like video games and candy. Another teacher who told this story in a rural setting emphasized how the son ate pig food.

As you prepare to tell any Bible story, work on the elements of good storytelling-characters, point of view, conflict, involvement, and style and delivery.

Characters

Dust off the people in the Bible that you discuss in your story and make them real. One man described Goliath as someone more than 2 feet taller than Michael Jordan. He got everyone's attention. When telling the story of Sarah and Isaac, a teacher dressed as Sarah and borrowed a 6-week-old for his acting debut as Isaac.

One adventurous teacher, let the 5-year-olds act out a series of Bible stories. They wore biblical garb and went outside where a teacher read the Scripture and the children acted it out. An unexpected line came from the 5-year-old Zacchaeus who had climbed a tree. When Jesus said, "Zacchaeus, you come down," he replied, "I can't. I'm stuck!"

Point Of View

Decide who could best tell the story: you as teacher, a person in the story, or a person outside the story. Dialogues often work well with children, especially when people from the Bible converse with kids in their own language. Costumes help and may be as simple as a bathrobe and a head covering.

Sometimes a person or even a character outside the story may supply the point of view for telling it. When the fifth- and sixth-grade material focused on Jeremiah and Baruch ([Jeremiah](#)), I invited Cinderella (a senior higher) to class.

I told the story and "Cindy" stopped me with questions. As she scrubbed floors and felt sorry for herself, I told her about someone else who had every reason to feel sorry for himself. We discussed the trials and troubles of Jeremiah. We talked about the princes in the story because Cinderella had a great interest in princes. Later, the class remembered all the information from the story.

Conflict

Good stories have suspense and movement to hold the listener's interest. Sometimes we take out the conflict in Bible stories because we assume everyone knows the ending. But the tension is what makes the stories real.

When you let kids experience the conflict that the people in the Bible felt or faced, your children are more likely to learn. During a story, ask questions such as: What do you think Noah thought about while he built the ark and it wasn't even cloudy? What do you think James and John's dad thought when they left their fishing boats and followed Jesus? How do you think it feels to be on the sea during a storm?

Involvement

Kids will remember better what they've experienced with several senses, rather than just what they hear. So involve kids.

A "Life Saver" story is one way to do this. As you tell the story, stop and ask a question periodically. Give the child who answers a Life Saver candy. Use the questions to emphasize truths or applications from the story.

Another approach to encourage participation is to choose words or phrases that you'll repeat several times throughout the story. Ask children to make certain sounds or motions whenever they hear these words. This keeps them attentive and active in the storytelling.

You can use this approach with a variety of stories, from Jesus telling his disciples to let the children come to him (the disciples tell the parents, "No, No, No," complete with shaking heads and fingers) to Jesus calming the sea (make motions and sounds for the rocking boat, the waves, being afraid, then being still).

When our first- and second-graders heard the Creation story, our framework for it was a giant wall mural. I made a border around the paper that resembled the edges of celluloid film, then divided the mural into "frames."

Prior to the story, groups of children each illustrated one part of the Creation. During the story, groups pasted their artwork for each day on a frame of the "film." The children were part of telling the story and saw how it all fit together.

Style And Delivery

Style and delivery are the way you tell a story. Practice and preparation make you more effective in style and delivery. Practice by telling the story aloud. Stand in front of a mirror as you speak. Or tape-record yourself and listen for ways to improve. Even better, videotape yourself and critique your style and delivery.

Use words children use. Try out hand gestures, facial expressions, and varied speed and volume of your voice to create suspense and interest.

When you prepare your Bible story, list all the sensory experiences from the story. If your story is about Paul and Silas in jail, think about the smells, sights, sounds, feelings, and tastes. Weave these sensory connections into your facial and body gestures to make the story come alive.

Carol Younger is a free-lance writer in Kansas. Please keep in mind that phone numbers, addresses, and prices are subject to change.

How Are You At Storytelling?

If you answer "no" to any of these questions, practice working on the area in question. If you answer "yes" to all the questions, keep practicing on your way to becoming a master storyteller-just like Jesus.

1. Is the story interesting to you?
2. Do the characters seem like real people?
3. Have you included descriptions and emotions children can relate to?
4. Are your words understandable to kids?
5. Do you practice the story aloud before you tell it to kids?
6. Do you work at making eye contact with kids?
7. Do you vary the rate and volume of your voice?
8. Do you use a variety of facial expressions and gestures?
9. Do you use different approaches to your storytelling?
10. Do you use specific ways for kids to participate?