

Telling it Together with a Story Sack

Are you a novice storyteller, an early years or primary school teacher or a librarian? Does the thought of leading a storytelling session for a small group or classroom full of children make you nervous? Do you simply want to improve or gain new skills or grow in confidence?

Story sacks may just be the thing for you! Not only do they create excitement, invite curiosity and encourage participation but they provide a simple solid basis for a successful storytelling session.

What is a Story Sack?

A story sack can be created from any large bag (or even a pillowcase). An oral story, picture book or, wider general theme provides the focus of the bag; and a variety of related objects and suggested activities are included to entice exploration and stimulate a love for reading and the art of storytelling.

Commonly found objects include: picture books, factual books, toys, soft toys, puppets, backdrops, props, hats and dressing up items, musical instruments, audio, games, sensory objects, cards, and activity booklets.

Where can I find a Story Sack?

If you would like to have a go at making your own, The National Literacy Trust have produced a very handy guide. It is free, downloadable and includes directions for the making and using of story sacks based on The Three Little Pigs and We're Going on a Bear Hunt. You can find it here: www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0000/3210/Story_sack_guide.pdf

If you are a member of Pinterest® (if not, why not?!) a cursory search will inspire an almost limitless variety of ideas. Indeed, you may also want to include 'story bag', 'story box', 'story basket' or 'sensory tub' in your search. Here is a link to help you get started (or keep you going!) <https://uk.pinterest.com/renitaboyle/story-bags-boxes-baskets-tubs/>

If you would rather not make your own story bag, help is at hand! Several companies produce them ready for use.

Indeed, you may already be familiar with the story sacks produced by Storysack® and have easy access to them via your local primary school or library. Some schools and libraries have a loan arrangement for those working in child-care or storytelling capacities. It is worth asking if this is the case for you and, if not, helping to set it up.

There are a huge number of Storysacks to choose from and an excellent website to support the use of them here www.storysack.com

How can I use a Story Sack?

Once you have created, purchased or borrowed a story sack, you will want to prepare yourself to use it! At its most basic, here are five things to know before you go.

1. Know your group, setting and timeframe.
2. Know yourself: skills, strengths and weaknesses.
3. Know your session structure.

4. Know what is in the story sack and how you will use it.
5. Know the story and how to tell it.

Here are ten things to help you think into these basics and reflect more fully on how to make the most of your story sack and your session.

1. Think about the group you will be working with, the setting you will be in and the timeframe you have.

The clearer you are about the needs and expectations of the group and the practicalities of your situation, the better the experience will be for all concerned. Is it a group you know well or not at all? Will it be a one off session or a regular commitment? What are the ages, stages and abilities of those who are likely to come? Are there any special needs you need to consider or be made aware of? How much or how little time do you have with the group? Will you be indoors or outdoors? In a large noisy gym, an open public space, a classroom or a quiet corner? Who will be there to help you?

2. Think about yourself as the storyteller, play to your skills and strengths.

The better you know and prepare yourself, the more confident you will be. What are your personal goals, needs and expectations? What are your physical needs? Will you need a chair or kneel on the floor? Have access to a bottle or glass of water? What areas of your storytelling technique do you feel comfortable or uncomfortable about? How will you warm up your vocal chords, calm down your nerves, exercise flexibility but remain focussed? How will you create a welcoming, safe and fun environment? How will you play to your skills and strengths as a storyteller? How will you challenge yourself and develop beyond your comfort zone?

3. Think about the structure of your session; the elements, order and timing of activities.

The structure of your session will obviously depend on the needs of the group, the time you have and the contents of your bag.

If you are making your own story bag, you get to choose everything in it and plan what activities you plan to do right from the start. Therefore, you are likely to be planning your session first and creating your bag around it.

If you are buying or borrowing a ready-to-use story sack, you have the basis for a great session to hand. However, you may need to adapt it for your purposes. For example: a card game designed for parent and child will not be useful in a group of twenty.

Generally, I find this order most helpful and adapt to suit.

- Gathering activity/craft/game
- Settle in action song or tongue twister
- Story sack picture book with props
- Craft
- Story sack factual book activity
- Oral story

- Goodbye song

4. Explore the contents of your story sack for yourself.

Although story sacks can be used right off the peg with minimal preparation, this is not the most effective thing to do. Your goal is to use the contents of the story sack to create the best possible experience for those attending your session. Make some time well in advance to explore what is in the sack for yourself: take everything out and have a good look at it. Play with it and have a go, become familiar with what is there. Make sure to read any suggestions contained in the bag for how to use it. Think about your group and how they might respond to what is in front of you: which activities will be most suitable for them? Which will need adapting? Which will you leave out? What will you need to add in - an oral story, tongue twister, song, parachute game, craft, poem, etc.?

5. Read the picture book for yourself and practice how you will tell it as a story.

Your story sack will contain an engagingly written, beautifully illustrated picture book. It is also likely to contain props or a backdrop for helping you to tell it. These are often puppets, soft toys or simple objects.

Read the picture book until you become familiar with it but remember that it is essentially a well-told story. Look for ways in which you can engage your group in telling it with you. Try giving each character a different voice or find a repetitive phrase within the text that you can all say together. Use eye contact, pauses, change of tone, pace and volume. Create suspense, tension and resolution in the way you tell it.

Try to resist the temptation to simply hold the book up for all to see and read it aloud. Instead, engage as much as possible with the objects given. Preparation will bring confidence and give you the opportunity to work out any kinks or difficulties. Think about how you will reveal the characters and backdrop. Will you keep them out of sight until needed? Think about how you can help volunteers from the group to re-tell this story to their peers.

6. Prepare an oral story - no books.

Your bag may or may not contain a suggestion for a traditionally told oral story- one that is told without the aid of a book. If a suggestion is not included, I would encourage you to add one to the mix. If you feel uncomfortable telling a story without props, I would encourage you to make it a goal.

A brilliant story brilliantly told should be the aspiration of every budding storyteller. While this can be aided by props to great effect, something truly wonderful occurs when we tell stories eye to eye, ear to ear and heart to heart.

You will find excellent storytelling resources and workshops via the Scottish Storytelling Centre. Here, for example, is a free, downloadable Early Years Starter Pack ideal for use with story sacks. www.tracscotland.org/sites/default/files/10-earlyyearsstarter.pdf

7. Use facts from the fact book.

Take some time to think through how you will best use a fact book during your session. Guidance or ideas may already be included for consideration in a ready to use story sack. If not, choose some pertinent or interesting facts from the book and use them creatively. Simple quizzes, colouring sheets or art projects work well. Use the fact book to find out more about the people or places in the picture book or oral story.

8. Encourage discussion - ask searching questions.

Your bag may contain a set of questions or a card of discussion starters to use with the story. If not, create a set of your own. Ask searching questions, you will be surprised how much a well-framed question will inspire. I often use these:

- I wonder what part of the story you liked best?
- I wonder who you were in the story?
- I wonder if there is anything you would change about the story?
- I wonder how you felt during the story?
- I wonder what you will remember about that story when we go from here?
- I wonder if you could tell that story?

9. Get crafty with it.

Include a simple craft in your session. Think through the materials and space you will need for whatever it is you choose to do. This is made much simpler if you create a kit of basics that is ready to go when you are. Mine includes thirty pairs of scissors, glue sticks, colouring pencils, crayons, markers, water-colour pencils, paint brushes, plastic place mats and baby wipes. I just add to it what I specifically need for the session.

10. Enhance your session – add in the ‘extras’.

There are many things that you will not find in a story sack that would exponentially increase the enjoyment and flow for all concerned!

Introduce a ‘mascot friend’: a puppet or pair of puppets or a few soft toys that are not part of the story sack. They will, however, become part of your group. They can be part of the ‘hello’ and ‘goodbye’, kids can hold on to them during the story, include them in activities, tell jokes to them. The list is as endless as the fun.

Consider introducing some simple gathering activities to engage folks until everyone has arrived; board games or a very simple craft. Ensure that everyone has a name tag; use a welcome song or chant to increase the sense of safety and belonging within the group. Equally, use a goodbye song or chat to wish everyone safe home.

Have a few active games and energy busters ready to go. Parachutes are fantastic tools to have: they provide a natural shape for circle time and immediately create a sense of co-operative play and group belonging. It is amazing what you can do with a parachute or piece of lycra even in the confined space of a classroom or library.

Sing, even if you can't! Silly songs or campfire favourites are hugely popular. They lend themselves to participation and are naturally full of many of things that make storytelling so enjoyable: rhythm, repetition and rhyme.

And, of course, leave enough time to play. Let the group explore the contents of the story sack for themselves, encourage them to re-tell the stories to one another. Encourage them to explore long after the session is over.

As we have seen, story sacks may be best known for their use in classrooms and libraries or at home with support from parents. However, they are also hugely useful to blossoming storytellers- providing, as they do, the basis for a solid story session in a sack. They are automatically engaging, easy to use and can be further enhanced by any oral story you choose to tell or song you choose to sing within the same theme. They are also great for helping kids themselves to tell stories to one another, a training ground for future generations of storytellers.

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