

# **Stories**

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# STORIES AT A GLANCE

*It's hard to conceive of life without story.... [Telling stories] is not just passing the time of day. It's the mechanism through which we explain our world and come to understand who we are. Levi Strauss*

*Storytelling is fundamental to the human search for meaning. Mary Catherine Bateson*

## **What are stories?**

Stories are a part of each of our lives almost everyday. We tell each other stories about our families and our experiences; we live out stories in novels and in newspapers; we watch stories on TV and in movies, we make sense of our experiences and our lives through the stories we create. In the classroom, stories can be used by teachers to link abstract learning to concrete stories, to connect new learning to prior knowledge, to create positive learning communities, and to increase students' interest in whatever lesson is being learned.

## **Why should teachers use stories?**

In 1996, 80 Canadian university students were asked to describe the teaching strategies that their professors used that most helped them learn. In those interviews, the most common response from students was that stories significantly helped students learn new ideas during classes. Stories are entertaining and engaging, and they give learners a concrete context in which to place abstract ideas. Stories make ideas real.

Teachers can use stories to illustrate important ideas being delivered. In fact, stories are often the part of a lesson that students recall most vividly. For this reason, teachers should use stories to illustrate content that is especially noteworthy so that students can carry away strong recollections of important material.

## **What are the characteristics of effective stories?**

Effective stories are short, clearly related to the content students are learning, engaging (funny, emotionally compelling, or surprising). Stories will also only be effective if they are of interest to students.

## **Where do I find stories?**

Stories are all around us in movies, books, short stories, news articles, almost everywhere. However, many of the most compelling stories come from personal experience. One way teachers can find meaningful, effective personal stories is by creating a personal story line.

## IC CHEAT SHEET

1. Identify what kind of learning the story supports (mechanical or metaphorical)
2. Identify the purpose of the story (anchor, prior knowledge, thinking device, interest generator, community builder)
3. Create (or revisit) a personal story line
4. Write it out
5. Tell the story effectively

# 1. MECHANICAL VS METAPHORICAL LEARNING

## **What kind of learning is taking place?**

Before choosing a story and planning how to teach it, teachers should consider what kind of learning they want their students to experience. One way to think about learning is to sort learning under two organizing concepts: mechanical and metaphorical (Knight, 1999).

### **Mechanical Learning**

Mechanical learning refers to the learning students experience when the content to be learned in a class is unambiguous, when the outcomes are unmistakable and straight forward, and when there is a right and wrong answer that can be clearly identified. Examples of mechanical knowledge might include phonological awareness, memorization of essential concepts and terminology, grammatical terms, math facts, and so on. When a teacher employs instructional practices to enact mechanical learning, often called direct instruction, the teacher wants the students to master the content pretty much in same way that he or she understands it.

### **Metaphorical Learning**

This type of learning shares attributes with metaphor; it is by definition ambiguous, and functions indirectly. Metaphorical knowledge has no clear right and wrong outcome. For example each person determines and develops their own understanding of intellectual attributes like aesthetic response, personal attributes like compassion or heroism, and many creative acts such as higher-order writing activities. Metaphorical knowledge is complex, ambiguous, and so uniquely individual that we damage it if we reduce it. When a teacher employs instructional practices to enact mechanical learning, often called constructivist practices, the teacher wants students to make their own sense of what they are learning.

## **What does this mean for stories?**

When a story is told to support mechanical learning, the teacher should clearly explain the links between the story and what is being learned, directly explaining the purpose and meaning of a story

When a story is told to support metaphorical learning, the teacher should **not** explain the meaning of the story nor should the teacher telegraph the links between the story and what is being learned.

## 2. IDENTIFY THE PURPOSE OF THE STORY

Stories can be used by teachers to serve several purposes. Some of the most common types of stories are listed below:

**Anchor:** Teachers can make it easier for students learn and understand new knowledge if they use stories to make the new knowledge more concrete. In the movie, *Big*, for example, the lead character played by Tom Hanks helps a child learn his algebra by telling a story about a football game. Stories that are used as anchors need to be simple enough to be easily understood. Anchor stories should also be crafted so that the links between the story and the concrete are extremely easy for students to see.

**Prior Knowledge:** Stories that provide additional information about content students are learning can give students important prior knowledge for learning their content. The stories of a teacher who walked in the civil rights marches in the sixties, for example, might help students better understand the civil rights movement being discussed in US History class. Stories that are used to supply prior knowledge should be vivid, filled with details that make it easy for students to picture the topic being introduced.

**Thinking Device:** Teachers can use stories to prompt student conversation and dialogue in the classroom. For example, a teacher might tell a story about a young boy who steals when he is hungry to facilitate conversation about ethical behavior. Stories that are used as thinking devices need to be simple enough to be easily understood but they also need to be complex enough that they can be interpreted in several ways. A too simple story, with only one interpretation, rarely engenders meaningful conversation.

**Interest Generator:** Stories are often used as “hooks” to capture student attention (in fact presenters have used stories to catch audience attention for generations). Effective interest generators are often surprising, emotional, humorous, or compelling in some other way. Interest generator stories should capture students’ attention, be tightly organized, and brief.

**Hopeful Stories:** Teachers can use stories as one attempt to motivate students to action by telling success stories that students can relate to their own circumstances. Stephen Denning refers to these as “springboard stories.” Hopeful stories are most effective when they are brief, when they include few details (by keeping details to a minimum you make it easier for students to see themselves in your story). Most importantly hopeful stories have got to sound realistic to students while also clearly showing that students can be successful at the task being described in the story. If stories sound implausible to students, no matter how positive the outcome, they can actually decrease a student’s expectation of success.

**New Perspectives:** Teachers can help students see perspectives other than their own by telling stories that are told from various perspectives. New perspective stories should be vivid and written so that students feel sympathy for the central protagonist.

**Epiphany:** Some stories can powerfully communicate important lessons we have learned by describing an event that leads to a new insight into our principles, character, or beliefs. Epiphany stories are most effective when the teacher includes enough details for students to picture what is being described. Epiphany stories can fail if they show the teacher in too positive a light simply because children might think their teacher is bragging and be turned off by the story.

**Community Builder:** The kind of stories told in a class can do a lot to create the kind of learning community in a class. Stories that authentically elicit warm-hearted emotions, can be used by teachers to foster those kind of emotions in class. However, stories that belittle others, that evoke negative emotions may evoke those kind of emotions in class. Effective community building stories are authentically inspirational, positive, and hopeful. Authenticity is critical, though. If students think a story is hokey, it can have the opposite effect to that which the teacher intended.

## **IDENTIFY THE PURPOSE OF THE STORY**

1. Anchor
2. Prior knowledge
3. Thinking Devices
4. Interest Generator
5. Hopeful Stories
6. New Perspectives
7. Epiphany
8. Community Builder



# HOW DO I CREATE A PERSONAL STORY LINE?

## **Purpose of a personal story line:**

Once people recognize the value of stories, the next challenge is to figure out where to find them. One simple way to do that is to create a personal story line, a simple graph that helps you remember many stories from your own life. This is usually an enjoyable task, that takes about an hour and that can quickly leads to the recollection and organizing of many stories that can be used in the classroom.

## **Laying out the line:**

Take a large piece of paper, turn it horizontally (what we call landscape mode on PowerPoint) and draw a line across the middle of the page. Put your birth date at the start of the line (on the left side of the page) and put the current date at the end of the line (on the right side of the page). We'll call this the lifeline.

## **Events:**

Think about the major events in your life. Then, draw vertical lines up from the lifeline, at the approximate spot on the line where an event would have taken place. For example, something that happened right after your birth will be right beside your birth date. Something that happened yesterday will be right beside the end of the line. Then, label each line with the event you've noted. Write the label right on the line. Make sure you leave room at the top of the page for more information.

## **People:**

Repeat this process for people. Draw vertical lines down from the lifeline to represent that have had an impact on your life. Place the lines at the appropriate spot on the lifeline to depict when you met someone. Your mother, for example, will be right at the start of your line. Then put the name of each person on the line.

## **Add Stories:**

Now think about the people and events you've recorded. What stories do you remember when you think of them? Take time to mull over all many of the things you did at each time or with each person. When you recall a story write a few words (ideally one or two) above the event or below the person in the space that remains on your personal story line. Write with small print because you'll have many stories you'll want to remember. Consider the 8 different purposes might serve.

## STORY GRAMMAR

**Escalation:** A series of story components (for example events) are structured so that each new component is more intense or powerful than the previous one.

**Hero-Conflict-Resolution:** A hero we sympathize with encounters an obstacle or conflict and (in some admirable way) overcomes the conflict or obstacle.

**Building & Upsetting Expectations:** A story appears to be moving in a particular direction and then a twist in the narrative is included to surprise or entertain the listeners.

**Self-revelation:** To enhance your relationship with your students, tell a story about your life that provides some information about your personality or life.

## EFFECTIVE STORIES CHECKLIST

Effective stories are...	√	Comments
Not Lame: Is this story of interest to students or just the teacher?		
Concise: Cut out every word that you can. Shorter stories are more powerful.		
Vivid: Have you included enough details to paint a rich picture?		
Emotional: Will the story touch students' hearts?		
Surprise: Can you make the story more effective by including a surprise ending?		
Humble: Stories that celebrate a teacher's successes can sometimes be off-putting for students.		

**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:**

# Telling Stories

- Write your story out ahead of time to ensure you have structured it effectively.
- Be sure to have students' attention before you begin.
- Tell the story conversationally. Don't memorize the story, and especially don't read off the written. Strive to make tell your story almost as informally as stories told around the dinner table.
- Keep it simple and short.
- Be energetic. Adopt an appropriate pace (quicker than your usual cadence, but not so quick that students cannot keep up).
- Alter your pacing for effect.
- Use pauses for effect.
- Be explicit about the connections between your story and the content being learned if you are using the story for mechanical learning.

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