You’ve just read a story that you loved, and you can’t wait to share it with someone. You start talking about it, and before you know it, you’re telling it, and your listeners are enthralled. It’s such a satisfying experience that you decide to learn about storytelling and even hold story hours.

There are many reasons to tell stories to children. Pragmatically speaking, storytelling is all about language. When children listen and focus on a story told to them, they are developing listening, comprehension, and

By Judy Freeman
Hearing stories also makes a child want to read more of them. Storytelling helps turn kids into readers. But perhaps the best reason to tell stories is that it brings joy to the teller and listener alike.

Historically, public librarians have done more to introduce children to stories than anyone. They routinely hold weekly programs of songs, stories, crafts, and activities for babies through teens. Often, these programs are dependent on reading aloud, not storytelling, but you can easily integrate storytelling into a weekly session. Sometimes you’ll find you’ve read a picture book aloud so many times, you already know the story. Try telling it without the book and see how it goes. You will get hooked on telling.

If you are a school librarian with a structured schedule, you have a built-in weekly audience and can probably slot in storytelling on a regular basis. If a social studies class is studying Native Americans, explorers, or the 50 states, offer to tell stories related to those subjects. If students are learning about astronomy, animals, or weather in science class, propose a program of pourquoi tales that provide listeners with a very different explanation of scientific phenomena.

Ready to get started? Let’s look at a few simple steps.

SELECT
The key to a successful program lies in the story or stories you use. Above all, choose stories that you love and that fit your personality. If you think of yourself as vivacious and sparkling, you might enjoy telling a funny or silly folktale; if you are naturally quiet or shy, it might work best to choose a romantic or magical tale. You don’t have to actually sit down and analyze your psyche, but your selections will reflect your inner self. What are you looking for are stories that speak to you—that sing to you, even. Sometimes they will grab you by the throat and demand, “Tell me to someone!”

You’ll need to read through many stories until you find some that appeal to you. Everything you read—a family anecdote, a folktale, a picture book, a self-contained chapter of a novel, a piece of narrative nonfiction, a newspaper article, or something you come across online—is fair game. Go through the accompanying lists of picture books and folktales and mark off the ones that surprise, startle, and satisfy you. Your job is to figure out which stories you can’t live without. You need to develop your own singular repertoire from a variety of sources.

There are storytellers out there who have done some of the heavy lifting for you, publishing collections of tales that are easy to tell, and giving you step-by-step directions on how to tell them well. Margaret Read MacDonald, Anne Pellowski, Dianne de las Casas, Pleasant DeSpain, and storytelling spouses Martha Hamilton and Mitch Weiss have all written multiple books filled with deliciously fast and funny stories you can read today and tell tomorrow. These folks are masters, so why not try out some of their tried-and-true? If you hear a friend or a professional storyteller tell a tale you love, make it yours. There are scores of storytelling videos on YouTube. Borrow like crazy. Add your own spin, plus any bells and whistles that made the telling work for you. (Of course, if you tell a story you heard from someone else, be sure to give credit to your source.)

If you find texts of some of your stories online, bookmark or save them on your computer, but also print hard copies, making sure the URL is on the first page in case you need to find it again. You will be grateful for that hard copy, which you can either tuck away in your folder for later or carry around with you everywhere while you are learning the story. With books, be sure to write the source of the story, so you can track it down easily if necessary.

LEARN
When you select a story to tell, begin by reading it all the way through at least three times. Then start telling it to yourself. If you forget a section, stop for that session. The next time, reread the story and start telling it all the way through again. You don’t have to actually sit down and analyze your psyche, but your selections will reflect your inner self. What are you looking for are stories that speak to you—that sing to you, even. Sometimes they will grab you by the throat and demand, “Tell me to someone!”

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Here are a few favorite tales that aren’t overly difficult to learn.


“*Butterball*” in *The Troll with No Heart in His Body, and Other Tales of Trolls from Norway.* Lise Lunge-Larsen. illus. by Betsy Bowen. Houghton Mifflin. 

Butterball, a young boy, is carried away by a troll but finds a way to get free.


To which of his seven sons should Ogiloussa the hunter bequeath his cow-tail switch, for helping to bring him back from the dead?

**Epossumondas.** retold by Coleen Salley. illus. by Janet Stevens. Harcourt. 

Each time a little possum tries to carry home Epossumondas’ old Courlander and George Herzog. Holt. 

In this native American tale, Brown Squirrel encounters a hungry fox, a black bear, and a tiger; all want to eat her.

**The Cow-Tail Switch** in *The Cow-Tail Switch and Other West African Stories.* retold by Harold Courlander and George Herzog. Holt. 

To which of his seven sons should Ogiloussa the hunter bequeath his cow-tail switch, for helping to bring him back from the dead?

Epossumondas. retold by Coleen Salley. illus. by Janet Stevens. Harcourt. 

Each time a little possum tries to carry home gifts from his auntie, his exasperated mama says, “Epossumondas, you don’t have the sense you were born with.”

**Fin M’Coul, the Giant of Knockmany Hill.** retold and illus. by Tomie dePaola. Holiday House. 

The Irish giant and his clever wife, Oonah, outsmart the giant Cucullin.

**The Funny Little Woman.** Arlene Mosel. illus. by Blair Lent. Dutton. 

Japanese ogres kidnap a woman to cook their rice.


On her way to visit her daughter, Grandma encounters a hungry fox, a black bear, and a tiger; all want to eat her.


In this Native American tale, Brown Squirrel asks bragging Bear to stop the sun from rising.

**The Hungry Coat: A Tale from Turkey.** retold and illus. by Demi. S. & S/Margaret K. McElderry. 

Ostracized for wearing an old, smelly coat to a rich friend’s banquet, Nasrettin Hoca returns wearing a fine silk coat and feeds his dinner to it.

**Mabela the Clever.** retold by Margaret Read MacDonald. illus. by Tim Coffey. Albert Whitman.

In this story from Sierra Leone (with a chantable refrain), Mabela is the only mouse who pays attention when the big orange cat entreats the mice to follow her into the forest.


In the land of slavery, Sarah and her baby escape the overseer’s whip by flying to Freedom. See also the picture book version of the story.


The Chicken of the Family. Mary Amato. illus. by Delphine Durand. Putnam. “We have a secret to tell you. You’re a chicken,” Henrietta’s siblings inform her.

Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type. Doreen Cronin. illus. by Betsy Lewin. S & S. Farmer Brown’s cows demand a typewriter in exchange for their milk.


Mary’s Penny. Tanya Landmann. illus. by Richard Holland. Candlewick. A farmer’s sons compete to take over his farm, though it’s the smart daughter who proves that brains are better than brawn.

Pete the Cat: I Love My White Shoes. Eric Litwin. illus. by James Dean. HarperCollins. The feline steps in strawberries, blueberries, and mud, each of which turns his new shoes a new color.


Splinters. Kevin Sylvester. illus. by the author. Tundra. Made to clean uniforms and tape hockey sticks by Coach Blister (who favors her own two daughters), a poor, aspiring skater, is at last aided by her fairy goaltender.

“Talk” in The Cow-Tail Switch and Other West African Stories. retold by Harold Courlander and George Herzog. Henry Holt. A farmer, digging up yams in his garden, is flummoxed when a yam speaks to him.

Tasty Baby Belly Buttons: A Japanese Folktale. retold by Judy Sierra. illus. by Meilo So. Knopf. When the wicked oni kidnap the village babies, Uriko-hime sets out to rescue them.

The Three Billy Goats Gruff. retold by Peter C. Asbjørnsen and J.E. Moe. illus. by Marcia Brown. Harcourt. Three goat brothers encounter a fierce troll guarding a bridge.


Tops & Bottoms. Janet Stevens. illus. by author. Harcourt. Hare offers to plant and harvest crops for Bear and split the veggies. It seems like a good idea….

Two of Everything: A Chinese Folktale. retold by Lily Toy Hong. illus. by author. Albert Whitman. Poor old Mr. Haktak is astonished to find that whatever he throws into a pot automatically doubles.

“Sody Sallyratus” in Grandfather Tales. retold by Richard Chase. illus. by Berkeley Williams Jr. Houghton Mifflin. Off to the store to buy some sody sallyratus (baking soda), a little boy, his sister, an old man, and an old woman are eaten by a mean old bear.

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