Write Away With Me

Storytelling and Creative Writing Inspiration

By

Beth Cregan
Introduction

In the course of my week, I am in schools and kindergartens presenting storytelling and writing workshops, as well as teaching twice a week at ‘The Writer’s Club’. Over the last years and especially in my role as Director of Write Away With Me, I have discovered many ideas and writing tasks to inspire the next generation of writers. I often receive emails with questions relating to writing and literacy skills from teachers and parents in Australia and around the world. I started collecting these questions and they have formed the basis of a series of articles which can be found in our monthly newsletter. In this Ebook, you’ll find some of the most popular questions discussed.
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(Or Inside The Storytelling Experience!)

After a recent storytelling workshop, a young teacher stopped me and asked, "How do you get the kids to listen to you like that? You had them ... mesmerised." Now let's face it, children these days can be a tough audience to impress. They're accustomed to a continuous stream of instant high tech infotainment. At any one time, they'll be listening to an ipod, watching T.V and/or playing on their ipad. Sometimes all at once. But the latest research shows that this constant multitasking makes it difficult for children to focus their attention on a single outcome. (No kidding!) And all too often, children are passive participants in these activities, so the opportunity to think creatively and activate their imagination may be limited.

So why then, is something as simple as storytelling, so engaging?

The teacher who described the effect of storytelling as 'memerising' was pretty close to the truth. A great story simultaneously engages the child's physical, mental and sensory channels. When a child in your class is immersed in a story, they are not only interpreting complex information, they are visualising it, they are feeling it. And if the immersion is deep enough, they can momentarily lose track of time and 'travel' to a different space. Their eyes open wide. They start to imitate the teller's facial expressions. Their breathing slows a little. They hang on every word. The storyteller also experiences this change of energy. The story itself may be fictional but the storytelling experience shared by both the teller and the listeners, is very real. And just a little bit magical...

So if a child is actively listening and I have their undivided attention, storytelling can become a powerful teaching tool?

Yes definitely - there's only one condition really. For all this valuable learning to take place, the listener must feel connected to the teller. In a busy classroom, I think we sometimes underestimate the importance of giving the children our full attention but storytelling demands this of us. It snaps us right back to the present moment. Before I
begin telling a story, I gather the children around me so I see each of their faces, especially their eyes. I tell them about an invisible string the reaches from their eyes to mine and that the story travels along this string to them and their feelings travel back to me. This exchange is exactly why storytelling builds trust and creates community. Sharing stories connects us to each other. And to think that all this can take place in your classroom or home with no costly resources or special high tech gadgets. No gimmicks at all really. Just you, the kids and a story. Okay, want to get started?

**Here are three quick storytelling possibilities you can try today:**

- Children love to hear stories about their teachers and parents. Think back to what it was like to be the same age as the students you teach. Tell them what life was like for you. How have things changed? What games did you play? Who were your friends? What pets did you have? Did you know any funny characters? Let them ask questions. Your personal stories will creep out of the crevices of your memory and come to life right before your eyes.

- Find an extended joke that has a beginning, middle and an end so it's easy to remember. You'll have them not only listening but laughing along with you. On second thoughts, better find a couple of jokes - guaranteed they will want an encore.

- Re-tell a favourite fairy tale, folk tale or a fable. These stories live in our memory and can be easily adapted and extended to suit your audience.

Interested in reading more? Check out these blog posts relating to storytelling!

http://www.writeawaywithme.com/category/literature/storytelling/

Pinterest Boards for Storytelling: http://pinterest.com/bethcregan/storytelling/
How does oral storytelling impact on a child’s development?

Not so long ago, some colleagues and I were discussing why oral storytelling doesn’t hold its own in today’s curriculum. It’s usually overshadowed by the ‘Big Guns’: reading and writing. Of course, reading and writing are essential skills. What’s more, reading and writing skills can be measured and converted into charts and statistics and used to map a student’s progress. But something crucial is overlooked when we simply focus on measuring outcomes. When storytelling steps out of the shadows, it is, in fact, the very foundation of all language skills. And not only is it holding up the ‘Big Guns’ - it plays a part right across the spectrum of human development. Reading. Writing. Vocabulary and language development. Oral language skills. Communication. Active listening. Creativity. Critical thinking. Comprehension. Problem solving. Social and Interpersonal Skills. Personal development. Emotional intelligence. Spiritual awareness. Philosophy. And the list goes on. Makes you wonder then, why we sometimes leave it to chance, doesn’t it? Storytelling is a powerful means of communication. And the people (children and adults alike) who learn to harness this power, become skilled and effective communicators.

What Are The Links between Storytelling and Creative Writing?

If storytelling has a hand in almost every pie (in terms of skill development), let’s consider for a moment, the link between oral storytelling and a child’s creative writing potential.

Storytelling develops a writer’s ability to:

• connect with others through shared experiences.
• use their imagination and creativity.
• look for logical solutions and solve problems.
• increase their knowledge base.
• extend their vocabulary.
• play with language and appreciate the power of words.
• enrich their writing with sensory details and imagery.
• understand the intricacies of spoken language such as rhyme, repetition, vocabulary, context etc.
• understand narrative structures and patterns, sequencing, settings, characterisation, themes, mood, atmosphere etc.
• adapt their writing for an audience.

So don’t be fooled! Storytelling may look like entertainment and feel like pure fun, but it packs a punch.

**Three Great Stories To Share**

Do you want share some great stories with your children or the students you teach? These three modes of storytelling: string stories, paper cut stories and drawn stories, have taken my fancy of late. (They will definitely feature in the term 3 program of The Writer’s Club!) Next time you want to inspire a little creativity, grab a a ball of string or paper, pencils and a pair of scissors and let the storytelling begin!

[Butterfly Paper Cut Story](#)

[Super simple String Story](#)

[Richard Thompson Draw and tell Stories](#)
Why is creative writing such an essential skill for children to develop?

I believe creative writing is one of the most important skills a child can learn; it stretches their imaginations and offers a positive outlet for self expression. Writing as a means self-expression, can instill a positive sense of self achievement and really boost a child's self-esteem. It's not just an individual process either, it's a social skill involving observation, storytelling, collaboration and communication.

Creative writing allows children to:

- learn to engage and entertain an audience.
- foster their creative expression.
- stimulate their imagination.
- clarify their thinking and develop logical thought processes.
- search for identity – when creating characters, children will naturally explore their own feelings, fears, hopes and values.
- extend their reading and writing skills.
- learn empathy – they walk in the shoes of their characters but they also learn to actively listen and appreciate the ideas and feelings of their peers.
- develop their creative thinking skills.
- have an opportunity to express their emotions, ideas, dreams and wonderings.

Creative writing is not only fun, it's an important life skill.

Kimberley O'Brien, Child Psychologist, says in her article, 'Childhood Creativity in Decline: Putting the Spotlight on the Issue of Supporting Creativity in Children',

"Research shows that children who actively participate in creative writing activities benefit in multiple ways when it comes to their personal development and education. Children are likely to be well rounded and develop better life skills like conflict resolution, stress management, understanding and empathy when using creative writing as a means of self-expression."

The article (which is sponsored by Pilot Pens), discusses handwriting, creative writing and creativity in children. It's worth a read.
What can you help a child tap into their imagination and generate original ideas for creative writing?

In the course of a week, I meet all sorts of young writers. There are some children who dive confidently into any writing activity, ideas spilling out effortlessly onto their page. (I certainly envy them!) But there are some students, who don’t even get to their tables before they are telling me that they don’t have anything to write about. Other children suffer the same dilemma but are a little more subtle. Instead, they recycle characters and plots from their favourite books and movies or even borrow an original idea from the person sitting next to them. Instead of being fun, the writing process can become a source of frustration for some children.

So why do some students find the process of generating ideas so difficult? Firstly, if they are spending much of their time passively engaged in computer programs, gaming and TV, their capacity to visualise and imagine a story may be quite limited. Imagination is, after all, a creative muscle and it needs lots of exercise and experiences. And secondly, the ability to think creatively, is directly linked to confidence and self esteem. If you don’t see yourself as a creative thinker and writer, then it goes without saying that it will be harder to experience success. However there are some writing activities that naturally develop fresh ideas as well as building a young writer’s confidence. Want to help the child who is fresh out of ideas?

Try some of these sure winners!

The Character Hall of Fame:

Use pictures of characters either drawn by the students or from a variety of other sources for your Character Hall of Fame. Characters could be people, animals, aliens, monsters...the possibilities are endless. Choose a picture and ask your class to consider questions like:

What is this character’s name?

Greatest fear?

Happiest memory?

Personality?

Likes/Dislikes?

Where do they live?

Favourite food?
Record the answers and display these with the image. Keep these character profiles in a folder or even displayed on the wall. This can become a great resource for developing original characters to star in future stories. Take it one step further and put these characters to work with these simple writing tasks.

**Sleep Tight**

Choose a character. Describe this character's bedroom or the place where they sleep. What is on their bedside table? Somewhere in this room/place is a special photo which your character loves. Who is in that photo? What is happening in the photo?

**What's Inside?**

Choose a character. In your character's bag, they have three items that mean a great deal to them. What are the objects and why are they so important to this character? What sort of bag would your character choose?

**Creative Connections**

Another imagination booster is Creative Connections. Divide your class into teams of three or four and give each team, three randomly chosen pictures or objects. Set the timer for 10 minutes. Each team must come up with a story outline that somehow includes and links the three pictures or objects. Ask teams to share their story.

**Shared Stories**

This is great team writing activity that begins with a drawing. Organise your class into small groups of four or five and give every child a blank piece of A4 paper and a grey lead drawing pencil. Set a timer for one minute. During that time, have each children start a picture on their paper. When the timer goes off, everyone must stop what they are doing and hand their paper to the left. Set the timer again, and the next child continues on with the picture. Repeat this until every child has their original picture in front of them. Allow time for children to share their pictures in groups and tell the stories to each other. What can you see within the picture? Any clues that tell you where this picture might be? (Setting). Any characters springing to life? What are their names? What are they doing and why? After the oral storytelling has finished, provide the children with another piece of paper. Play some thinking music and give everyone the chance to jot down ideas and even create a working title for their story. I love this activity because it totally eliminates the blank page and the anxiety that often comes with having to ‘come up with an idea’. This sort of writing is a real team effort!

And finally...

And of course, no other activity promotes visualisation and encourages imaginative thinking, quite like storytelling or even reading aloud. So make some time in your week to gather the children close to you and escape together into a different world. Your imaginations (and your creativity) will thank you for it!
Storytelling and Creative Writing Inspiration
Beth Cregan

What Is It About Zombies?

Not long ago, after a meeting of The Writer's Club, some parents and I were talking about what topics children choose to write about and it wasn't long before zombies reared their ugly heads. "What is it with zombies?" One mum pleaded, "and how can I get my child to stop writing about them?" Another parent had been questioned by her child's teacher about his writing and whether he was exposed to these ideas at home. She was mortified. So it got me thinking...

What is it with zombies and how can I get my students/children to stop writing about them?

Interesting question.

And whilst I don't have a foolproof method for eliminating zombies from children's writing, I have gathered together some thoughts on the matter. Firstly let's remember, that literature has always reflected pop culture, and whether we like it or not, zombies, ninjas and warriors of one kind or another, are part of this generation's culture.

I'll admit up front, I don't 'get' the zombie phenomenon and I probably never will (Put it down to the generation gap.) But I do respect the rights of children to express their ideas. So lately when I see this theme appearing in stories, rather than involuntarily screwing up my face, I have started to ask the young writer questions like, "What is it about zombies that appeals to you?" And the answers are interesting. The writer will start telling me about good versus evil and how the good characters are fighting to save the world and the zombies are sucking out their brains and in the end, the zombies win! (Which isn't surprising - it's hard to fight the good fight without a brain.) And I have to say, that despite my reservations, I have read some pretty impressive zombie stories written by children. I can't honestly say that stories in this genre now make me now feel all warm and fuzzy,(they don't) but I do see these stories in a slightly new light. Instead of seeing a kid before me, who I assume (rightly or wrongly) probably plays too many computer games, I see a young writer who is playing with lots of big ideas like power, control, morality and death. And isn't that what literature is supposed to do?
Another criticism I hear about this genre of writing, is the child's complete lack of awareness regarding their audience. Not everyone likes reading about zombies. (Well, not everyone likes reading about fairies either but let's face it, they are so much less confronting.) But the best way to help a young writer learn about his or her audience is to provide an opportunity for the children to share and workshop their writing. They will soon learn, that just because the story is about zombies or fighting, that alone, doesn't make it inherently interesting. Another problem I often encounter is that zombie stories are usually full of action and these scenes tend to play out quickly in a child’s head. Capturing this, in words, can be really difficult. It reads perfectly to the writer - they know what they want to say. Again, the best way of demonstrating this mismatch between what the writer imagines and what is written on the page, is to get kids to read their story to an audience. And then encourage them to edit and rewrite scenes to clarify their images and make their writing sing. (Not sure if 'sing' is quite the right adjective for zombie literature but you know what I mean.)

Okay, so you have a child who only wants to write in this genre? Take a breath. Relax a little. Instead of banning zombies, try introducing him or her to a wide variety of literature, genres (and authors) that explore similar themes. Adventure stories, quests and science fiction often explore similar themes (like good versus evil) and provide plenty of action. A varied literary diet is good for young writers. After all, writers can not live on zombies alone. Or try introducing a writing activity that naturally changes the audience focus. Why not write a picture book, for a younger audience? A perfect opportunity then arises for the child to try writing in another style or genre. After all, picture books for young children do not usually feature zombies and this alone, is an interesting philosophical talking point with children.

But above all, no matter what your children are writing about, encourage them to write and share and edit and write again. Because whilst zombies may be clever enough to suck your brains out, a well written story has the power to open up your mind and spin you right out of this world!
How Can I Support Reluctant Writers?

In a research paper conducted by Paul Gardner, teachers identified a range of characteristics that were common to reluctant writers. I certainly recognise characteristics of both of my children in this list, at various stages of their development. Although we think of children who struggle with literacy belonging to this group, reluctant writers are found right across the developmental spectrum of any classroom or group.

A reluctant writer may:

- be good at telling stories orally but has difficulty putting ideas on paper independently.
- be a perfectionist, therefore fear of getting it wrong prevents writing.
- lack ideas due to insufficient experiences; a) of life  b) of story through reading or being told stories.
- find writing a physical struggle - poor fine motor control/pencil control.
- find spelling difficult which then impedes writing.
- have 'internalised a view of writing as a set of grammar and language rules rather than a creative process.
- have difficulty remembering what s/he is writing about (memory be an issue).
- be unable to build upon their writing.
- quickly start and finish their writing but do not develop ideas so the plot is often superficial.
- prefer to play it safe with their writing and is reluctant to take risks.

Four Pre Writing Strategies to Support Young Writers

Pre- writing and planning are two of the most important stages of creative writing and it’s here, at the beginning of the process, that we can really set the stage and encourage young writers to enjoy playing with ideas.

Use Mind Maps to Generate Story Ideas

Mind mapping (made famous by Tony Buzan) allows children to record their ideas through the use of symbols, pictures and language. Mind mapping as a pre-writing activity engages both the creative and logical elements of the brain and gives children a chance to experiment with ideas.
and possible outcomes. The idea is to explore as many ideas as possible - some will work, some may not, but all ideas are accepted into the mix. Mind maps combined with paired peer discussion enable writers to both record and share their ideas through storytelling. I have found this to be most effective. If you're interested in learning more about mind mapping for children, head over to Draw Me An idea for some interesting examples.

Encourage Storyboarding to Visualise and Structure a Story

Creating storyboards helps children visualise how their story might unfold. This is a vital skill for storytellers. Once you 'enter' into the world of your story, your imagination and sensory perception are called into play. Your right brain loosens up a little. Storyboarding is a great planning tool, especially if the physical act of writing is difficult. Langwitches Blog has a great post about storyboarding and the writing process.

Create Word Banks to Build Vocabulary

Both storyboards and mind maps use words and phrases to capture ideas and thoughts. These words can be shared and collected to create a word bank for the class or for individual students. This is especially helpful for children who need assistance with extending vocabulary and/or spelling.

Provide Storytelling Models to Provide Structure

Providing a template or a storytelling model can sometimes provide a solid structure for writing. Rather than limiting creativity, it allows some students to soar because it reduces anxiety and the pressure of developing all the elements of a story at once. A good example of this is found in a pre writing activity we did at The Writer's Club last term. Using the storytelling model of 'The Gingerbread Man', pairs had to:

create a new character made out of something unusual

think of a reason the character might want to run away

name three people that might chase this character

decide how will the story end

Rather than inhibiting the creative process, providing a template such as this, actually produced some hilarious and very creative innovations on the original story.

Finally let's be mindful of the learning environment we create for children. Writing is a complex process, bringing together a number of sub-skills such as spelling, syntax, vocabulary, fine motor control etc. In Year 3, my daughter Neve was in a classroom where spelling and grammar were the Gods of any writing task. Neve, a competent and creative writer, struggled with spelling, so she wrote very simple stories that year. She wanted to spend her break outside, rather than in her classroom correcting and rewriting her work. "I like writing stories", she told me, "but I love the monkey bars!!" Let's aim to create positive and balanced learning environments that support and inspire young wordsmiths, to take risks and enjoy the journey, that is creative writing.
Storytelling And Creative Writing
Beth Cregan

About the Author
An experienced teacher of 27 years, Beth Cregan is dedicated to inspiring the next generation of writers! She’s taught classes from Early Childhood to VCE and in 2010, she combined her passion for books, writing, storytelling and creative thinking to launch ‘Write Away With Me’. Now in its third year, Write Away With Me offers a wide range of original and creative storytelling and writing workshops across Victoria. As the Director of Write Away With Me, Beth develops storytelling and literacy workshops for Early Childhood and Primary Schools as well as a range of after school (The Writer's Club) and holiday programs (The Writer's Masterclass). She also presents professional development workshops which provide a wealth of hands on activities to allow parents, teachers and a range of professionals to become aware of their unique power as writers, storytellers and creative thinkers! Beth also writes a monthly newsletter and maintains Write Away With Me's website and blog.

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