

# Stories to “Do”

Judy Sima

As a school media specialist and part time free-lance storyteller I have found that storytelling has helped books come alive for my students. What better way to teach about other cultures, places, and times than through the magic of stories? And stories which give children an active role really get them involved with the excitement of other places and books. I can always tell that a story is successful if my students ask if we can “do” that story again. These participation stories put students directly into the telling and make them feel central to the story.

In a classroom, participation stories are especially effective if you’re just getting started and your repertoire is limited. Children want to hear them again and again. Participation stories also make students more attune to my tellings, seeking ways that they might join in.

Here are some favorite “do” stories that have worked well for me. The stories seem to fall into three categories with some crossover.

1. **Peat and Repeat:** Group response and repetition of phrases.
2. **Actors and Action:** Kids become an actual part of the story.
3. **Puppets and Props:** Very simple objects add to the visualization.

**PEAT AND REPEAT:** Group response can be as simple as roaring terrible roars, gnashing terrible teeth, showing terrible claws, and rolling terrible eyes as in *Where the Wild Things Are*. I always begin that story by getting my audience to put their “wolf suits” on one leg at a time. Given a little encouragement, even adults love to roar out their frustrations.

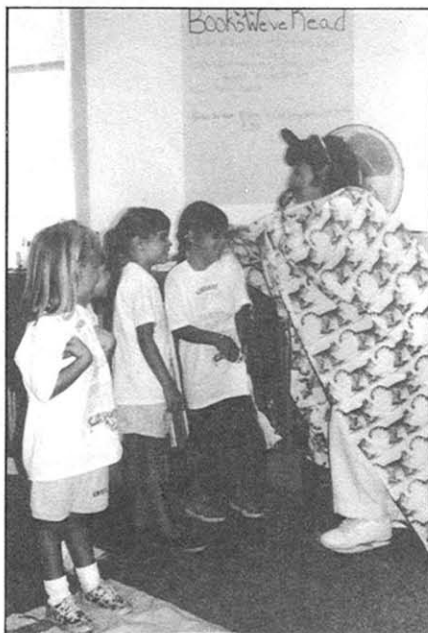
Another favorite is Eric Kimmel’s story of the African trickster, *Anansi and the Moss Covered Rock*. Little kids love to shout “KPOM” after the animals say, “Isn’t this a strange moss covered rock.” I elicit additional animals for Anansi to trick by using Lion and his yams and Elephant and his bananas as examples. This “do” story works equally well with older students. They enjoy the creative challenge of ad libbing and topping one another. Middle

school kids think they’re very clever when they suggest their teacher instead of an animal and put pizza or cheeseburgers in front of her rather than fruit.

Sometimes I add repetitive phrases for the audience to join in. In *The Wolf’s Chicken Stew*, the wolf takes down “his pots and his pans, his mixing bowls, and mixing spoons.” He adds “flour and sugar, and butter and eggs,” then he “mixed and stirred, and stirred and mixed” as he makes donuts, pancakes, and a big chocolate cake to fatten up Mrs. Chicken. This is all done with hand motions to make the story more fun.

Many storytellers have a version of the Yiddish folktale, “The Tailor.” The tailor starts out with a coat. As the coat wears out, he cuts it down to a jacket, vest, tie, covered button, and finally a story which never wears out. In my version hand motions accompany the refrain, “He wore it here, he wore it there, he wore it everywhere, he wore it and wore it and until he wore it out!” The kids also like to join in the sounds of the scissors, sewing machine, and needle and thread.

Many stories work well with group responses if you hold back and wait a couple of seconds for the audience to join in. An excellent example is “Grade one, grade two, grade three, grade four, grade five, grade six, aaaaand Kindergarten” in *Moria’s Birthday* or “Nooooo” in *Thomas’ Snowsuit*. Kids can raise and wiggle their fingers and say along “hundreds of cats, thousands of cats, millions and billions and trillions of cats” in *Millions of Cats*.



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**ACTORS AND ACTION:** The two stories my little ones ask to “do” over and over again are *Fat Cat* (A Danish folktale) and *Dance Away*. In the first, I cut a hole in a sheet, put it over my head, add paper whiskers (attached by scotch tape to my upper lip) as I become the fat cat who eats the pot of gruel, the old woman, too, and everyone he meets along the way. The children are the characters he meets. Their line “What have you been eating my little cat, you are so fat!” I repeat all the preceding characters and say, “And now I am also going to eat you!” As I do, I meow, put the sheet over the kid’s head and pretend to eat the child, who slips out the back and waits until the woodcutter opens me up. Then everyone goes back through the sheet in reverse order. The anticipation of being “eaten” can be almost overwhelming if you hesitate a couple of seconds before saying, “you!”

In *Dance Away* I grab the hands of the nearest children and they join me in Rabbit’s dance as we dance away from Fox, “left two three, right two three, left skip, right skip, turn around.” The end of the story sometimes gets lost in giggles as the entire class tries to follow the steps. Even macho fifth grade boys have joined hands and danced away with me.

If stories do not have a ready refrain, I will sometimes create one to give the actors more lines. In the Armenian folktale, *One Fine Day*, I play the fox and the kids are the characters I meet as I try to recover my tail from the old lady who has cut it off. When the child (old woman, cow, field, etc.) asks for more milk, grass or water, I respond, “How am I going to get more milk?” Their response: “That’s your problem!”

*Too Much Noise* is fun because the audience can join in with the creak of the bed, squeak of the floor, swish swish of the leaves, drip drip of the faucet, and whistle of the tea kettle. Individual children become the cow, sheep, donkey, hen, dog, and cat that old man Peter brings in to try to get rid of the noise in his house. I have the kids “audition” the animal sounds before I choose them. Once, a donkey I had chosen said, “Woof, Woof.” I figured the donkey must have been bilingual!

**PUPPETS AND PROPS** add a new dimension to stories I “do.” I search out my own props but purchase ready made puppets. Nancy Renfro makes a wonderful old woman in three skin tones with a plastic window over her stomach so the kids can see the toy fly, spider, bird, etc., as they drop them down her throat in I

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*Know an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly.* Renfroe also makes a caterpillar with a butterfly fingerpuppet I use with *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. I've cut out and laminated large construction paper fruit and junk food with a hole in the middle big enough for the caterpillar to eat its way through to become a beautiful butterfly. This story works well at nursing homes where it is sometimes difficult to get the residents to participate.

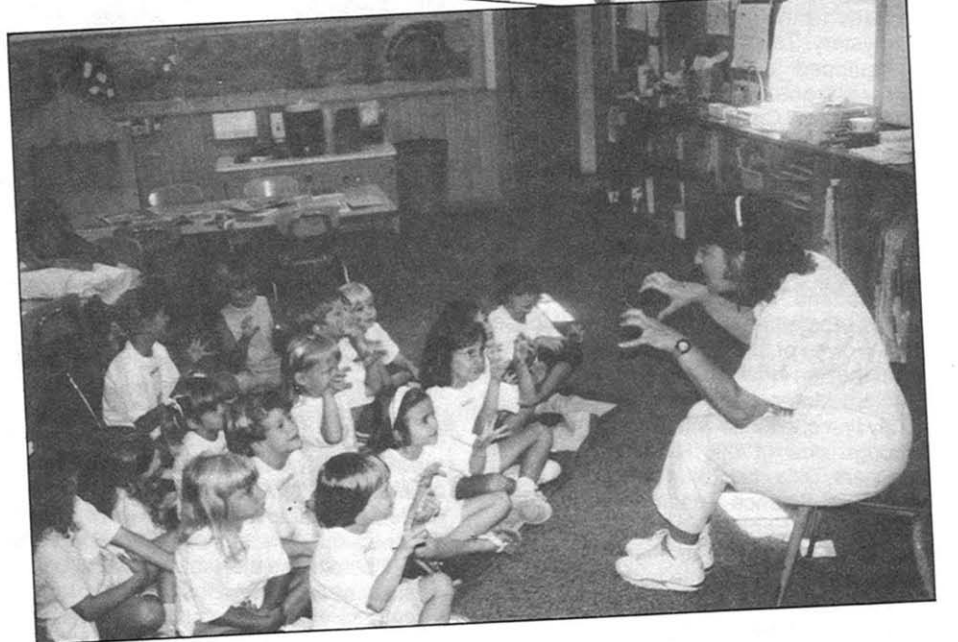
I love to pick the class clown to be the part of the Rabbi or wise man in another Yiddish story, *It Could Always Be Worse*. The Rabbi wears a pair of Groucho Marx glasses with a moustache. The "poor unfortunate man" has a large plastic bow tie, his wife has a pot and wooden spoon, the children have squeezey toys, and the grandmother has a shawl and knitting needles. The audience is divided up to be the animals he brings into the house at the Rabbi's suggestion. The kids act out their part as I tell the story. Even eighth graders get into the swing of this story.

I had the most fun gathering props for *If You Give A Mouse A Cookie*. I found a mouse puppet which retrieves the props from the audience at the appropriate time, and Toys "R" Us sells plastic cookies. The rest is fairly easy to find except for the toy refrigerator which a friend found at an antique show. I hand out the props and use a mouse puppet to gather them back as the story progresses.

With a little thought and experience, many stories you already tell can become "Do" stories. Add a refrain, wait for your audience to join in, give them an opportunity to suggest characters and watch the delight in their faces as they become the most important part of the story. □

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