



## Envision's Art of Storytelling Free Classroom Activity Ideas

### Teaching Students the Art of Storytelling

Before your students engage in a storytelling project, devote class time to discussing key story components. By the end of the discussion, your students should have a firm grasp of the difference between a compelling *story*, and a mere *report*.

#### Warm-Up

- Ask your students to share the titles of their favorite story – one remembered from childhood, or a recent book or movie they've enjoyed.
- From their list, select 4-6 popular choices that represent a variety of genres; for example, a fairytale, action story, love story, historical fiction, etc.
- Next, facilitate a discussion about the elements that made these *favorites*. What was interesting about each? What made it memorable?

### The Elements of a Story

During your discussion, your students will naturally uncover elements that are common to stories in general. List them on the board as they're identified, and examine the ways in which the authors successfully developed these elements in the Favorite Stories.

Your discussion should cover:

**Theme** – Some stories have a **theme** – a central topic, concept or belief, and some have a **moral** – a lesson learned. Were these elements present in the Favorite Stories?

**Character** – Most stories are about individuals – usually humans. A good storyteller enables their readers/listeners to clearly visualize each character, by eloquently describing both physical and personal attributes. The actions characters take should “ring true” to the reader, based on the individual traits that character exhibits early in the story.

Most stories focus on one or two main characters. Generally the central character is sympathetic and relatable, so the reader feels empathy for that person and is thus drawn more deeply into the events unfolding. The “good guy” is known as the protagonist and the “bad guy” is the antagonist. The best characters feel “real” to the readers, because they have both positive and negative traits.

Usually the most memorable stories result in some kind of meaningful **transformation** in the life of the main character.



**Setting** – Every story is set in a location that’s integral to the narrative. Again, the reader should be able to visualize the setting from the author’s description. Unusual settings, such as those that are particularly beautiful, scary, exotic, quaint or even alien may have a draw of their own, but familiar, everyday settings are also effective, enabling the reader to more easily visualize and connect with the story.

**Plot** – “Plot” is almost synonymous with “story” – it’s the flow of the story’s events, influenced, and to some degree *directed* by the characters’ corresponding reactions and decisions. Plots usually have three main elements: conflict, climax and resolution. Throughout the majority of the story, the characters are attempting to manage the conflict, which builds to the **climax** – the point of highest tension in the story, when the scales tip in one direction or another.

**Conflict** – The plot element known as “conflict” is crucial to the success of the story. As [Writers’ Digest](#) author Brian Klems said, “You do not have a story until something goes wrong.” Good stories include crisis, tension, struggle and discovery. “Page turners” are stories that create more and more tension as the story unfolds, intensifying the reader’s desire to discover the resolution.

A story without a **resolution** would be unsatisfying, leading readers to demand, “So what *happens??*” The story’s action and tension must be resolved, for better or worse. The resolution should make sense, based on the events that took place, as well as what we have learned about the characters. However, interesting plots often include a “**twist**” – an unforeseen turn-of-events that the reader wasn’t expecting, therefore resulting in an unpredictable resolution. Overly simplistic plots may lead your readers to comment, “Heck, we all *knew* that was going to happen.”

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## Storytelling Activities for High School

Here are the details/instructions for the classroom activities summarized in our blog.

### Storytelling for English Class

Storytelling exercises are great ways for English students to hone their creative and verbal skills as they organize the concepts and events of a story, and bring characters to life through vivid and artful description. Your options for story topics are wide open, and stories can be delivered verbally, or in writing. Here are a few fun ideas:

**A String of Pearls** – This group exercise brings students together to collaborate on a story, encouraging teamwork and extra creativity.

**Step 1** – Pick a topic, theme or genre and write it on the board.

**Step 2** – Divide your students into groups of 5-10, with each group arranging their chairs in a circle.



**Step 3** – Instruct the groups to devise a story that fits the topic, with each group member delivering no more than 4 sentences at a time, and stringing the story together using the contributions from each individual – like creating a string of pearls.

**Step 4** – Any student in the group can start the process – as soon as someone has an idea for the first 3-4 sentences, they share those opening lines with their group. The student sitting to their right goes next, filling in the next 3-4 sentences. The action continues, with each student taking their turn, as the story progresses to the right around the circle. No one can skip their turn. Remind the students that they must include all the story elements discussed earlier in class.

You may want to impose a time limit, or instruct the groups to have a completed story by the time the contributions have gone around the circle X times (choose any number you wish, based on your time constraints).

**Taking it to the Airwaves** – In this activity, your students create an ongoing “mini-series” story, which they will share with the entire school, over the school PA system.

**Step 1** – Tell your school administrator that you would like to reserve 15-20 minutes of PA time, once a week (or twice a month, or whatever timeframe works best).

**Step 2** – Determine how many “episodes” you want your story to have (4-8 is a good range).

**Step 3** – Ask your class to submit plot ideas for the story series. They don’t need to include details – the initial goal is only to select the story premise. It could be anything from, “A group of Navy sailors is lost at sea during war time” to “A family struggles to manage the severe depression or drug addiction of the oldest sibling” to “a group of students playing co-ed softball is abducted by aliens.”

**Step 4** – Once plot premises have been submitted, the class votes on their favorite

**Step 5** – The class writes the story. The entire class can collaborate on each episode, or you can divide the class into groups and assign each group to write one episode. Naturally, Group 2 would wait to begin until Group 1 completes the opening episode, and so on.

**Step 6** – Members of the class then volunteer or are elected to deliver episodes over the PA system, at the appointed times.

**The Living Journal or Blog** – This exercise can be an on-going weekly or monthly project. After you’ve determined the topic, simply ask the class to submit regularly-scheduled blogs or journal entries on this subject. Entries can be individual or group collaborations. Instruct the students to incorporate the elements of storytelling, so that their entries are vivid and captivating, rather than merely a report of dry facts.

Ideally your topic will be something relevant to the students, which they’re passionate about, so they’re inspired to write multiple entries. Each student can pick their own topic, or they can select a single topic for the whole class. **Topic ideas include:**

- Commentary on the 2016 presidential race, or any other current event
- Following a school sports team or on-going school project
- The biggest challenges we’ll face as adults



- Key issues on our campus today
- People who inspire us

Inspiring topics will lead to inspiring blogs, and we'd like to see them! Please remember to submit your students' best entries and you may see them featured on the Envision blog! We're currently accepting guest bloggers. Refer to the original blog for the submission link.

### **Storytelling for Journalism or Social Studies Class**

The Taking it to the Airwaves or Living Blog activities described above for English class can be easily adapted for Journalism or Social Studies. Simply pick a topic focus that focuses on current events and issues – local, national or global. Include an element of reporting for Journalism students. For Social Studies, you may wish to select topics based on pivotal issues or events from history, such as Female Suffrage, Slavery, Prohibition, Labor Unions, etc.

### **Storytelling for Marketing or Business Class**

Many of the most effective commercials or ad campaigns tell a story. They depict a scenario that the viewer can relate to and care about – perhaps a scenario in which the viewer would like to take part. They make the viewer *feel* something – and want to take action as a result. Obviously, the desired reaction is for that viewer to buy a product or service.

Many entrepreneurs are also telling a story when they pitch their idea for a new business. They are, in effect, saying, "Imagine that you're..." They then go on to tell a story in which the proposed new business meets a need or desire of the listener. Perhaps the entrepreneur is describing the romance or adventure of an alluring new resort or vacation idea. Perhaps he is describing a budget-priced car that makes a junior employee look or feel like an executive. Or perhaps he is describing a childcare product or service that makes a stressed working mom feel capable of Doing It All.

In this activity, challenge your Marketing or Business students to take on the role of either the Advertising Manager of new business entrepreneur, and pitch a product or business idea incorporating the art of storytelling.

### **Storytelling for Art or Music Class**

#### **For Art Class**

Separate your class into groups of 4-5. Ask each group to pick a favorite painting – one that evokes a story. The students then collaborate to compose the story that they feel the painting illustrates. After agreeing upon the story details, each group elects one representative to tell the story to the rest of the class. If desired, after all groups have told their stories, the class can vote on which group best captured the essence of their painting in their story.



### **For Music Class**

Songs are often stories set to music. This class activity is very similar to the Art exercise above, only in this exercise, the subject of your students' story is a song, rather than a painting.

Separate your class into groups of 4-5. Ask each group to pick a favorite song – one that evokes a story. The students then collaborate to compose the story behind the song. What set of circumstances led up to the events or emotions depicted in the song? Since lyrics are often written in the first person, what is the background or context of the singer's story? What will happen to the singer, and the person or people he's singing to or about? After agreeing upon the story details, each group elects one representative to tell the story to the rest of the class. If desired, after all groups have told their stories, the class can vote on which group best captured the essence of their song in their story.

Alternately, you could ask your students to write song lyrics that depict either a well-known or an original story.

### **Storytelling for History Class**

Separate your class into groups of 4-5 and ask each group to create an original historical fiction. Their central character can be a famous historical figure, or an everyday citizen living in a time of great historical importance. The story should incorporate the beliefs and issues of the day, as well as accurately portraying the setting of the historical event.