

Oral Mentor Texts

A Powerful Tool for
Teaching Reading,
Writing, Speaking,
and Listening

Connie Dierking
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Foreword by **Lester L. Laminack**

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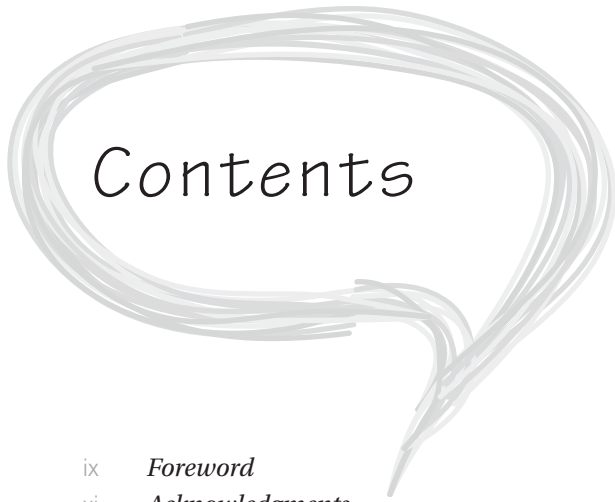
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To Madeline:
Let the stories begin!
C. C. D.



To all of the students I have taught over the years:
Thanks for filling my heart with stories.
S. J.



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Foreword

I grew up in the rural South. We are a people of stories. We know who we are and who our people are from the stories we are fed in childhood. Stories sustain us like food, nourish us body and soul. I know relatives I have never met from stories told on porches as daylight slipped into bed under the blanket of night. I have insights into the childhood of my mother from stories my aunts told to the rhythm of a porch swing. I know a life before electricity and running water, when children worked the fields and learned to hunt to help keep food in the bellies of their siblings. I know these things from stories told to the cadence of tree frogs and the mournful call of the whippoorwill.

Stories are powerful magic in every culture. They conjure up a past that predates our existence. They reanimate experiences that lie dormant in our psyche, events we have moved beyond. They connect us one to another, a quilt of humanity. Stories keep relationships and emotions and experience alive and thriving. Stories help us understand ourselves and others. Stories tether us to place, ground us with a sense of belonging. Stories serve as touchstones when we have difficult decisions to make. They are mentors from our past, our culture, and our shared experience with trusted others. We return to our stories over and over throughout our lives like a child with a security blanket.

Oral Mentor Texts: A Powerful Tool for Teaching Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening harnesses the age-old power of storytelling within whole-class “oral mentor texts”—teaching texts that students practice and internalize, a host of mentors in common, always on hand to support their reading and writing throughout the year. Connie and Sherra give us a clear, logical, elegantly simple process for creating oral mentor texts in the classroom to use alongside printed mentor texts to guide and support literacy instruction. They start by selecting a moment the entire class has shared. Next they write it down, carefully embedding craft details and teachable content they

will form lessons around. Finally they incorporate it into their literacy teaching as an oral mentor text. As students internalize and retell the story, Connie and Sherra use it to teach craft techniques and skills—leads, endings, dialogue, vocabulary, summarization, inferring, as well as listening and oral-language skills, to mention just a few.

Oral mentor texts are personal, accessible, and intimately understood. They are stories of a shared experience tucked into the pockets of each child’s heart and soul. They become the security blanket, the familiar and trusted resource that informs and influences each child’s knowledge of story grammar, structure, purpose, word choice, sentence variation, tone, and voice. They are with each student every day, all day. They influence how children approach printed mentor texts and how they construct their own writing.

Oral mentor texts offer something fresh and accessible in this era of increasing demands as we struggle to ensure that our students can access learning in ways that honor their humanity. While creating a level playing field may be beyond our reach, we can and we must create some common ground for all students. Connie and Sherra build on traditions of sound practice and common sense to develop patches of common ground from which our students can move forward in their learning journey.

Lester Laminack
Asheville, NC / Beaufort, SC



Acknowledgments

We have many stories to tell—after all, we are teachers, mothers, wives, sisters, friends. Every day, our lives are filled with small moments, unexpected happenings, and unique experiences that we weave into stories to be savored and remembered. We know that storytelling is best when the storyteller engages with an audience. We were very lucky that our editor, Zoë Ryder White, was a member of the audience we spoke to one spring day at the International Reading Association Conference. We were over-the-moon excited about the life-changing method of instruction we had embraced. After our talk, we met Zoë and knew we had found a soul mate. We thank her for understanding that stories are the foundation for not only living well but for reading, writing, speaking, and listening well. So we begin with a heartfelt thank you to you, Zoë.

Thank you to Natalie Louis for sharing her fireman story and introducing us to the power of a shared story.

Thank you to the coaches and teachers of Pinellas County Schools for your interest in learning ways of incorporating oral storytelling into your day and for sharing your own stories of success.

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Thank you to our friends and colleagues at Curtis Fundamental Elementary who listened to each one of our class stories and delighted in the simplicity of small children sharing an event.

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Thank you to our own personal mentors, those friends and fellow educators who have been with us always, no matter where we hung our work hat.

Thank you to our wonderful students who brought the stories to life, both in the air and on paper. And thank you to their parents for listening with bright eyes.

Thank you to our families for never complaining about the nights and weekends we were completely unavailable. You have our unending gratitude.

We feel fortunate that we were able to initiate, sustain, and finally complete this labor of love. Find *your* story, tell it loud and tell it clear. The benefits are priceless.



Introduction

Not Just Stories, but Oral Mentor Texts

It seems that summer is the only time we can finish conversations begun during the school year. Even after teaching together for more than twenty years, we look forward to summer days—not only for the time to breathe and recharge, but also for the clarity of thought a little distance from the school year can bring. Although we have taught in the same school, often in classrooms right next to each other, carving out the time for deep reflection can be tricky. Spending summers batting ideas back and forth, scouring professional journals, and talking, talking, and even more talking usually leads to fresh ideas. In fact, one of these summers led us to an epiphany: Oral storytelling could support our literacy curriculum.

That summer, Connie attended her first summer institute at the Teacher's College Reading and Writing Project. She remembers listening intently to staff developer Natalie Louis describing how her first graders had composed a letter to the firemen housed near her school, thanking them for their service in the aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy. For Natalie's class, it was the delivery of the letter—the class' physical journey to the fire station—that became the heart of the experience for the class. Natalie marveled at how her students asked her to retell the story of the letter delivery over and over again. She discovered that the power of this shared experience influenced other areas of literacy in the classroom. This story became a shared oral text. Students learned how to retell the story themselves, and Natalie was able to teach into their retellings in order to support comprehension development in reading and writing.

We had both used storytelling in our classrooms, but this was different. Using a retold shared experience as a classroom mentor text sounded like the answer to some big questions we had been asking ourselves and each other for a very long time:

- » What could we do to provide a greater scaffold for our ELL students and students in earlier stages of language development?
- » How could we offer a mentor text that students would know so intimately that they would be able to call it up in their minds when needed?
- » How could we make the stories students create in their school life support the stories they will encounter in their forever life?
- » How could we harness the power of oral language to enrich our students' comprehension?

Our first oral stories were born on the first day of school that year. A huge storm rolled in off the Gulf of Mexico. The dark clouds hovered overhead as Sherra's first-grade students rushed to the classroom from their Art special. Connie's third-grade students noticed the storm brewing from the classroom. This was the opportunity we were looking for: a shared experience that would be exciting to retell. Each of us crafted a story about this shared experience and began teaching the stories to our students the next day.

Sherra's class story went like this:

Yesterday was the first day of school. At the end of the day, we had art with Mr. Prankard. Just before 2:00, Mrs. Jones picked us up. "Hurry," she warned, "it's about to rain." As we walked to the car line, we noticed the gray clouds in the sky. The thunder rumbled. We wondered if we would make it to our cars before the storm.

Here is Connie's class story:

The sky grew dark, blocking out the sun that had shone all day. The first day of school had been uneventful, until now. Val peeked out the window as she gathered her new lunchbox and backpack, ready to head home. "Whoa, look at the sky!" she announced. Everyone turned toward the windows. Black clouds raced by and there was lightning on the horizon. Karei mumbled, "It looks really bad out there." Jabari said, "I sure hope we get to our cars before it starts to rain." Mrs. Dierking answered hopefully, "I'm sure you will if we all hurry." And with that we grabbed our stuff and raced out the door like a flash.

As the year progressed and we began using class stories in a variety of ways, we came to recognize how effective the class story was as an oral mentor text, so we began to implement oral language practice through storytelling as part of our literacy curriculum. We watched our students—all of them—speak with expression and confidence as they retold the story. Several students wrote the story during writer’s workshop, all on their own. During reader’s workshop, students made connections between storylines in the books they read and their class story. The class story was proving to be the mortar for building the bridge between the stories students tell and the stories they read and write. We were sold; oral storytelling had great potential for not only early language learners and ELL learners, but for *all* learners.

As we implemented oral storytelling in support of our students’ literacy growth, colleagues became curious as well, and we realized that all classrooms could benefit from this work. We understood that not only must we have a plan for choosing which stories to turn into oral stories, but we had to know how to incorporate district goals and guidelines. What’s more, we had to make sure that we were creating a system that would be replicable, not just tied to our particular classrooms and students. We didn’t want oral storytelling to be just another thing for teachers to implement; rather, we wanted to ensure that we were practicing oral language authentically in a way that would enhance instruction in all areas of literacy. So, in our second year of implementation, we began to take notes on our process so that we could answer questions like:

- » How do I choose an event to turn into an oral story?
- » Why do I write the story myself?
- » What do I include in an oral story?
- » How do I teach my students the stories?
- » How do I help students practice the stories?
- » Which parts of my day will be the most conducive for teaching the oral story?
- » How do I make explicit connections between student class stories and the stories of others?
- » Which text types can be used in oral stories? Could I build an explanatory or opinion story as well as a narrative?
- » Can I align class stories with literacy standards?

As we became more explicit and deliberate in finding, building, and using the oral class stories, the benefits for students became even more apparent. Students were pointing out everyday occurrences as topics for class stories. Walking to lunch

became an exercise in finding a story along the way. Paul accused Mem Fox, a favorite picture book author of ours, of copying our class story's sound lead. Posting story language on the wall as a resource for reading and writing was becoming an everyday occurrence. The class story was seeping into our literacy block and becoming a strong support for our literacy teaching.

Since that second year we have fine-tuned the process and have developed the method you will read about in this book. In a nutshell, the steps of the oral storytelling process are these:

1. **Identify a shared experience.**
2. **Build the story.** Compose the experience into an oral story, keeping in mind your students' needs as well as literacy goals and guidelines identified by your school or district. *(This is done by the teacher, in preparation for literacy instruction with students. In this way, you decide what skills are to be taught and which craft moves the mentor story will help your students practice.)*
3. **Practice the story.** Using predictable structures of gestures and symbols, students learn the story and are able to recite it from memory.
4. **Perform the story.** Presenting the story to an audience is the publication.
5. **Use the story** as a scaffold for comprehension during reading and writing.

What Do We Mean by Oral Mentor Texts?

Of course, there are myriad wonderful ways to use oral storytelling in the classroom. We want to make clear the distinctions between the method we propose—using a teacher-crafted story of a shared class experience as a mentor text—and the many other kinds of storytelling. Teachers often think of storytelling as simply retelling a story that was either read aloud or read independently. This kind of storytelling might include dramatization of the story. Fountas and Pinnell (2006) encourage this type of storytelling as an assessment of comprehension. Story retelling helps teachers determine whether students can grasp the main idea of a story and describe the main events. Gretchen Owocki (2003) thinks of retelling as a way to help children rethink their way through a text, thereby enhancing their understanding.

In other cases, storytelling can mean asking students to retell a family story, the kind of story that can be passed down from generation to generation. With our method of storytelling, a teacher-written shared classroom experience resembles a family story so that it speaks to a student's own experience. The difference, however,

besides being the story of a shared class experience, is that we build the story so that it is repeated the same way across retellings. (In my house, for example, the telling of my dad’s catch-of-the-day varies, from the prize being as small as a pinfish to one as large as a shark—it just depends on who is telling the story!)

Another brilliant form of storytelling, developed by Vivian Gussin Paley (1990), is based on students dictating their own invented stories to the teacher, which are then dramatized by the students and their classmates. Paley views storytelling as an extension of play, and an opportunity for each child’s story to be celebrated by the classroom community.

Finally, there is the language experience approach to storytelling. The Language Experience Approach (LEA) stems from the work of Lilliam Lamoreaux and Doris Lee (1963) and Sylvia Ashton-Warner’s work with Maori children in New Zealand (1963). This approach requires students to choose an experience to be dictated to the teacher. The words are chosen by the students and recorded on a sheet of paper for all to see. The teacher doesn’t compose the text to reinforce or practice previous skills or strategies, or to align with grade-level standards. The story is composed for students to read. The central principle of LEA is to use the students’ own vocabulary, language patterns, and experiences to create their own reading texts. The text unfolds in front of them as they dictate what they want the teacher to record. Although the oral component is important to building the story, the main focus of this kind of storytelling is to create a written text.

Our method serves a different purpose though. While students do perform the class oral story, the story is teacher-composed, based on a shared class experience, and stocked with specific skills and craft moves that will support students in their current reading and writing work. Our stories are literally designed to be oral mentor texts. Built deliberately by the teacher, the stories teach, reinforce, and practice identified skills and strategies. Once practiced and performed, students internalize the story so that it lives in their memories as a mentor text for both reading and writing. The story belongs to the students, remaining with them forever and lighting the way whenever they get stuck.

But How Can I Fit It In?

Many teachers have asked us, “How do I fit this in?” We always respond with, “Can you find ten minutes a day?” All you need is ten minutes. Just block off ten minutes right before lunch or right before students go home in the afternoon. Or practice the

story during classroom transitions—students can tell the story as they line up for the lunchroom or the gym.

The class story doesn't have to take a lot of time. You determine the structures that work for you based on how much time you have. Building the class story will take some thought, but the standards and curriculum requirements you incorporate are part of your teaching and planning anyway. And once the story is celebrated and sent out into the world, you can use it as a mentor text for whole-class or small-group reading and writing instruction and in individual conferences. Once stories are in kids' memories, they have them to enjoy, share, and use forever.

The oral class story is also cost effective: It's free! It's an authentic way to incorporate speaking and listening standards into reading and writing instruction. The class story is engaging, builds confidence, and will be remembered for years to come. All of this in exchange for ten minutes a day! When a colleague asked Sherra how she found the time to incorporate the class story into her literacy block, Sherra responded, "How could I not?"

How to Use This Book

Chapter 1 explains why we so deeply value oral storytelling as a form of composition and as a method of literacy instruction. We'll provide a summary of how use of class stories—oral mentor texts—generally unfolds across the year, moving from finding and building a class story to learning and practicing the story. We will show you how a story can grow and change along with the needs of your students and your sequence of instruction. Chapter 2 describes the process of choosing and "building" the class story. In Chapter 3 we continue with structures for introducing and practicing the story as a class. After the story is found, built, and practiced it becomes a tool for teaching. In Chapters 4 and 5, we give an overview of how skills embedded in the class story transfer into students' writing and reading work. We also include four categories of minilessons that we use during our transfer instruction. A barebones minilesson from each category along with a list of potential teaching points for use as support for reading or writing conferences will help get you started. Chapter 6 focuses on how to support your students as they choose and compose their own oral stories, in partnerships and individually. After all, this is the prize: watching our students spread their wings and fly, carrying their *very own* stories with them and calling

upon these stories as their *very own* resource wherever they may be! Many chapters will contain a section discussing the specific needs of ELL students. We will also link this storytelling work to the Common Core State Standards.

Child psychologist Jerome Bruner wrote, “We are storytelling creatures, and as children we acquire language to tell those stories that we have inside us” (1985). Oral language is the foundation for comprehension. Using class stories as oral mentor texts will allow comprehension to begin where it is most natural and innate—the story itself.

grabbed her grandfather's hand and dragged him toward our classroom. "Poppy, Poppy," she cried, "come see my classroom." At first, Katie's grandfather was a little reluctant because he thought he would be disrupting our class work. After a little coaxing from Mrs. Jones, he finally agreed to a visit. Mrs. Jones in-



CHAPTER

Why Oral Mentor Texts?

The Gasp Heard 'Round the Media Center: The Thirty Million Word Gap

A few years ago our principal shared the results of a vocabulary study during our back-to-school staff meeting. After conducting research in the homes of preschool children in Kansas City, Betty Hart and Todd Risley (1995) confirmed that while children from different backgrounds typically develop language skills around the same age, the subsequent rate of vocabulary growth is strongly influenced by how much parents talk to their children. They also found that children in professional families, whose parents talk to them more, increase their vocabulary at a quicker rate than their peers in working-class and welfare-recipient families. They dubbed this disparity “the thirty million word gap.” The teachers gathered in our media center gasped: Thirty million words are an inconceivably high number. The two of us once again came face to face with the question we had been asking each other for years: What can we do to help children bridge this cavernous gap?

Even though we can't influence the experiences students have before they enter our classrooms, we can be more deliberate about the language experiences they have while in it. As kindergarten teachers, we had been discouraged year after year by the number of children who entered our classrooms in August and left them in June still struggling to communicate. Although we had no curriculum and no time in the day to deliberately teach either receptive or expressive language skills, our literacy leaders assured us that by reading aloud and talking with our students, we were teaching

Cambourne's Conditions for Learning

IMMERSION

Students need to be immersed in a language-rich environment. The classroom should contain language-rich posters, charts, student work, displays, classroom libraries, and so forth, and students should hear lots of talk and stories read aloud.

DEMONSTRATION

Students need demonstrations throughout the day of complex receptive and expressive language.

ENGAGEMENT

Students must actively engage with language while learning, and learning must be active, not a spectator sport. Opportunities to use language in authentic ways must be provided.

EXPECTATION

Students learn in an environment in which the teacher communicates high expectations, believing that the student can and will use language in many ways and situations.

USE

Students need to use their knowledge in their everyday lives. They are expected to apply this new knowledge today and every day.

APPROXIMATION

Students should feel free to take risks with their learning. They must experience success in a safe, supportive environment. They should feel that their efforts will not be judged as imperfect.

RESPONSE

Students need to receive feedback on their language use from significant others at school and at home.

(Adapted from Brian Cambourne's *The Whole Story: Natural Learning and the Acquisition of Literacy in the Classroom*.)

Figure 1.1 Brian Cambourne's Conditions for Learning

these skills implicitly. While this is true up to a point, we knew this approach was not helping all students succeed. We knew we needed to teach these skills explicitly as well as implicitly. After considering the conditions of learning identified by Brian Cambourne in his work with language acquisition (see Figure 1.1), we decided to provide our students with language support through the telling of shared experiences.

Teaching Oral Language Skills Explicitly

Sharing news or retelling a favorite book every day immerses students in language. Even before beginning our work with classroom stories, we used appropriate language, and we encouraged our students to approximate and use appropriate language while speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Students always received feedback from us and from their classmates.

However, this wasn't enough to help those students who had entered school behind their peers catch up. A case in point: One afternoon Sherra assembled her students on the rug and read aloud *Our Tree Named Steve*, by Alan Zweibel (2005). In this story, two-year-old Sari can't pronounce the word *tree*, so she calls the tree in her yard *Steve*. As Sari grows up, the tree, Steve, plays an important part in her life. In the end Steve has to be cut down but is remembered with fondness forever. The story prompted much talk about family, getting older, special objects, and the like. As the discussion was winding down, Emma raised her hand: "Mrs. Jones, who is Steve?" All the conditions were present for Emma to comprehend the story. What had gone wrong? And what could Sherra do to help her?

The Importance of Retelling

Retelling a text increases both the quantity and quality of comprehension. It requires a number of skills, including inferring, determining importance, visualizing, and summarizing. Retelling not only is an important strategy for deepening comprehension but also enhances language development and communication skills (Benson and Cummins 2000).

Robert Munsch is a favorite author in Sherra's first-grade classroom. Her students love to listen to their classmates retell *Stephanie's Ponytail* (1996). Recently, small groups reenacted the antics of Stephanie and her ponytail. Each group retold the story a little differently. One group emphasized the different ways Stephanie wears her ponytail. Another zeroed in on how her classmates copy her hairstyle. No group

retold the story exactly the same way, but all the groups retold the story succinctly, in the proper order. Participating in the retelling helped the students in each group to do the following:

- » Develop storytelling language
- » Organize thought into a sequential story
- » Pay attention to detail
- » Recite sentences of different length
- » Lay an important foundation for understanding story elements
- » Retrieve and pronounce words

Retelling gives readers an opportunity to process what they have read by organizing the information and explaining it to others.

This can be difficult for beginning readers, who are often confused by the sequence of events. The Max and Ruby series, by Rosemary Wells, were favorites in one of Connie's kindergarten classes. She introduced *Max's Birthday* (2004) in an engaging, interactive read-aloud. In the story Max receives a wind-up toy lobster for his birthday from his sister Ruby. Max is afraid of the lobster because it chases him around the room. Finally Max falls and the lobster stops right on top of his tummy. Discovering that he likes the toy lobster after all, Max says, "Again!"

Ryan struggled with his retelling: "It was his birthday. He was chasing the lobster. He got a lobster. He had a birthday. He liked the lobster. He got a lobster. It was his birthday." He saw the book as separate events, not as a whole, with no links between the birthday, the lobster, and Max. There was no story grammar, no ability to determine what was important. Ryan needed explicit instruction in how to tell a story and then additional time to practice.

The value of teaching students to retell stories multiple times is clear. For example, kindergartners Melissa and John are retelling *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* in the puppet center. After retelling the story once, Melissa wants to retell it again. They begin arguing about how many billy goats will go over the bridge. Melissa is certain that three goats will go over; John is convinced that because they've told the story once, all the goats are already gone. As Melissa holds up the first billy goat puppet and starts the story, John says, "That's not him. The troll went over the bridge and he is gone. We already told that story!" For John, the story happens once and that's it. The goats are gone, no need for retelling. John has not yet internalized the idea that an event in a story can be told over and over as if happening for the first time. We can

teach him that rewinding a story and reliving it again is at the heart of living as a literate being.

Going About It

We began by teaching our students how to retell a familiar story. We read and reread aloud picture books with a strong storyline and then had students retell these stories to a partner using picture support. Many of them sounded as if they were reading the words. Elizabeth Sulzby (1991) identified eleven stages that students go through on the way to conventional reading, and we saw our students progressing along this continuum. (See Figure 1.2 for a summarized description.)

Their retellings helped us assess their comprehension of familiar stories. We began to wonder what would happen if their own stories sounded like they came from a book. What if their *own* stories became mentor texts?

Elizabeth Sulzby's Stages of Emergent Storybook Reading

STAGES 1 & 2

Retelling includes labels and comments, following the action.

STAGES 3 & 4

Student tells a story with a sense of beginning, middle, and end using story language and syntax.

STAGES 5-7

Retelling is still picture-based; student begins to sound like a reader but is not yet watching the print (still relying on memory).

STAGES 8-10

Child begins to say "I can't read this" because of developing awareness of print; some aspects of conventional reading begin to combine with the previous picture-based retellings.

STAGE 11

Student demonstrates conventional reading behavior with a familiar book.

(From Wiley Online Library)

Figure 1.2 Elizabeth Sulzby's Stages of Emergent Storybook Reading

Telling a story is the foundation for writing a story, and some children need to have that foundation shored up. Recall the puzzled look that sometimes comes across a student's face after you ask, "How's it going?"

You: "How's it going?"

Student: "I wrote right here that I love my dog."

You: "Wow, I see that." *[Pointing to the accompanying drawing]* "Is this your dog?"

Student: "That's my dog."

You: "So what's going on here with your dog? Tell me the story."

Student: *[Stares at the teacher]*

Our students come to school bursting to tell the stories of their lives. Andrew rushes in on Monday morning: "Mrs. Dierking, I lost a tooth yesterday. It came out when I was eating breakfast and I almost swallowed it." Xavier rushes in on Tuesday morning: "Mrs. Jones, my cat ran away and I made a poster to put up on the street light by my house!" On Wednesday morning Blake confides, "Mrs. Dierking, my sister put a pea up her nose and she had to go to the emergency room!" Thursday: "Mrs. Jones, we saw a fire truck on our way to school!" Children can't wait to tell us these important moments in their daily lives, and this is a wonderful thing. But often the stories either stop after the first couple of sentences or they go on and on and on.

This is fine when students are sharing informally. But so many students need support in retelling their stories sequentially, succinctly, and with detail. Without being able to tell or retell a story out loud—"in the air"—it is very difficult to compose a story on paper. Being able to tell a story in sequential order in the excitement and exhilaration of the moment is a powerful skill. Telling a story coherently helps students write a coherent story.

As we contemplated using oral stories as the starting point for our literacy instruction, we quickly realized we couldn't listen to a whole classroom of individual stories during the first few weeks of school. So, we borrowed a technique from Lamoreaux, Lee, and Ashton-Warner (1963) in which students jointly compose a story while the teacher acts as scribe. We use a similar type of shared experience but formulate the story orally.

Through this shared event we teach and reinforce vocabulary, story grammar, and structure. Students are also able to practice speaking and listening. Orally retelling a common school experience is the scaffold students need to be able to retell someone else's story. They also deepen their comprehension by looking at a story from the inside out. Children want to know what makes something tick. The act of simply drawing a cat or a tree will lead to the question, "How did you do that?" The inquiring mind of a child wants to know the inside work of reading. Orally retelling a common school experience allows students to peek inside a story and bear witness to where stories come from. This scaffold allows them to tell and retell their own stories and eventually empowers them to write these stories down with coherence.

In *A Quick Guide to Making Your Teaching Stick, K-5* (2008), Shanna Schwartz stresses the importance of using stories as powerful connectors between our children and the strategies we want to teach them. Telling stories again and again throughout the day draws students in. They lean toward us, watching our faces, excited to connect in this very personal way. Schwartz writes, "In a magical minilesson, the teaching doesn't seem as if it is for any ol' class; it feels custom fit for this class." The story provides the connection.

Another powerful connector is putting students themselves into a story. Chronicling a child's positive actions paves the way for others to try the same thing. Using the name of a student in a class story turns him or her into a famous storybook character. Using a story about *this* class builds community, setting the stage for the students' own storytelling and story writing.

Initially presenting a shared experience to students as an oral story enhances their understanding of "how a story goes." Having all children experience the story's creation firsthand is the glue that makes the important components of retelling stick. Examples of oral stories are presented in Figure 1.3.

As we continued retelling shared experiences as if they were stories in a book, we noticed patterns in students' responses. Whatever we did deliberately when we retold a shared class experience, many students copied in their own retellings. After Sherra began an oral story with "One hot sunny day at the park," her students began their retellings with that setting. When Connie highlighted transition words, students began using them as well. These oral mentor texts are the scaffold the students need to embrace other retelling strategies as well, such as making predictions, asking and answering questions, and providing a sense of story and prosody.

A Typical Initial Story for First Grade

Remember the story Sherra shared in the introduction?

Yesterday was the first day of school. At the end of the day, we had art with Mr. Prankard. Just before 2:00, Mrs. Jones picked us up. "Hurry!" she warned. "It is about to rain." As we walked to the car line we noticed gray clouds in the sky. The thunder rumbled. We wondered if we would make it to our cars before it started to rain.

She retold an event the students had experienced together as a story they could then retell to someone else. When presenting this story, she had a general idea of what she might want students to practice in an oral story. She considered its length and the way the sentences were structured and included dialogue and a few strong verbs.

A Typical Initial Story for Third Grade

As we began to compose more and more oral stories, we were more strategic in planning the retellings.

It is hard to believe we are in third grade. Some friends we already know, but some friends are new. We were just settling in to get to know each other when the loudest noise we had ever heard came across the intercom. It sounded like a wounded duck. "What is going on?" inquired Mrs. Dierking. Everyone was holding their hands over their ears. The sound, *akkk-akkk-akkk*, wouldn't stop. Mrs. Dierking flung open the door and asked Mrs. Stewart if she knew what was happening. Mrs. Stewart's students were acting just like we were! Their hands were over their ears and their mouths were shaped in a big round O. Both teachers huddled in the hallway discussing the matter. Finally, just as we were about to leave our room and possibly the building to get away from that atrocious noise, it stopped. What an interesting way to start third grade. We are going to call it "The Year of the Duck!"

In this retelling of a shared event, Connie included varied sentences and a spot in the story to practice showing, not telling. She deliberately included the literacy skills she wanted her students to hear and practice.

Figure 1.3 Samples of Oral Stories

In *Teaching for Deep Comprehension* (2005), Linda Dorn and Carla Soffos note: “Children involved in talk that includes retelling an event using language that includes setting, characters, events, and an ending is an important precursor to comprehension. This is quite simply a story. The potential of storytelling through narrative discourse will assist with growing comprehension skills.” We have found that telling a story benefits all children, from emergent readers and beyond, as they expand their ability to use language to make meaning.

Dorn and Soffos identify ten strategic behaviors that link oral language and comprehension:

1. Manipulating forms of speech to express meaning
2. Making good word choices that communicate clear messages
3. Using pronouns to stand for nouns
4. Using punctuation to clarify meaning and regulate fluency
5. Combining simple sentences into more complex ones
6. Organizing related ideas into paragraphs, chapters, texts, and genre
7. Using dialogue to carry and extend meaning
8. Using figurative language to symbolize meaning
9. Building vocabulary through word relationships and patterns
10. Using transitional words and phrases

We need to both teach these behaviors and then show students how they work together to make meaning. When we ask children to tell the story of something that has happened to them, we are teaching strategic behaviors.

These behaviors influence students’ acquisition of the forms and functions of language that support comprehension. They must manipulate phonemes to form words, use precise words to convey meaning to their listener, and speak with fluency. Their story must be organized and retold in an order that makes sense, and it may include figurative language and dialogue to make it more interesting. Story, in its broadest sense, is the retelling of a set of related events. Retelling a story encompasses important comprehension strategies, including making connections, visualizing, and summarizing. Background knowledge, vocabulary knowledge, language structures, verbal reasoning, and literacy knowledge provide the foundation for literacy learning. Retelling a story provides practice in all these strategies. Retelling a story that belongs to you provides incredible bang for your buck!

Although telling a story does not require students to read print, it does require them to make meaning and speak with fluency. How many times have we noticed that students who do not read or write fluently do not speak fluently? Retelling a shared event puts speaking fluently first. Give it a try!

Oral Mentor Texts Throughout the Year

Finding and building an oral class story begins on day one. One rule of thumb we follow is that in every class story, everyone must be present in the event being represented. The initial story is a simple event the class has experienced during the first few days of school—getting in line for lunch, walking to the gym, getting a drink from the water fountain. It probably won't be the most exciting thing that happens all year, but it sets the stage. This story is short, sequenced, and told as if it were a story in a book. The goal is to show students that anything that happens to you can be retold, that events should be told in the order they happened, and that there are particular ways stories go when they are being told. First you retell the story to your students. Then the students retell the story again and again until they are very familiar with how it goes. (This goal does not change, from kindergarten through third grade.)

At the same time, students begin to internalize narrative story structure as they read and listen to the stories of well-loved authors. One day Connie began an oral retelling with, "It was the first full day of first grade." Later, first grader Andrea pointed out that the first sentence of *Kitten's First Full Moon* (Henkes 2004) begins, "It was Kitten's first full moon." She squealed with excitement: "Look, Kevin Henkes started his story just like ours!"

A second oral class story is presented about a month into the school year. After finding and building the first oral story, the second one comes together much more quickly. This second story should introduce any skills or strategies students will soon encounter during reading and writing instruction. If your upcoming unit of study emphasizes characters, make sure your oral story mentions character traits. If you will be introducing a particular element of the writer's craft, include it in your story. Keep this second story about the same length as the first but make the sentences more complex. (Chapter 2 lays out the process of explicitly building the story.)

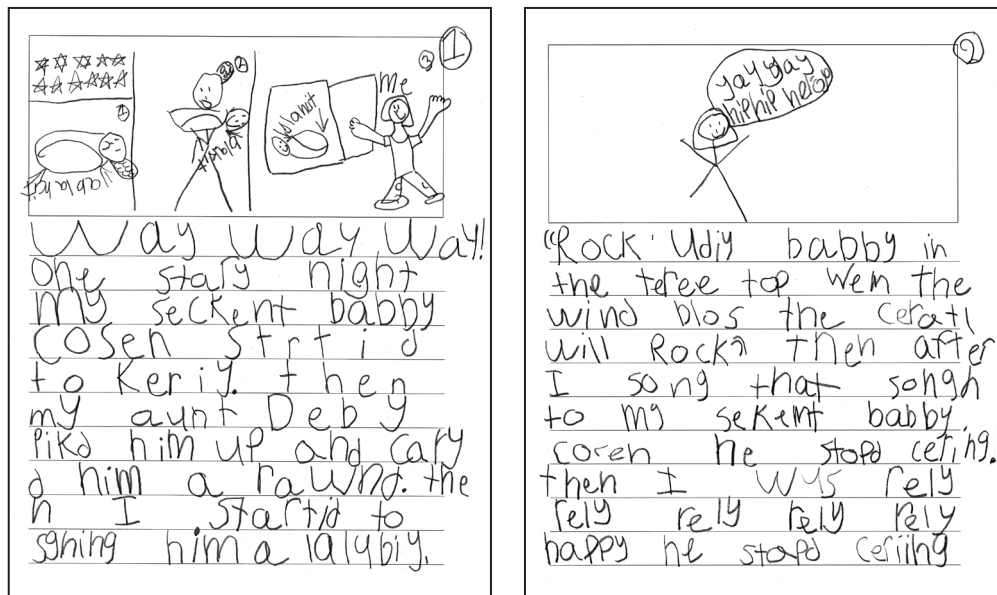
During the next three months, continue to find events to turn into oral class stories to retell, a new one every month. Vary genres to match the text type students are reading and writing. If you are studying nonfiction, insert a little how-to section in your

story. By now students should have internalized the process and begun to rely on the oral story as a mentor text for their own reading and writing.

You will also be able to use the class story as a kind of formative assessment of students' writing. In the example in Figure 1.4, Kendall uses the words from a familiar poem to add voice to her piece. The class story used the poem "Spaghetti, Spaghetti" as an attention grabber, so Kendall pumps up her own written story with "Rock-a-Bye Baby." The strategy stuck!

During the last few months of school, students can find and build class stories with a partner. Have the partners identify an event that happened to the two of them, build the story together, practice retelling it, and then retell the story to the rest of the class.

When Sherra's first graders begin finding and retelling shared stories with a partner, they first do things together. If one partner goes to the media center, the other



Wah, wah, wah! One starry night my second baby cousin started to cry. Then my Aunt Debby picked him up and carried him around. Then I started singing him a lullaby. "Rock-a-bye baby in the tree top. When the wind blows the cradle will rock." Then after I sang that song to my second baby cousin he stopped crying. Then I was really, really, really, really happy he stopped crying.

Figure 1.4 Kendall's Story

Building Castles A Partnership Story

TOLD BY: JOSHUA DEWESE AND IAN SIEBERT

One day, we were working as busy as bees trying to build castles out of cardboard. We were in our gifted class. We built a real working drawbridge. Mrs. Allen, our gifted teacher, helped us make a portcullis. A portcullis is a metal gate to keep people out of the castle walls. We worked until Mrs. Allen said, "Let's share!" The first table made a cannon out of plastic balls. The next table was awesome too. They built walls made out of paper and cardboard. Their drawbridge was made out of paper too. But ours was the best of them all! We shared our castle with the four flags, the real working drawbridge, and the portcullis that Mrs. Allen helped us build. It was a fun but exhausting day.

Figure 1.5 Building Castles

partner goes along. Partners sit next to each other at lunch and play the same games at recess. They deliberately search for a happening in common. Once they find their shared event, they build their stories using everything they have learned about retelling a story with clarity and craft. Obviously, Sherra supports the partners during individual conferences, but the content of the stories comes from the students. Topics include playing kickball games during P.E., observing caterpillars on the sidewalk, or creating art projects. Of course, many partnerships choose the same topics (everyone plays kickball and works on art projects). Every partnership creates a story grid. Stories include similar structures. Every partnership performs their story. However, the stories differ in the details: point of view, emphasis, craft elements, and sentence structure. (See Figures 1.5 and 1.6.)

During the last month of school, students should be able to tell their own story following the same process: finding, building, practicing. These stories highlight how

Playing Tag **A Partnership Story**

TOLD BY: MICHAELA HAWTHORNE AND MAIJA MILLER

The other day at recess, Michaela and I were playing tag. We were chasing each other around a tree. All of a sudden, Michaela tripped over her shoe laces and fell down. "Ouch, I hurt my knee!" she screamed. I took her to the clinic for a bandage. When we returned to recess, Mrs. Manley said to Michaela, "Now you know why it is important to keep your shoes tied!"

Figure 1.6 Playing Tag

One day my cat came inside our house with a dead lizard in her mouth. She wanted to show off her skills. The lizard was big and brown. I yelled, "Mocha, get that lizard out of your mouth right now." Mocha didn't listen. Then she went back outside and ate the lizard. Me, my mom and dad all said, "Ew, that's gross!"

Figure 1.7 Jonah's Story

much students have learned about the process of storytelling, not just someone else's but theirs (see Figure 1.7).

It has a beginning, a middle, and an end. He has elaborated using size and color words. He also uses dialogue, a craft element that has deliberately been used in every oral class story. Jonah retold this story with excitement and confidence, just as he had practiced when retelling the shared class stories. Jonah has internalized the skills he has been introduced to and practiced.

Figure 1.8 lays out loosely how the oral story changes throughout the year no matter the grade level. Building the story involves layering. Whatever you include in one month should be reinforced in future months. An analogy helps make the point: When making a cake, you have the dry ingredients of flour, sugar, and baking soda. Then you add the wet ingredients, eggs, butter, and vanilla. It takes all of them to make a cake. The chart lists the dry ingredients. The skills and strategies stipulated by your curriculum are the wet ingredients. You can also add chocolate or nuts or fruit—analogueous to state and district benchmarks. Chapter 2 discusses how these benchmarks are considered in building the oral story.

You need to stock your stories with the work that you want your students to practice. Month one is about getting started with a story; by month two you will add craft to your story that matches what you are studying in reading or writing. In first grade, you might add a simile and a sound word. In third grade, you might try different transition words that you would like to see your students use in their own narratives. Every month, bump up your story. By the end of the year, no matter the grade, you will probably want to have students, with a partner or individually, find, build, and practice an oral story (see Chapter 2).

How Oral Stories Evolve Across the Year

<p>Oral Story 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple story line • Shared group experience • Sentence structure that matches age group of class • Dialogue 	<p>Oral Story 2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A few more sentences • Example of craft • Transition words 	<p>Oral Story 3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different type of beginning than previous stories • All narrative elements • New examples of craft 	<p>Oral Story 4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structure to match the genre being studied in reading and writing
<p>Oral Story 5</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A few more sentences • Varied sentences • Different type of ending than in previous stories • New examples of craft 	<p>Oral Story 6</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Showing, not telling 	<p>Oral Story 7 (partners)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared experience • All the components of the previous stories 	<p>Oral Story 8 (individuals)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal experience • All the components of the previous stories

Figure 1.8 How Oral Stories Evolve Across the Year

Common Core State Standards Supported

READING STANDARDS FOR LITERATURE

CCRL.K.2—With prompting and support, retell familiar stories, including key details.

CCRL.K.3—With prompting and support, identify characters, settings, and major events in a story.

CCRL.1.2—Retell stories, including key details, and demonstrate understanding of their central message.

CCRL.1.3—Describe characters, settings, and major events in a story, using key details.

CCRL.2.4—Describe how words and phrases (e.g., regular beats, alliteration, rhymes, repeated lines) supply rhythm and meaning in a story, poem, or song.

CCSL.K.4—Describe familiar people, places, things, and events, and, with prompting and support, provide additional detail.

SPEAKING AND LISTENING

CCSL.K.6—Speak audibly and express thoughts, feelings, and ideas clearly.

CCSL.1.4—Describe people, places, things, and events with relevant details, expressing ideas and feelings clearly.

CCSL.2.4—Tell a story or recount an experience with appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details, speaking audibly in coherent sentences.

Supporting English Language Learners

Oral storytelling is particularly beneficial for English language learners (ELLs) (see Figure 1.9). Being part of the experience on which the story is based, they are “in the story.” When listening as the experience is told back to them, they hear the words that represent the experience. Retelling a shared event that happened in real time doesn’t present the same constraints as retelling a story derived from print. ELLs can use sensory cues to retell the story. For example, in Sherra’s oral class story about leaving art class as a storm moves in, Marco heard the thunder. He knew that the part in the story where the thunder rumbled comes after he left art class. He witnessed the visuals—the dark sky, the children moving quickly to the cars—and he heard the thunder. If he read the same story in a book about another little boy, he wouldn’t have the sensory clues to help him with the meaning.

Supporting English Language Learners: Retelling

- The experience happened to the students:
 - They can use sensory clues.
 - The meaning precedes the print.
 - The predictable structure of finding and practicing the story provides a scaffold.
- The words are provided:
 - They learn key phrases.
 - They use words in an authentic way.
 - They pronounce the words over and over.
- Story structure is modeled:
 - They hear correct sentence structure.
 - They retell the story aloud using correct sentence structure.

Figure 1.9 Supporting English Language Learners: Retelling