

St John's
inspire
programme



VERBAL STORYTELLING

STORIES

Stories are a familiar part of our lives; we seek them out for entertainment, we tell them to our friends and families to inform them about our lives and learn about theirs and we use them to impart information to others. But what actually counts as a story?

WARM UP

A story can be defined as:

"an account of imaginary or real people and events told for entertainment", or as:

"an account of past events in someone's life or in the development of something".

The common aspect of these definitions is that a story is an account of events. This creates a wide scope of formats in which stories can be told. **How many storytelling formats can you think of? How many stories have you told or been told recently?**

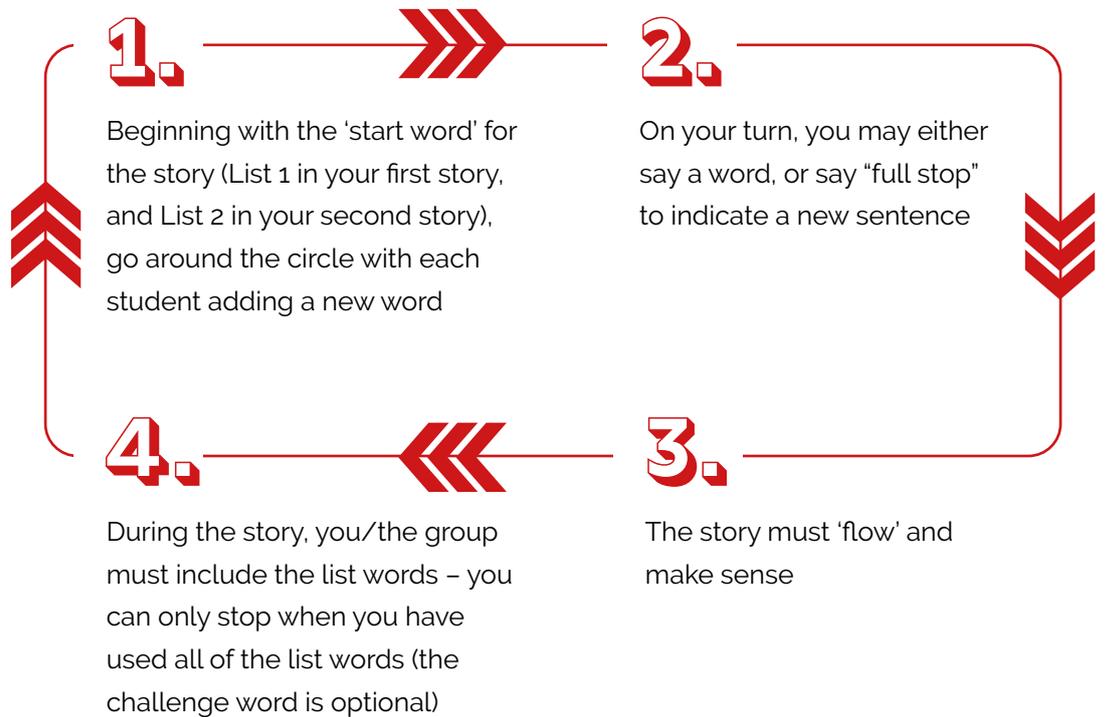


How many kinds of stories can you think of? Write some examples here.

How many stories have you told today? How many have you told this week? (Look at the above definitions of 'story' when you think about your answers!)

GIVE IT A GO

Before people were widely able to read and write, stories were told orally (out loud). You will have a chance to try this as a group, using the story prompt lists below. As a class, arrange yourselves in a circle.



LIST 1

Start word: School

Words that must be included:

Book, Uniform, Notes, Bus

Challenge word: Anomaly

LIST 2

Start word: School

Words that must be included:

Daffodil, Spear, Potato, Piano

Challenge word: Velociraptor

You probably told two quite different stories, despite having the same starting point. Reflect on your two stories, and discuss the following as a class:



- What happened to the stories as you went along?
- Which story was harder?
- Which story made more sense? Why do think this was?

ORAL LITERATURE IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

The inhabitants of Anglo-Saxon England (5th – 11th Century AD) were mostly hunters, voyagers and tradesmen, who spoke Old English. Although literacy and academic study flourished in the latter half of this period, reading and writing was reserved for individuals in the Christian church or nobility.

Stories as we know them took place in large communities and were told rather than read. In the early part of the Anglo-Saxon period, up until the 10th century, communities would gather in their 'mead hall' ('**meduseld**' in Old English) to celebrate victories, enjoy a feast, and listen to stories.

Stories from this time were almost always accompanied by music. The language used in these poems is thought to be very different from the everyday language spoken by the people – storytellers used a special 'poetic' version of the language for literary works.

BEOWULF

The best-known, and longest, Old English poem to survive to the present day is *Beowulf*.

The story of *Beowulf* is an epic. Although it is written in Old English, it is set in Scandinavia. **Beowulf**, a hero of the Geats, comes to the aid of **Hrothgar** who is King of the Danes. Hrothgar's mead hall has been under attack by a man-eating monster known as **Grendel**.

Beowulf slays Grendel, then **Grendel's Mother** attacks the mead hall and is subsequently also defeated. Victorious, Beowulf goes home to Geatland (Götaland in modern Sweden) and becomes king of the Geats.

Fifty years later, Beowulf defeats a **dragon**, but is fatally wounded in the

battle. After his death, his attendants cremate his body and put up a tower on a headland in his memory.

It is estimated that *Beowulf* was first told orally from 750 AD (almost 1,300 years ago). However, it was first written down around 950 AD. This means that for almost 200 years after its initial composition *Beowulf* was told exclusively by word of mouth.



LISTEN TO OLD ENGLISH

TUNE IN



Listen to the Old English pronunciation of Beowulf. Old English was very different to Modern English so pay attention to the style and emphasis of the words rather than their exact meaning.

Then, listen to the passage again, this time following along with the Old English words provided below. A translation of this text into modern English is provided too. Old English texts were written in our familiar alphabet, with a few exceptions which are shown below.

		Old English	Modern English
ð	two versions of and	Hwæt. We Gardena in geardagum, þeodcyninga, þrym gefrunon, hu ða æpelingas ellen fremedon.	Hail! We have heard tales sung of the Spear-Danes, the glory of their war-kings in days gone by, how princely nobles performed heroes' deeds!
þ	letter called 'thorn' which makes a 'th' sound	Oft Scyld Scefing sceaþena þreatum, monegum mægþum, meodosetla ofteah,	Oft Scyld Scefing captured the mead halls from many peoples, from troops of enemies,
æ	'a' sound, as in hat	egsode eorlas. Syððan ærest wearð	terrifying their chieftains. Though he was first a poor foundling, he lived to find comfort;
g	often has a 'y' sound, or sometimes as a 'ch' as in 'loch'	feasceaft funden, he þæs frofre gebad, weox under wolcnum, weorðmyndum þah, oðþæt him æghwylc þara ymbsittendra ofer hronrade hyran scolde, gomban gyldan. þæt wæs god cyning.	under heavens he flourished, with honours fulfilled— till each neighbouring nation, those over the whale-road, paid the price of tribute. That was a good king!

In groups or as a class, discuss these questions:



- Why do you think epics and lyrics were told orally rather than written down in Anglo-Saxon England?
- Why do you think that the Anglo-Saxons enjoyed listening to epics and lyrics?

VERBAL STORYTELLING TODAY



In a society where almost everybody can read and write, and where information is often presented in concise 'chunks', does the kind of storytelling we see in *Beowulf* have any relevance today?

WATCH



Now, watch the extract of a performance by the poet **Patience Agbabi**, speaking at Oxford University in December 2019.

In the clip, Agbabi introduces and then reads the start of a poem which she contributed to the 2016 'Refugee Tales' project. (We will listen to the first few minutes of the poem, but the full version is about 15 minutes long, and is freely available for you to listen to in full on the Oxford Podcasts website.)

Why do you think Patience Agbabi tells this story orally? How is the impact of the story different being read aloud, compared to if you were reading it on paper?

Think back to what you learned about *Beowulf* and storytelling Anglo-Saxon England. Do you think there are any similarities between storytelling then, and storytelling such as Agbabi's today?

NON-VERBAL STORYTELLING

An alternative traditional storytelling technique is called **physical theatre**. This involves using physical movement to tell a story: dance and mime are two examples. In the next

session, we will be looking in more detail at this kind of 'nonverbal' storytelling. This final exercise will begin to get us thinking about how stories can be told **physically**, through **actions**, **gestures** and **expressions** rather than by spoken or written words.

ACT IT OUT

Work in pairs to communicate a story nonverbally.

You should tell **the story of your journey to school** without speaking or writing anything down. Then swap over with your partner. Make sure you have enough space, but try to tell the story through hand gestures, facial expressions, and so on, rather than by moving around the room. You can use 'non-verbal' sounds, for instance laughing or sighing, but no actual words!

