

A Teacher's Guide to Narratives

10 tips for teaching narratives in the classroom



A narrative is the telling or re-telling of an event through spoken or written language

Spencer & Peterson, 2020

WHY ARE NARRATIVES IMPORTANT?

- **Social Importance**
 - **Children use story telling to talk to their parents about their day** (Spencer & Peterson, 2020)
 - **Information for teachers about events on the playground or over the weekend** (Spencer & Peterson, 2020)
 - **Peer entertainment: children who are good storytellers are more accepted by their peers** (Colozzo et al., 2011; Dodwell & Bavin, 2008; Fey et al., 2004; Kaderavek & Sulzby, 2000)
 - **Children's future ability to solve social problems is predicted by their exposure to narrative conversations** (Leyva et al., 2014)
- **Academic importance**
 - **Listening comprehension, vocabulary, and writing are all related to a child's narrative abilities** (Bourg et al., 1997; Heilmann et al., 2010; Griffin et al., 2004; Kim et al., 2015; Scott & Windsor, 2000).
 - **There is a strong relationship between early oral narrative skills and later reading comprehension** (Catts et al., 2002; Dickinson & McCabe, 2001; Gilmore et al., 1999; Griffin et al., 2004).

LANGUAGE DISORDERS AND NARRATIVES

Complex language is required to tell an orally or written story of an event in a **detailed manner** that **makes sense** to the listener

(Bruner, 1986; Johnston, 2008; C.E. Westby, 1985)

For a child to achieve effective storytelling they must use many processes including **perspective taking, memory, inferencing, cognition, and attention**

(Curenton, 2011; Dodwell & Bavin, 2008; R. B. Gillam & Johnston, 1992; Hudson & Shapiro, 1991; Johnston, 2008; Lahey, 1990; Nippold & Schwartz, 1996)

It takes a lot to tell a story!

Children with language disorders will have trouble with the complex processes required to tell an effective story, either spoken or written.

Children with **Developmental Language Disorder (DLD)** have a **hard time** using language while **speaking, reading, and writing**

- They have difficulty with:
 - Thinking of the words they want to say
 - Making complex sentences
 - Reading comprehension
 - Learning new words
 - Telling a clear story from beginning to end
 - Following directions due to lack of understanding

Narrative Intervention helps!

1. Studies examining **narrative language intervention for children with DLD** showed **improvement in prosocial behaviour, expressive narrative language, and sentence structure** (Brinton and Fujiki, 2019)
2. **Oral narrative language intervention** in neurotypical and neurodiverse children has a **significant impact on their written narrative quality** (Kirby et al., 2020; Petersen et al., 2019; Spencer & Petersen, 2018).

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Narrative Tips for Teachers

Adapted from Spencer & Peterson, 2020: Narrative Intervention: Principles to Practice



Begin by building story structure

1

- First work on oral telling and retelling basic stories using story elements (setting, characters, events/plot, conflict, resolution)
- Research shows that as the ability to retell stories improves, the child will learn target vocabulary and the meanings of new words

Gardner and Spencer (2016)

Use many different stories

2

- Using more than 2 different stories with the same grammar elements will promote their ability to notice patterns in the stories (e.g., naming the problems, characters, feelings, events, ending)



Encourage active participation and practice

3

- When children are engaged and responding, they are learning!
- More practice = better
- Repeated practice will engrain and enhance their abilities to use narrative skills

(Greenwood et al., 1984; Pratto & Hales, 1986).

Present the whole story first

4

- Before breaking the story down into its parts, present it in its full form first to provide context and enhance motivation
- Once the story is broken down into its parts, connect some parts back together by asking the child to retell specific sections that relate to each other (e.g., What was the problem? What was done to fix the problem?)

Use visuals to represent story elements

5

- Using pictographs, icons, symbols, drawings, manipulatives, or gestures to represent the story elements is useful to help make abstract concepts more concrete

(S. L. Gillam et al., 2018; Spencer & Petersen, 2016; Story Grammar Marker, 2020).



Give immediate, specific feedback

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- Use positive body language as the child is saying something you want them to say (e.g., head nods, eye contact) (Cleave et al., 2015)
- Give feedback about their retelling and offer suggestions of what to say rather than telling them what they said wrong
 - Example: "Say it like this, Tom was frustrated."
- Correct errors as soon as they are made
- Give specific feedback
 - Example: "Oops, you forgot to tell us his feeling. How was he feeling?"



Use 2-step prompts

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1. Ask a question about what specific information the child missed
 - a. "How did Tom feel about the problem?" or "What did she do to fix the problem?"
 - b. This will enhance comprehension of the event without teaching the child to explicitly answer wh- questions. (Spencer et al., 2013)
2. If they cannot answer the question, model the answer
 - a. "He was frustrated because he lost the game. Now you say that."

Individualize and Extend

8

- Make sure the demands of the tasks align with the child's skill level and language targets, and advance the tasks as needed (e.g., retelling, manipulating pictures, answering questions)
 - If a child begins to get bored, they may need to move up to the next target
- Some helpful programs with structured lesson plans include: Story Champs, SKILL, The Story Grammar Marker program

(Westerveld & Gillon, 2010)

Incorporate narrative-related targets in multiple contexts

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- Have children "turn-n-talk" with their peers about what they did over the weekend to practice storytelling
 - Utilize graphic organizers or concept maps with icons and symbols to promote storytelling
- Send home family activities to support retelling of stories at home with family members
- Try using crafts to promote spontaneous use of narrative targets



Make it fun!

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- Play games, use props or puppets
- Use friendly competition
- Put children in teams to increase motivation for storytelling tasks
- Engage in role playing, and use movement!
 - Research has shown that combining movement and storytelling enhances language outcomes

(Brinton & Fujiki, 2017; Culatta et al., 2010; Duncan et al., 2019)

Resources

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