

Pourquoi Play: Practicing Oral Language Skills by Making up “How and Why” Stories Extemporaneously

"Pourquoi" (pronounced por –kwa') is the French word for "why." Pourquoi stories explain why an animal or plant looks or acts the way it does, or how a natural phenomenon came to be. The following exercise, which can be done with children as young as kindergartners or adapted for middle schoolers, will get students creating and telling pourquoi stories informally. It also is a highly effective way to demonstrate to students that every story needs a beginning, middle, and end. Visit our website under “Just for Teachers” to download a comprehensive unit on how to teach students to write pourquoi tales, including extensive bibliographies. The site is at www.beautyandthebeaststorytellers.com.

Use Oral Language as a Starting Point for Writing

This exercise, which focuses on oral language skills, is a good way to start even if you plan to do a pourquoi writing unit afterward. Speaking and writing are similar processes; both involve information flowing out of an individual. As a result of the new emphasis on speaking and listening skills in state learning standards, many writing instructors now recommend that students’ writing always begin in small writing groups, in which students first tell stories informally. Their first written drafts will be much stronger after getting helpful editorial feedback from the faces of listeners, as well as from questions the listeners may have after they tell a story. Even if they do fifty revisions on their own, they will still not have benefited from having help with their creative process. This exercise gives them a chance to practice speaking skills and gets their creative juices flowing. It also provides a catalyst to those students whose minds tend to go blank when given a piece of paper and told to make up a story.

To complete this exercise, you will need:

1. “Why Dogs Chase Cats” from *How and Why Stories: World Tales Kids Can Read and Tell* (Hamilton and Weiss 1999). The book includes twenty-five pourquoi stories that you can use as examples.
2. Our blank template for How and Why Stories
3. Our sample story map for “Why Dogs Chase Cats” (filled in on the template)

(#2 and #3 can be downloaded on our Web site under “Handouts” at the top of the page)

Tell “Why Dogs Chase Cats.”

Begin by asking students if they have ever noticed that dogs and cats often do not get along. Point out that “fighting like dogs and cats” is a common saying. Then tell them the African American story, “Why Dogs Chase Cats.” (If you read it dramatically rather than *telling* it, you won’t be able to demonstrate hand gestures and eye contact – so go for it! Tell the story! Use our story map to get the sequence of events in your mind and then tell it in your own words.) You could also play the recording of nine-year-old Johnathan Reed telling the story on the CD of *How and Why Stories: World Tales Kids Can Read and Tell*.

Show the story map for “Why Dogs Chase Cats.”

This story map has been drawn on the blank template that students will eventually use to make up their own pourquoi stories. A story map is not meant to be artistic; it is a tool to help you remember the sequence of events in the story so that you can tell it in your own words. For example, point out that the initials “D” and “C” are used for Dog and Cat and “H” for ham. Simple stick figures are fine.

The template is set up in the order in which you *tell* the story – beginning, middle, and end. Because of their simple structure, pourquoi tales are perfect for illustrating that every story needs these three elements: a beginning, middle, and end.

To make this clear, we have NUMBERED the three elements on the template in the order in which you go about **making up** a pourquoi story.

Start with the end (#1—bottom box of template) – how the animal looks or acts today. (*Ever since Cat came down from the tree, Dog has been chasing her. He hasn't forgiven her for eating the whole ham.*)

Then make up the beginning (#2—top box of template) — how the animal looked or acted before – which is usually the opposite. (*Dog and Cat used to live right next door to each other. They were very good friends.*)

Last is the longest part of any story, the middle (#3)—what happened to get from beginning to end. Point out that there could be many different “middles” for this story. In fact, people around the world have made up lots of different stories to explain why dogs and cats don't get along. Ask students to come up with alternative “middles” of their own.

If time permits, have students retell “Why Dogs Chase Cats” in pairs. If you have *Children Tell Stories: Teaching and Using Storytelling in the Classroom*, use the “Virginia Reel” activity which allows them to have multiple partners and thus benefit from seeing many other storytelling styles. You can also use any of the exercises in the book to focus on how to improve vocal and facial expression, hand gestures, eye contact, etc.

Demonstrate by making up a pourquoi story together as a group.

First, choose an animal. The elephant works well as an example because it has so many special characteristics—floppy flat ears, trunk, skinny tail, tree-trunk legs, tusk, toenails, and baggy wrinkled skin. For each or some of these, brainstorm several different ways that body part could have looked before. For example, floppy flat ears might have been stiff or round or tiny. Each change requires a different action to get from beginning to end, and that is the middle of the tale. This activity expands students' imaginations at the same time that it strengthens their understanding of how one thing leads to another. If students have been studying animals, remind them about the environment of the animal for that might help determine how or why the change takes place.

Pourquoi tales can be simple and sometimes as short as 6-8 sentences.

Stories should begin with a sentence such as:

“Long ago, the _____ had a _____. “ (some characteristic that is different than what it has today) or
“Long ago, the _____ did not have a _____.”

They should end with something like: “And that's how the _____ got its _____.”

Have students draw the three parts in story map form on the blank template.

This is quicker than writing for young children (and necessary for non-writers), and serves as a memory device. Model for them by telling the story that you've brainstormed using gestures and appropriate expression. Then have them pair up and retell the story.

Have students make up their own stories.

Let students work in pairs or on their own to create a pourquoi tale. If they can't come up with their own, there is a long list of ideas on page 3 of our comprehensive “How & Why” writing unit (see 1st paragraph). Depending on their age/skill level, students can eventually write their stories down in order to preserve them and to reinforce the connection between the spoken and written word.

More Useful Resources: We have several world folktales in our books that explain various things about how chickens/roosters look and act. Two of them have free animations online. *Rooster's Night Out* is a Cuban folktale that explains why the rooster crows the sun up each morning. *The Hidden Feast: A Folktale from the American South* explains why roosters often scratch in the dirt. To watch animated versions, go to our Web site, click on “Books and Recordings,” scroll down to the titles and click on “Watch the animated movie.” “Why the Sun Comes Up When Rooster Crows,” a tale from China, and “Why Hens Scratch in the Dirt,” from the Philippines, can be found in *How and Why Stories: World Tales Kids Can Read and Tell*.

All information Copyright © 2009 Martha Hamilton and Mitch Weiss. This exercise was adapted and expanded from Mitch and Martha's book, *Children Tell Stories: Teaching and Using Storytelling in the Classroom*. Many thanks to our friend, storyteller Jeannine Laverty, who inspired this exercise, gave us some of the specific ideas described here, and gave permission to publish it and use it in our work.