

STORYTELLING:

LOOKING FOR THE MOST IMPORTANT THING

by **Trudy L. Hanson**

In the college courses that I instruct in the art of storytelling, one of the basic concepts I stress is the idea that a story is a problem-solving process. If a student views a story in this way, then learning and remembering the story becomes much easier. Along with the idea of viewing a story as a problem solving activity, I use professional storytelling Doug Lipman's advice to find the MIT (the most important thing). (See "Finding the Most Important Thing," *Storytelling Magazine*, march, 1994, pp. 16-18).

To understand the process, let's use the example of Red Riding Hood. What problem occurs in this story? There are several answers. If we decide that the problem is centered in the danger of talking to strangers, then the telling of the story will focus on that MIT. Yet, what if we say the problem in the story is that Grandmother doesn't have very good home health nursing care? Then the telling is centered more on the dangers that grandmothers face rather than dangers encountered by impulsive young girls. Or, we could say the problem in Red riding Hood is that she is not able to judge the appearance and intention of others accurately. Then the MIT of the story becomes the importance of making choices.

To help students see storytelling as a problem-solving activity, you might use the following questions:

1. What is the major problem in this story?
2. Who is it that solves the problem?
3. Who causes the problem?
4. How is the problem solved?
5. Where does the problem occur?

If we apply the story of Red Riding Hood to these questions, we might come up with these answers if we decided the MIT we wanted to emphasize was that children should be careful when talking to strangers.

1. Red Riding Hood forgets her mother's instructions and takes the advice of a stranger (the wolf).

2. Depending on which version of the story you are using, a couple of answers can be correct for who solves the problem. In the traditional version of German origin, the woodcutter is the one who solves the problem. He rescues Grandma and Red Riding Hood by slicing the wolf open.

3. The wolf-in almost every version-causes the problem. He takes advantage of the trusting nature of Red Riding Hood for his own personal gain (supper!).

4. How is the problem solves? The cries of a Red Riding Hood and Grandma within the wolf alert the woodcutter to their fate and he frees them from the wolf's stomach.

5. The scene of all the action, in the traditional tale, is a dark forest (but more recent re-tellings have the story taken place in the American mid-west. See Lisa Campbell Ernst's *Little Red Riding Hood, a New Fangled Prairie Tale* published by Scholastic. 1995) The setting becomes part of the magic that the storyteller can use to emphasize the MIT.

In working with young listeners, tell the story first and then introduce the idea of an-MIT. Ask the students, what they think is most important in this story? When the students have identified the MIT, then they can answer the other questions and have a formula for re-telling the story to you. Doug Lipman suggests: "Many artistic decisions--small and large--can be expedited by evaluating them in light of the MIT." What is important to remember is that each listener may come up with a different MIT. There are no wrong answers, as long as the teller uses the MIT to help all the story elements fit together.

(Dr. Trudy Hanson is Storytelling Contest Director for the University Interscholastic League (TX) This article first appeared in the UIL Leaguer and is used by permission. Our Thanks to Dr. Hanson and Jana Riggins UIL Speech and Debate Director).