

by James
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Tell Me A Story

"Tell me a story." This reoccurring plea from my children when I was a young father has been replaced in my forensic coaching by my requesting talented speakers to do the same in preparation for the season's competition. Michigan has been involved in doing just that...telling stories for three decades of high school competition with great results that have been satisfying as an event for the performer and for the audience.

It is rooted in the history of mankind and our country's heritage. For students, it attempts to introduce classical and modern children's literature to rekindle the child in each person touching human emotions. Storytelling provides the speaker with the unique opportunity to recreate for his audience the simplicity, truth and beauty of childhood. Storytelling, as oral interpretation, permits creative expression with a freedom other interpretative events often do not permit.

Suitability

Although Michigan storytelling is designed to be appropriate to children, the use of myths, folk tales and legends provides a wide variety among stories recommended to students are stories that offer some plot complexity, dialogue, multiple characters, dialectical challenges as well as physical and verbal action. Traditionally, the challenge of the story is a point to consider in story choice. The greater the challenge in novelty of the story, often the more pleasing the result. *Stories that are in rhyme form, repetitious, overly simple, lacking in action, overly dependent on single narration are ones that the coach and storyteller might best avoid.* Sometimes, the storyteller will find it necessary to compose transitions to bridge portions of the story, to shorten the story or link the most appropriate sequences together. Care must be taken not to change the author's intent or message by doing so in editing. Stories can be taken from legends, fables, folk stories, myths, adventure stories, historical stories, special-occasion stories and modern short stories.

Introductions

A story needs an introduction much like any good speech. It establishes the requisites of introducing the characters, providing necessary exposition in story plot, establishing an appropriate mood for the story, as well as focusing the listener on a theme or worthwhile central idea. The introduction also offers unique opportunities by informally linking storyteller and audience, while introducing song or sound effects to enhance the presentation. A sample wording of just such an introduction would be:

"Beauty is not skin deep. Prettiness is. Beauty comes from within a person, from the soul, the spirit, and your true self. Prettiness can be changed, but no matter what happens, the true beauty inside remains, as seen in this classic story entitled *The Ugly Duckling* by Hans Christian Anderson."

Telling the Story

To assist storytellers in their pursuit of excellence, the stages of rehearsal that precede the competition include the following areas. After the choice of the story, the storyteller and coach must go to work. Keeping in mind that storytelling is most effective from memory, the next step is providing action and word transitions that serve as spontaneous transitions. Although the storyteller does not rewrite the story, often additions of song or physical position changes, along with pantomime, adds to the cleverness and originality of the presentation. Facial and vocal expression do the most to capture the attention and sustain interest in the presentation. If the eyes are windows to the soul then the eye contact with the audience and the "ear contact" as well maintains the connection that is so necessary between speaker and listener to heighten interest.

To maintain an audience's attention, the storyteller must rely heavily on perfecting varied facials and animated movements that allow humor, drama or evil expressions to make the characters and moods believable. Rehearsal in front of mirrors, video tapings and constant practice in front of audiences of various ages, along with the

coach, will bring imagination and experimentation to the vocal and physical traits so necessary to sustain quality of storytelling. It will also point out weaknesses to the storyteller where the story fades, loses momentum and audience involvement. When a variety of characters surface in a story, the storyteller can utilize character voices, imitations, and dialectical images to establish the characters just as the storyteller can add a posture, set facial position, repetitive

movement to establish the character the audience hopes to see before them. If the character creation is in poor taste or a spin-off of a too copied, trite or recognizable character from television or motion pictures, the creativity of the storyteller is at risk. Ideally, each time the story is told, it should seem like a fresh experience. A canned-sounding story with little investment of the storyteller signals the storyteller is not ready for competition until flexibility, and smoothness in

style are recaptured. The storyteller succeeds best when the story is reworked, polished, and tweaked constantly for the addition of a voice, motion, or mood switch. That makes the storytelling and the story listening that much more enjoyable.

Tell Me Another Story

If the storyteller invests time and self in the process, when the story is told, the next thing heard will be the audience plea, "Tell me another story."

(Jim Menchinger coaches at Portage-Northern (MI) HS.)

STORYTELLING ASSESSMENT FORM

(Scoring - 5 = Excellent 1= Poor)

Speaker: _____

Date: _____

Topic: _____

Introduction

Rating: 5	4	3	2	1
Comments:				

Understanding the Story

Rating: 5	4	4	2	1
Comments:				

Skill in Narrative

Rating: 5	4	3	2	1
Comments:				

Voice

Rating: 5	4	3	2	1
Comments:				

Facial Expressions

Rating: 5	4	3	2	1
Comments:				

Gesture and Movement

Rating: 5	4	3	2	1
Comments:				