



the **tutor**

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The Power of Story Retelling

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Terrence has been tutoring Marisa, a second-grader, twice a week for a month and a half. Today, Terrence is introducing a new strategy to help Marisa develop her reading comprehension skills: story retelling.

Terrence: I'm going to read aloud a short story called *The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing*. After I finish, it will be your turn to tell the story back to me as well as you can. You'll need to pretend I'm someone who doesn't know the story at all, so listen carefully.

There was once a wolf who grew tired of hunting for his food. "It's such hard work and it's no fun being shot at by angry farmers," he said.

So he thought of a clever plan. He decided to wrap himself in a sheepskin and live in a sheep pen. Then, when he grew hungry, he could kill a nice fat lamb for his dinner and not have to hunt to find it.

However, that same night the farmer also decided that he would like lamb for dinner and went down to the sheep pen. It was very dark and the farmer grabbed and killed the first sheep he found. Imagine his surprise when he found he had killed a wolf.¹

Marisa: I bet he was surprised!
(She laughs.)

Terrence: Now it's your turn. Retell the story to me. And remember, pretend I've never heard it before.

What Is Story Retelling and Why Use It?

Story retellings require the reader or listener to integrate and reconstruct the parts of a story. They reveal not only what readers or listeners remember, but also what they understand. Retellings build story comprehension.

A wealth of research shows that reading aloud to young children

supports specific aspects of their literacy development. The kinds of learning experiences that occur before, during,

and after reading aloud have an equally important impact on literacy development. As far back as 1976, Zimiles and Kuhns suggested that the comprehension of six- to eight-year-olds significantly improved when they were asked to retell a story after it was read to them.

"...Retellings help children rethink their way through a text, thereby enhancing their understanding" (Owocki, 1999).

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Studies by Blank and Frank (1971), Zimiles and Kuhns (1976), and Morrow (1984, 1985, 1986) asked children to recall sections of a text or whole stories and examined the instructional benefits. Each study found a significant improvement in oral

language complexity, story comprehension, and understanding of story structure.

In story retellings, readers or listeners tell what they remember about the story orally or through dramatization, drawing, or writing (Morrow, 1989; Owocki, 1999). Retelling does not mean

“Comprehension is critically important to the development of children’s reading skills. It has come to be viewed as ‘the essence of reading’” (National Reading Panel, 2000).

memorizing—it means recounting the story in the child’s own words. Retellings require children to think more conceptually—to look at the bigger picture—rather than answering specific questions about the text. Retelling also helps learners internalize information and concepts, such as vocabulary and story structure (Brown & Cambourne, 1987). The more experience children have with retelling, the more they are able to understand, synthesize, and infer. “Retelling is grounded in an understanding of the crucial role that oral language plays in both the formation and sharing of meaning” (Gambrell, Koskinen, & Kapinus, 1991).

This article will provide tutors with:

- Ways to use story retelling to build reading comprehension
- Descriptions of tutor roles in retelling sessions
- A variety of retelling activities
- Strategies for assessing reading comprehension through story retelling

Using Story Retelling To Build Reading Comprehension

Children need a lot of practice retelling text, and that practice improves the quality of their retellings (Morrow, 1985). While many classrooms struggle to find the time to actively involve children in reconstructing and reenacting stories, tutors can provide children with important opportunities to engage in this valuable activity (Gambrell, Pfeiffer, & Wilson, 1985).

Retelling is not recall. Simply recalling selected events or facts from a story or informational text is not the same as retelling (Rhodes & Shanklin, 1993). Retellings go beyond the literal and help children focus on a deeper understanding of the text. When children retell stories in a comprehensive manner, they reflect on the text and make distinctions between the actual words on the page and the meaning behind them (Gambrell, et al., 1991).

When you engage a child in retelling, consider the following guidelines:

- Clarify what you will be asking the child to do *before* reading the text to the child
- Invite the child to retell the text as though telling it to a friend who has never heard it before
- Encourage the child by using open-ended prompts when necessary



The Role of the Tutor in Retelling

Retelling is an active process that encourages children to reconstruct the text; it also allows for interaction between tutor and child. When necessary, help the child reconstruct the meaning of

“Research has documented that retelling as a post-reading activity is more effective than teacher questioning” in building comprehension (Gambrell et al., 1991).

the text by using open-ended questions and lead-ins to facilitate recall. For example, if a child pauses and seems confused, ask, *What happened next?* If a child needs help detailing a main character, say, *Tell me more about this character.* Prompting

children’s thinking helps them understand that, in retellings, the whole text is more important than any of its separate parts (Morrow, 1989).

Children who struggle with expressive language or memory problems may have difficulty retelling a story with sufficient detail. Though retelling may be more difficult for these children, it can still help develop their language and listening skills. They simply need more practice and additional time (Maria, 1990).

Knowing what to look for as a child retells text can help tutors determine areas of strength and those that need more support. The information gleaned from retellings can guide the tutor’s sessions with the child and help refine instructional goals. Comparing children’s retellings over time can provide insights into their comprehension progress (Cooper, 1993).

As children retell, ask yourself if they:

- Grasp the main idea of the story
 - Can describe the main events with accuracy
 - Tell the story sequentially (with a beginning, a middle, and an end)
 - Use vocabulary or phrases from the text
 - Activate prior knowledge to enhance understanding
 - Are aware of the characters and settings
 - Use details to enhance the retelling
- (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996)

Let’s return to Terrence and Marisa. Before Marisa starts retelling, Terrence repeats the directions, along with the prompt to pretend that he has never heard the story before. This helps her understand the need to provide enough detail for the listener to understand the retelling.

Marisa: OK, once there was a wolf who got tired of hunting some food so he wanted to ... so he wanted to, um ... so he decided he wanted to have some lamb for dinner, um. The wolf went to the, where the sheeps were ... in the meadow, I think. And he pretended to be one. The first thing the farmer did was to get a lamb, but he didn’t get a lamb he got the fox, I mean ... yeah. (Long pause.)

Terrence: Are you done?

Marisa: Yeah.

Terrence: Wow, you’ve included a lot of important information in your retelling.

After Marisa's lengthy pause, Terrence confirms that she is finished. This is important, especially if retelling is new, as children will probably spend a few silent moments trying to recall information. Next, the tutor provides positive reinforcement. Instead of simply saying, "Great," he acknowledges the child's specific accomplishment.

Terrence: At the end of the story, did the farmer get a fox or a wolf?

Marisa: Oh, he got, I mean, the wolf.

Terrence: In the middle of the story, were the sheep in a meadow or in a pen?

Marisa: Oh, no, right, they were in the sheep's pen.

To help Marisa elaborate and adjust some misinformation, Terrence offers lead-ins to provide additional structure.

Terrence: Tell me more about the wolf at the beginning of the story.

Marisa: Well, he was hungry.

Terrence: Yes, and ...

Marisa: He said he didn't like the farmer because he tries to shoot him all the time.

Terrence: And then what did the wolf do?

Marisa: Um, he had a plan.

Terrence: Tell me more about his plan.

Marisa: He wanted some sheep, I mean a lamb, to eat and he put on a disguise so the sheep wouldn't know it was him.

Terrence: Was the wolf able to fool everyone with his disguise?

Marisa: Well, I think he fooled the sheep but he didn't fool the, um, man, I mean, the farmer.

Terrence: Did the farmer know he was getting a wolf when he went to the sheep's pen?

Marisa: Oh, no, wait, no the farmer was fooled until he tried to eat it.

Terrence uses leading or open-ended questions to get Marisa to elaborate on elements of the story that she cut short in her retelling. Her responses indicate that she understood the story but is still learning how to organize the information and retell it in a comprehensive manner.

What can the tutor learn from this retelling?

This child has a good sense of story structure. Her retelling had a clear beginning, middle, and end, and she retold the story in the correct sequence.

However, she omitted many details, making it

Story retelling is suitable for a range of language abilities and can be used flexibly (Brown & Cambourne, 1987), making it an appealing strategy for tutors.

difficult for someone who had never heard the story before to follow it without asking questions. For example, Marisa did not mention that the wolf

wore a disguise, an important element in the story. It is interesting that she left out the story's setting; she used her prior knowledge to make sense of the story (i.e., she put the sheep in a meadow instead of a pen), but her visual image of the story's setting remains vague or nonexistent.

How can the tutor help?

Retelling stories is a new experience for this child. Help develop her abilities by modeling retellings and asking her to retell regularly. In addition, helping the child visualize where the story takes place increases her understanding of setting and story structure.

A Variety of Retelling Activities

Younger children need experience retelling familiar stories (e.g., *The Three Little Pigs*) or stories with predictable patterns (e.g., *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?*) (Morrow, 1989). Older children can begin with stories and texts that have more complex plots and settings. Retelling can be done individually or in small groups, but tutors should always model the activity first. The following examples present a range of retelling activities.

Five-finger retelling—prompts for stories. A simple five-finger technique can help guide children through retellings. Each finger represents one of the following questions:

- Who were the characters in the story?
- What happened in the story?
- Where did the story take place?
- When did the story take place?
- Why did the action happen the way it did?

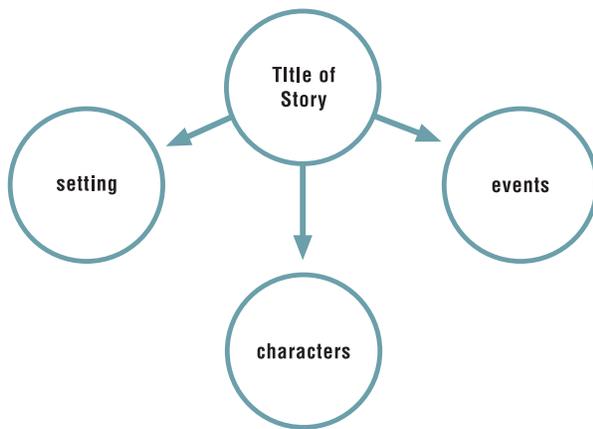
Oral retellings using props. Visual prompts help children organize their thoughts when retelling a story. Props such as finger puppets and felt boards provide a concrete structure to frame the story (Owocki, 1999). Make simple puppets by photocopying or drawing the main characters from a story and gluing them to craft sticks. You can also use these with a felt board—a small board covered in felt—using adhesive or Velcro.

Chalk talk. Morrow (1989) describes chalk talks as retellings in which children draw aspects of a story while telling about it. This technique is great for older children, and works with both fiction and nonfiction texts. Chalk talks are most effective when children have enough room to see how their retelling is evolving as they draw. Using chalk (on a chalkboard or the sidewalk) allows children to erase and redo elements of the retelling as needed. You can also use mural or chart paper with markers.

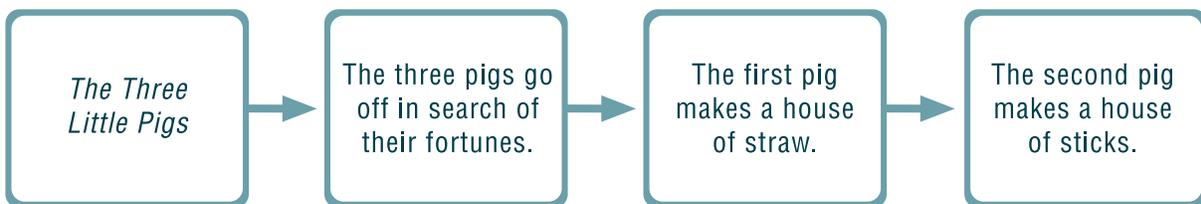


Dramatizations. Young children love dramatic play, and this vehicle provides them with a natural way to recreate a story. Choose read-aloud texts with simple story structure and a limited number of characters. Do this activity with a small group of children, each taking on a different character from the story. Older children, who might be reading more complex stories, can choose a particular part of the story to act out, such as the emotions of a particular character or what a character might have been thinking and why.

Story web retellings. Story webs help children organize their ideas about fictional texts. A story web is a visual way for the child to represent the key elements of the story, such as characters, settings, problem, and solution.



Flow chart retellings. A flow chart is a good way for a child to organize sequential information. Older children can use this technique for fiction and nonfiction texts with clearly sequenced events. The student begins by drawing the first box and writing the first event inside. He then connects the next box with a line and writes the second key event inside, continuing to add boxes until the retelling is complete. Adding boxes one at a time helps the child consider what information is important enough to add and the order in which events occurred.



Interactive picture books. Young children reading fairly simple stories can create picture books using the settings from the story. The process of drawing the settings lends itself to discussion of story structure and story sequence.

To make an interactive book:

- Review the story with the child
- Identify the most important settings²
- Illustrate the settings in the order they appear in the story
- Make a cover for the book and bind the pages together
- Make a set of characters from the story. (Draw or make photocopies and glue the images onto cardboard or sturdy paper.)

As the child retells the story using the book of settings, he can move the characters from page to page as the story progresses. (*Tip for not losing the character pieces: Punch a small hole near the top of each character and thread a string through the hole. Punch a small hole in the top left corner of the closed book, pull each character's string through, and tie. The string should be long enough that the child can move the characters with ease.*)

Assessing Reading Comprehension Through Story Retelling

Retelling assessment guidelines. When using retelling as an assessment tool (as opposed to a teaching tool), it is important that the child start with an unprompted retelling. Based on Morrow's work, Cooper (1993) suggests the following guidelines:

- **Select similar texts.** When comparing a child's retellings over time, use the same type of text each time. Compare narratives with narratives and nonfiction texts with other nonfiction texts.
- **Prepare a guide sheet.** When using narratives, identify the setting, characters, events, and resolution. For informational texts, identify the topic, purpose, and main idea. Use this information sheet as a guide or checklist as you listen to the child's retellings.
- **Ask the child to retell the text.** After the child finishes an *unprompted* retelling, you may want to prompt him with more specific questions about parts of the text he did not include. For example, if the child did not include when the story took place, ask, *You told me where the story takes place; what can you tell me about when it takes place?*
- **Summarize and evaluate the retelling.** Using your guide sheet, discuss and review the retelling with the child to help him understand what can be improved and how. This process also helps you develop instructional goals for future sessions.

Levels of retellings. As children become more proficient readers, their retellings become more comprehensive. Direct instruction and practice increase students' abilities to retell texts. Children can practice retelling with classmates or by recording and listening to their own reconstructions. As children improve, they tend to use more book and story language, which increases oral language and vocabulary (Morrow, 1989). Consider the following levels of retelling (Honig, Diamond, & Gutlohn, 2000):

1. Simple descriptive retellings:

- Have simple beginning, middle, and end
- May describe a setting
- Present an initiating event and the outcome of a problem

2. More complex retellings:

- Present concrete events and facts in sequence
- Supply missing information through appropriate inferences
- Include some explanation of the causes of events

3. Most complete retellings:

- Present a sequence of actions and events
- Provide explanations for the motivations behind characters' actions
- Elaborate using details from the story or details enhanced by prior knowledge
- Comment on or evaluate the text

After using retelling as a teaching tool for a number of sessions, Terrence decides to use it as an informal assessment of Marisa's comprehension.

Terrence: OK, the story I'm going to read to you is called *The Mouse and the Bull*.

Marisa: I thought it was *The Mouse and the Lion*.

Terrence: There is one called *The Mouse and the Lion*. Do you remember what happens in that story?

Marisa: Well, there's a little mouse and he gets caught ... [Marisa proceeds to tell the story].

Terrence allows some time for Marisa to activate previous experience by recalling a similar sounding story, *The Mouse and the Lion*. This way, he validates the connection between the two stories and gives the child an opportunity to warm up with something familiar.

Terrence: I've heard of that story, too. Well, this story is a little different as you'll see. After I finish reading this story, I'm going to ask you to tell it back to me as well as you can. Pretend I'm someone who doesn't know the story at all. OK, now I'm going to read *The Mouse and the Bull*.

Terrence gives specific directions and repeats the title to make sure that Marisa is focusing on the current story.

One day a mouse was playing in a farmer's field when he saw a large, black bull dozing nearby. Being a bit of a rascal, the mouse crept close to the huge animal and bit its tail. The bull roared and snorted and chased the little mouse around the farmyard. However, the tiny creature was too quick for the bull and hid in a hole in the wall. The bull charged at the wall time after time but nothing would move the little mouse safely hidden in the hole. Eventually, the bull was so exhausted that he sank to his knees, unable to go on any more. The end.³

Marisa: Hey, that was really short.

Terrence: It is a short story.

Marisa: OK. Now I'm going to tell it to you. There was a mouse and he was playing in the farmyard ... I think. And there's a bull snoozing. And he was being a little bit of a rascal, and he bit the bull's tail. But, he was a little too fast for the bull and also, um, and, um, the mouse ran into a wall ... into a hole in the wall. The bull charged and hit the wall a lot trying to get to the mouse, but he couldn't. And eventually he stopped ... That's it.

Terrence: You remembered a lot of the details. You were also able to add more in the middle, like when you said the mouse ran into the wall and then changed it to be more descriptive by saying a hole in the wall.

That shows you're really trying to visualize what's happening. Tell me more about why the bull stopped.

Marisa: Yup, because he was too tired to keep on.

Terrence: Was the hole that the mouse hid in big or small?

Terrence gives Marisa a choice (big or small) to provide a structure from which to elaborate — which she does.

Marisa: Small. The bull couldn't fit in it—only if he could shrink.

Terrence: Was any character particularly smart in this story?

Marisa: Well, the mouse wasn't smart because he bit the bull. He was a rascal. But then he was smart because he hid in a hole.

Terrence: Why was hiding in the hole so smart?

Marisa: Because the bull was too big to fit and the mouse was, um ... safe.

“Children need guidance and practice before retelling is used in formal evaluation of any of their skills or abilities” (Morrow, 1988).

What can the tutor learn from this retelling?

The child was able to retell the story in sequence, with a beginning, middle, and end. She used the word *snoozing* instead of *dozing*, indicating a good understanding of the material and a growing vocabulary. She also used a word from the text, *rascal*, in the retelling and in her answers to the tutor's questions. It is clear from the discussion that she inferred what happened between the bull and the mouse (the mouse ran into a hole that was too small for the bull to follow) *and* made assumptions based on the character's actions and her perception of them (i.e., the mouse was smart). Between the first retelling exercise and this one, her ability to elaborate and make inferences about the story has improved. Though it is clear that Marisa is getting better at retelling (she has moved from a simple description to a more complex retelling), the retelling itself was not as complete as it could be; she omitted a number of details and explained others only partially.

How can the tutor help?

For subsequent sessions, the tutor can provide more structure (e.g., the five-finger strategy) to help the child organize the information absorbed, and encourage further retelling through the use of concrete materials, such as a felt board or puppets. The child's answers to the tutor's prompts indicate the ability to infer information from the text. The next step is to demonstrate that her response to the text is as important to a retelling as recounting the facts of the story.



Because retelling improves children's reading comprehension skills in a multitude of ways, tutors benefit from knowing how to effectively support children in developing this skill. Keep these tips in mind as you begin to engage students in retelling activities:

- Model retelling
 - Use predictable texts and/or familiar stories, such as fairy tales or folk tales
 - Retell a portion of a familiar text and ask the child to finish the retelling
 - Ask the child to identify the most important part of the text
 - Have the child work with a partner to practice retelling
- (Gambrell and Dromsky, 2000)

For informational and nonfiction texts, prompt the child to tell about:

- The topic
- The main idea
- The ideas supporting the main idea

Regardless of the specific activities you choose from the suggestions in this article, retelling will enhance and deepen students' reading comprehension.

End Notes

¹ (Brown & Cambourne, 1987, p. 48)

² It is important to distinguish here between drawing a scene from the story and drawing only the setting in order to verbally retell the story using cut-out characters. Children who engage in oral retelling recalled much more than those who simply use drawing as a prompt (Gambrell et al., 1985). Therefore, the combination of illustration and verbal retelling is especially helpful for some children.

³ (Brown & Cambourne, 1987, p. 50)



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