

# What's the story?

Julia Damassa and Meg Jones introduce storyshaping, a fun way to create structure for children's storytelling

Storyshaping is an interactive method for making and sharing stories together supported by tactile prompts. By providing a simple story structure, it supports children in oral story telling, giving them the opportunity to express their ideas and listen to ideas expressed by others.

This inclusive activity encourages positive group interaction, allowing individuals to participate in their own way. Everyone has an imagination; everyone has ideas. It is expressing them that some find tricky, and storyshaping can help with this.

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The storyshaping method was originally devised to help Julia's son develop speaking and listening skills. She asked some simple 'story questions' to provide a structure for her son's ideas and help him turn them into a story. To support his understanding of the 'story questions' before he was able to read, Julia developed a sequence of five tactile symbols (called storyshapes) for the essential story elements of place, time, character, question and idea. Realising that this method had application beyond the home she refined her ideas to enable storyshaping to be used in schools.

## So how does it work?

The five story symbols are used as prompts by the adult in a storyshaping session to draw ideas from the children for their story. The adult asks open questions to encourage children to use rich descriptive language. At each stage of the story, the adult holds the appropriate fabric storyshape and repeats the story so far, using the children's ideas and their descriptive language. The adult also has the opportunity to enrich that language, so



modelling good story language for writing and helping children to remember their story. All ideas are valued equally and incorporated into the story, giving the children real ownership of their story. As non-verbal symbols, the storyshapes are accessible to children whatever their reading ability and are also unthreatening, as they invite children to create stories without the pressure of an empty page.

The inclusive nature of storyshaping places value on the children's ideas and helps them to see themselves as authors. To enhance further the status of shared storytelling, it is also valuable to consider the environment in which storyshaping takes place, ensuring that it is comfortable, free from distractions and perhaps made extra special by choosing the children's favourite area.

## Storyshaping in the classroom

Using the storyshapes develops an awareness of story structure, helping children to sequence and remember their ideas. Without them being aware of it, children have also planned the structure of their story, with each storyshape representing a paragraph.

At Heathfield Primary School, the Year 1 class shaped a story called The Rainbow Sea. This was about two

friends, a crab and a shark, who went on an amazing adventure together to find their way home. Afterwards, the children transformed their classroom into the multi-sensory rainbow sea, marking on a gigantic story map the different places and characters that the crab and the shark encountered on their journey. They then interviewed the characters and wrote up the interviews in the style of a newspaper. As one member of staff comments, 'The children were enthralled by the experience and spoke up freely and enthusiastically. They loved being given an extended opportunity to build their own ideas into an exciting and collaborative story. The process revealed hidden qualities and aptitudes in certain individuals which we are convinced would have gone unnoticed otherwise.'

## Taking it further

A story created by the children themselves can offer inspiration and motivation to explore the wider curriculum, building on the children's own interests and ideas. Opportunities for speaking and listening around the story could include:

- > Interviews with individual characters to understand their feelings at different points in the story, or conversations between different characters. Assessment can be built in by asking children to record the interviews and conversations.



## Features

### Asking the questions

Here are some examples of questions to draw out children's ideas for the story:

**Place: 'Where does your story take place?'**

- > Encourage the children to respond to the question and accept all their ideas equally.
- > Repeat their collective ideas back to them, adding descriptive story language where appropriate.
- > You could also ask the children about the colours, sounds and smells of the place to encourage the use of adjectives for a more vivid description.

**Time: 'When does your story happen?'**

- > Ask about the time of day, the weather, what day of the week or month it is, or if it is a special day.

**Character: 'Who is your story about?'**

- > Ask about the character's name, age and occupation to build up a picture of the main character.
- > Ask the children what the character is doing, encouraging them to use verbs and adverbs.

**Question: 'What is your character's question?'**

- > Encourage the children to think about the character's thoughts and feelings and to decide on their question together.

**Idea: 'How does your character find the answer to their question?'**

- > Using all the storyshapes as prompts, encourage the children to take their character on a journey to find an answer to the question.
- > When the question has been answered, ask, 'How does your story end?'

> Talking about the story's setting and physical journey: discussion could centre on how the time of the story affects the place, adding mood and atmosphere, and how the character relates to the place and time of the story.

> Sharing the story with others: children can be encouraged to retell their story to friends, family members or the rest of the school in an assembly.

Storyshaping can also be a great way into drama and role-play activities, allowing children to improvise and develop their ideas:

> Using props and costumes children can role-play different characters meeting each other, or combine characters from different stories shaped by the group, in order to explore what would happen if they were to meet each other.

> A soundtrack for the story could be put together. For example, at Heathfield Primary, the group who shaped 'The Rainbow Sea' used instruments to make the sound of water.

> Children may benefit from working as a small group to cast, practise, rehearse and present the story

through drama, deciding and agreeing together on the roles and responsibilities of each member. Keeping a written journal or a video diary of this activity could be valuable, as children record their thoughts, feelings, opinions and views along the way. Encourage them to note how any disagreements or problems were resolved and how decisions were made.

> The complete story can be typed or handwritten, as well as illustrated. The story can be published and read to an appropriate audience as an extended and cross-curricular book-making project. This could be further extended by encouraging creative writing and poetry inspired by the story.

### Storyshaping and ICT

Children's enthusiasm for the story they have created can be harnessed by recording it in various media. It could be turned into a simple eBook using software to embed children's artwork, photos of them in role, audio recordings of them telling the story and video of their drama work. These short clips of the children's responses, audio

or video, are an invaluable tool for supporting the writing process, and can be reused to support new stories and the evidence-gathering process for assessment. They are also perfect (with the appropriate permissions) for sharing on the school's learning platform, enabling parents who are not confident in supporting writing to understand better the processes involved, help their child develop as a writer and share in their success.

### It seems to remove the fear factor from writing

When turning the story into writing, an interactive whiteboard may be ideal for capturing a sentence for each element of the story. Children can decide together on a story summary of up to three words for each storyshape, which can then be written up on screen as a reminder. With the children divided into five groups, each group can then create their part of the story, based on the summaries. The story is then told to the group in the order of the storyshapes, and can be followed by a discussion on whether the story worked, or how it could be improved.

Many of the aspects of storyshaping that make it inclusive and successful are not unique to this approach. However, it does create a framework which ensures that all children can access a rich language experience to support their writing, and provides a structure that schools can employ consistently to encourage emergent writers. It seems to remove the fear factor from writing and replace it with fun, which as all good teachers know is crucial to any success.

Julia Damassa is a teacher, actress and writer. As the creator of Storyshapes she offers training for teachers, learning support staff, family learning practitioners and childcare providers. For more information, visit [www.storyshapes.com/](http://www.storyshapes.com/) Meg Jones is an early years consultant and writer with over 40 years of experience as a manager and trainer working with children, families, practitioners and students. The *Storyshaping* book and CD-ROM are available from Yellow Door – [www.yellow-door.net/](http://www.yellow-door.net/)