

## Folktales

### Introducing Folktales (all grade levels)

A folktale is a story that, in its plot, is pure fiction and that has no particular location in either time or space. However, despite its elements of fantasy, a folktale is actually a symbolic way of presenting the different means by which human beings cope with the world in which they live. Folktales concern people -- either royalty or common folk -- or animals who speak and act like people.

People told folktales long before there were books, newspapers or televisions. Folktales were a way to bring news from one village to the next. Parents used folktales to teach lessons to their children. These stories helped people learn and understand the customs of their village. Folktales also explained the wonders of nature, like thunderstorms.

Many cultures have one clever character who is always getting into trouble. For example, Native American Indians have Trickster, Cape Verdians have Los Nobos the wolf, and Africans have Anansi the Spider. (see "Tricksters")

Folktales are told over and over and they change with each retelling. Each storyteller breathes a different life into a story. The storyteller is always making choices; where to begin, where to end, where to add a dash of humor or a sprinkling of suspense.

Read a variety of folktales to your class, and have them discuss the meanings. Our suggestions include: Anansi (Spider) Stories, How the Mosquito Learned to Buzz, Brer Rabbit stories, Coyote Stories, and any story that suggests sound or movement. Check out *Mufara's Beautiful Daughter* by John Steptoe, *When Africa Was Home* by Karen Lynn Williams, *A Country Far Away* by Nigel Gray, and



*The Fortune-Tellers* by Lloyd Alexander. Also check out "Folktale Detective" in the Kid's Room, and our links page for access to folktales from several parts of the world!

### **Folk Tales Presentations** (Best for grade 4 and up)

Give the students at least one period to read more folk tales on their own. After reading several folk tales, have the students work in small groups and select the one story they liked the most. This will be rewritten by the students in their own words and then illustrated by the students. (It will be helpful if the students can identify the location where the story originated so they can later research authentic details about the specific region for their illustrations.)

In one or two periods they should be able to divide the story into sections and assign one or two pages (depending on the size of the group) to each member of the group. Each student will be responsible for writing the section of the story for their assigned pages and for creating the illustrations.

### **How to write your own folktale**

If you wanted to write a story about your canoe trip with your Mom, it might sound like this:

Mom and I went canoeing on Sunday. In the spring the Pascamansett River in Dartmouth, Massachusetts is full of water and there are even rapids. We stopped and had a picnic on a hill and I saw lots of birds. When we came to the rapids, Mom yelled out directions from the stern. I held my breath as we rushed through rocks and swirling water. In a few minutes, the water was calm again and Mom was calling out, "Great job, Eva!"

Telling what you did on your canoe trip is an example of a narrative story.

Now let's take the basic idea of the canoe trip and write a folktale.

Remember, a folktale is a simple story with a message or a lesson in it. It's also a story that lots of people can understand and enjoy.

Here's an example of a folktale using the idea of the canoe trip:

Two brothers went on a canoe trip. One brother said, "I'll sit in the stern. But the other brother said, "I want to sit in the stern." They argued until finally one brother said "I'm older, so I'll sit in

back first. When we are halfway we will switch and you will sit in the back. The other brother agreed. When they were exactly halfway down the river, Wind decided to play tricks and he started blowing across the river.

Younger brother said, "It's time to switch now."

Older brother said, "Brother, it is too windy."

Younger brother said, "You just want to stay in the stern. We'll switch right now." Younger Brother got up to switch and the wind blew the canoe over and both brothers got dunked in the river.

Wind looked down and said, "I hope you have both learned what can happen when you can't wait for your turn."

As you can see, there are many differences between the folktale and other kinds of stories. How about writing one of your own? Just one request. Make it 2 pages or less.

Thanks to for Linda Nevens and "All About Folktales" for their help with this activity.

See their page at <http://www.umassd.edu/specialprograms/isn/Newfiles/aboutfolktales.html>