

Story Scavenger Hunts by Mary Hamilton

Take your students or workshop participants on a story scavenger hunt. How? You provide a list of story prompts; then invite your participants to gather stories from each other.

Story Scavenger Hunts are a strategy my colleague Cynthia Changaris and I have been using for years now. We especially like it as an opening activity for workshops and other instructional settings. People have a reason to talk with each other by playing the Story Scavenger Hunt game. By telling and listening to each other, they begin building a community together.

Just as ordinary scavenger hunts contain a list of things to be found, our Story Scavenger Hunts contain a list of stories to gather from others. Our lists are always headed by the instruction: Find someone who will tell you: followed by a list of story possibilities. We also include the following advice: When you are asked by someone else to tell a story, tell only what you are willing to share. We include this advice because Cynthia and I know stories can be very personal. While we do want to build community, we don't want to make folks uncomfortable by invading their privacy.

Just like ordinary scavenger hunts, the list of stories to scavenge can be tweaked depending on the reason participants are gathered. When we've lead workshops for teachers, we've included, "about a shining moment in their life as a teacher" and "about something he/she wishes someone had told them before they began teaching." With storytellers, we've included, "about their earliest memory of hearing a story" and "what happened to the first two pigs in The Three Little Pigs."

Story Scavenger Hunts Go to School

Teachers could use the Story Scavenger Hunt strategy to begin the school year, especially in grades where students could be expected to be able to read the prompts either independently or with the help of a partner. I've been thinking lately about the types of prompts that would have students talking about their ordinary experiences that put into practice the everyday relevance of particular subjects. Here are some story prompts I've developed. I've arranged the ideas by subject application. You'll notice I have not listed Language Arts as a subject. All this talking and listing is Language Arts. Some prompts will elicit a narrative. Some will elicit descriptions. Some may elicit both. So, language arts all the way through! Math teachers, I've also not listed math separately because every math prompt I thought of also fit with other subjects, so look for "& Math" repeatedly in the lists below.

Although this list provides lots of possibilities, I think five -- seven prompts are enough for a typical Story Scavenger Hunt. After all, you want everyone to talk and listen, not race around barely attending to one another.

Find Someone Who Will Tell You:

(Learn the details. Why was this happening? Who else was involved, if anyone? Why do they remember it? How do they feel about it now?)

Science

about a storm they will never forget

about the strangest place they've ever seen grass growing

about a time they sat in a tree for a long time

about a time they were involved in growing something

about an unforgettable outdoor walk

about a time they smelled an unusual odor and how they finally figured out what it was

about a time when they heard an unusual sound and how they finally figured out what it was

Science & Math

about a collection they have and how they organize it

Social Studies

about a time they got to vote

about something that happened before they were born and how they learned about this happening

tell about a relative or friend who lives in another country

their three "rules" for using a cell phone and why they follow these rules

how to say hello in three languages and how they learned to do this

about a time they got into trouble for something they did not do

about a time they should have gotten into trouble, but didn't

Social Studies & Math

about a time when they used a map

about a time they had to figure out how to share something fairly

about a time when arriving too late or too early caused a problem

how to handle the situation when dividing teams and one person is left over
(Math? They are handling a remainder. Social Studies? Issues of fairness)

Arts and Humanities

what their favorite CD art looks like and why it is their favorite CD art

about the ugliest object they've ever seen

about their favorite photograph -- It can be of them or someone else, but they need to describe it, and tell you why they like it

about their earliest memory of dancing

about an object they love to look at and why they love to look at it

about their favorite game of pretend when they were younger

Arts & Science

about the best sunrise or sunset they've ever seen

Arts & Math

about the most beautiful building they've ever seen

about a time when they folded paper to make something
(Math? Both of the above prompts can be related to geometry.)

Arts & Social Studies

about a time they wore a costume -- Why did they wear it? Did they want to wear it? What did it look like? (Why social studies? This could be a cultural or religious event that called for a costume -- not special occasion clothing or an outfit worn for ritual purposes and not referred to as a costume.)

Practical Living & Math

about a time they saved up to buy something

Practical Living & Social Studies

about a time they dressed up for a special occasion -- What was the occasion? Did they want to dress up? What did they wear? (Why social studies? Sometimes people dress up, but not in what the individual would call a "costume" for some cultural or religious events. Why practical living? It's worth being aware of different ways of dressing for different situations.)

about a time when a misunderstanding caused a problem

Practical Living, Physical Education & Social Studies

about the first time they were ever on a team (did they have fun? what sort of team was it?
what did the team do together)

Physical Education & Social Studies

about a time someone taught them how to play a game
(Why social studies? Folklore -- handing down of a game)

Any and Every Subject Area!

about a time when following directions would have made everything easier

Okay, that's over thirty from me. I'm sure those of you who are immersed in specific subjects every day will have no trouble thinking of many more prompts to get the stories flowing to build community, have fun, and help your students grasp that what they will do in your class really does have connections with everyday life.

Brief Bio: Mary Hamilton has earned her living telling stories and pondering how the art of storytelling works since 1983. www.maryhamilton.info