

TELLING STORIES FOR DIFFERENT AGES

Thoughts, Hints and Other Considerations on Matching Stories with Listeners

By Mary Hamilton

On Audiences and Story Selection

Over the years I've developed a few ideas about what works and what doesn't with particular audiences and have developed a few guidelines I try to follow. These guidelines are not chiseled in stone, and you may discover that your experiences do not match mine. Just as all tellers are different, I would imagine that what works with what audience will vary from teller to teller as well. Here are some of my observations:

Single age group audiences behave differently from mixed or family audiences. For example, a story teens would consider too babyish to hear in an "all teen" audience may indeed be accepted and enjoyed by teens who are part of a family audience. Adult nostalgia tales that may cut too close for an all teen audience (dating disasters, for instance) may be thoroughly enjoyed by teens who are part of a largely adult audience who possess enough distance from such events to be able to appreciate the humor such stories usually contain. In general, reactions of older listeners can influence reactions of younger listeners and help the younger listeners understand and respond appropriately to the story. It is important that families sit together in events planned for family audiences. Then, family members can relate to, and influence, one another instead of the older members of the family becoming onlookers watching the youngest members "enjoy the program."

When audiences attend events advertised for a specific age group, they have the expectation that stories told will be appropriate for that age group. Thus, adult audiences should hear stories appropriate for adults. This does not mean every story told to an adult audience must be inappropriate for children; however, it does mean that the teller should not assume the adult audience wants to "hear a story you'll be able to tell your preschooler at home" if this has not been an advertised intent of the program.

In a program advertised for families, every story must be appropriate for, even if not fully understood on first hearing by, everyone present. In other words, in a family program, I consider it acceptable to tell a brief story that may require explanation for the youngest listeners to understand as long as the story is one I would tell to some children – ages 10 and up, for example. I keep such tales brief so the youngest listeners aren't left out for long. Such stories must be also very entertaining to the older children and adults present, and must be easy for them to explain to the youngest children later. I do not tell family audiences tales I would tell only to adult audiences because such tales often deal with content adults may not want to discuss with their children on the ride home!

Selection Hints for Specific Age Audiences

Preschoolers

- stories with one plot (not "meanwhile" or "while that was happening . . .")
- stories with lots of repetition (say repeated parts the same way every time and they will join in and tell the story with you)
- interesting sounds, especially when they are repeated
- short, active stories (not 10 and 20 minutes – unless you have oodles of joining in)

Primary students

- stories with easy to follow and predictable plots just a bit more complicated than the plots chosen for preschoolers
- lots of repetition (yes, they will join in too)
- stories slightly longer than preschool stories
- “silly” ghost stories

Grade 4 & 5 students

- plots even more complicated
- “real” sounding ghost stories
- plots with twists or punch line/surprise endings that challenge their thinking.
- “fool stories” and tall tales begin to go over well at this age
- true stories from teller’s childhood, especially if teller was younger than listeners when the events happened (age difference important for events that are funny in retrospect, but were not so funny at the time).

Middle school and high school students

- most of the same stories as Grades 4 & 5
- realistic ghost stories
- urban legends, although this audience does not always appreciate knowing the tales are urban legends
- stories of justice
- stories of male-female relationships
- tend to prefer realistic or tall tale animal tales over tales with talking animals
- first story you tell this group is often the most important, so choose carefully. I often tell a short realistic ghost tale first. I feel the tale reassures the listeners that I know they are not little children so enables them to relax and listen instead of clinging to a disengaged attitude in an attempt to “feel grown up.” After that, I can often tell a wide variety of age appropriate tales.
- teller’s attitude often makes or breaks an event with this age. You must be yourself – not a grown-up trying to prove how “with it” you are, or a grown-up who “knows much more than you do, so you need to listen” or a grown-up who fears teen-agers. Teens spot fakes, feel insulted; then react negatively.

Adults

- most of the same stories middle and high school students like
- stories that deal with adult issues
- stories with demanding, unexpected plot structures.

Additional Story Selection Considerations

Life Experience –

Until about 4th grade I find most children don’t grasp “dead” unless they have had personal experience with the death of someone close to them. For this reason, many of the realistic ghostly tales don’t begin to go over well until then.

Many of the slumber party urban legends don’t go over until children are closer to the age and experience of the characters. Children who are too young to have ever heard of a “prom” won’t grasp the phrase “prom dress.” Keep in mind that told stories rely on

audience members being able to create images in their minds through listening. There are few visual cues to complete the picture for them.

One story I tell is “Some Dog” a tall tale set on the farm where I grew up. I find rural 4th graders enjoy this story. Urban children don’t enjoy it until about middle school, or even high school. The more urban a child, the less farm experience, so the more likely the child is to think the gigantic turtles in the story are possible rather than a funny exaggeration, so they miss out on the humor.

Experience with Story –

A parody of a fairy tale will go over well with an audience who knows the original tale, less well with an audience with no knowledge of the tale being parodied.

Experience with continuing story characters -- Listeners familiar with Jack, Anansi, Brer Rabbit, Paul Bunyan and other characters who have many tales told about them will have more associations to draw upon when those characters show up than will listeners for whom those characters are new. How do you know how much information the audience needs about the character? Watch their reactions. If you see smiles or nods and grins when Brer Rabbit shows up, you know the listeners know Brer Rabbit. No reaction? You need to decide whether you feel this story works well if the audience discovers Brer Rabbit through it, or if you need to embed a bit of Brer Rabbit background as you tell.

The most important story selection question is: **“What does my audience need to understand or to have experienced to be able to understand this story?”** If you believe your audience unlikely to have the experience or understanding necessary, can you weave the information into the story as you tell it, or convey it **briefly** within the story introduction? If not, choose a different tale.

Experience being in a storytelling audience --

Is it or is it not OK to laugh, gasp, chuckle out loud or should I just be quiet so I won’t “throw the storyteller off”? Experienced storytelling audiences know that give and take between teller and listener, even if just through body language, is part of a storytelling experience! Less experienced audiences (especially all adult) are more likely to “put on polite faces” leaving the teller less certain whether the story is working or not. While tellers can’t force an audience to react or interact, a teller’s welcoming response to reactions and interaction will encourage more. So, be aware you can also play a role in helping listeners learn to be a story-loving audience!

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