

Teacher-Created Stories for Beginning Adult Readers

Workshop by Janet Payne

Beginning readers need more practice! In this workshop, teachers will create beginning-level stories and reflect on criteria for accessible, enjoyable language and content. The presenter will move to student-generated stories with a fast-paced demonstration. There will be an extensive handout and a website for the stories.

I. Schedule and Introduction

II. Stories for Practice – Presentation

III. Story Creation – Group Work 30 minutes

A. Get into groups of three to work on a particular theme.

1. Introduce yourselves.

2. Assign a leader, a timekeeper, and a scribe.

B. Make lists together.

1. Make a list of people and tasks associated with this lifeskill.

2. Make a list of situations and settings associated with this lifeskill.

C. Choose the situation for your story.

1. Decide on the characters, the setting, and the basic plot.

2. Talk about the use of humor and surprise.

D. Decide how to write the story and write it.

Option 1: Spend individual time brainstorming a story that fits the group's parameters,

then come together to write the story.

Option 2: Spend individual time writing a story that fits the group's

parameters, then come together to read each other's versions. Decide

whether to present one or more of these stories or combine parts of all of them into one new story.

IV. Storytelling – Whole Group

V. The Language of Stories – Presentation + Discussion

VI. Student-Created Stories – Demonstration

VIII. Closing

Teacher-Created Stories for ELT Beginning Adult Learners

An ESL/ELT beginner's limited vocabulary and knowledge of sentence structure does not constrain a good storyteller. Stories with very few words can be relevant and humorous. Review the elements of a good story and conventions that will help you communicate them in easy English. Customize each other stories by changing people and places, create additional practice materials to go with the stories, and collect the student's stories for future classes.

- 1. You can tell a good story with limited vocabulary.** These stories are for reinforcement of classroom material, so start with the subject matter you are studying in class. As a teacher, you know the vocabulary that accompanies this subject matter. Keep it in mind, but write your own story. Use repetition for emphasis, such as "Her aunt is talking and talking." This conveys that she is talking a lot or too much. You are writing for adults so you can let them fill in between the lines. Give them the actions and they can usually infer attitudes or emotions. For example, depending on the story, "She is looking at the clock." can just be an action, or it can mean that she is late or bored. Putting these sentences together can create a humorous situation and clarify the word "late." "Her aunt is talking and talking. / Mary is looking at the clock. / She is going to be late!"
- 2. Control the structures used in the stories.** For the beginner, try to keep the story in the present tense even if the story is recounting something from the past. This is possible with the "historical present" and a little creativity. Some phrases will have to go in the past. This is not a problem; the students can and should learn individual phrases in the past, such as "I forgot!" Since textbooks vary in the order in which they introduce lifeskills, choose one textbook and adapt material from other textbooks so they are all at the same level. Use lots of dialog. Teach the difference between direct and indirect speech. Teach and always use the words, "says," "asks," replies." Keep the story to about 36-40 sentences. Also, we use thousands of set phrases in our everyday vocabulary. Use them! One of my stories is about Voice Mail with a phone system that says, "Thank you for calling Med Services. If this is an emergency, hang up and dial 911. To make an appointment, press **1**. To ask questions about billing, press **2**."
- 3. Write for YOUR students.** Tell them stories about your life or everyday activities. Occasionally use their names for the protagonist. Tell them true stories and fun fantasy. If you know your students, you know what they struggle with and enjoy. Write them stories about those things. We must be very careful about racial and gender stereotypes; they are very subtle. However, humor often involves a common mistake so we end up laughing at ourselves.

4. **Tell a good story.** Think about the structure of a narrative. Stories for our purpose have a title or an introduction, some background to set the scene, and then lots of action and dialog. There is usually a problem that comes up in the story and its resolution or a task to be accomplished. Yet a good story often involves something unpredictable or humorous. Humor shows up in emphatic speech, repetition, and an unexpected twist to a familiar story line. The story below is a very beginning story, but it still has a twist to it. When the students have a little more language ability, you can write about lots of fun topics.
5. **Improve your stories.** Read the story out loud. Check for tense changes (the past keeps sneaking in), choice of vocabulary, and the overall flow. Recheck for stereotypes. Then look at each sentence. See if you can think of a way to picture this sentence. That will help you keep your sentences concrete and give you ideas for follow-up activities. Sometimes it helps to start with a script or dialog and then write a story. Your adult audience can pick up subtleties and intuit intent and emotions by reading actions. This helps a lot in creating humor with limited language. It also helps when you want to introduce new vocabulary into a story. The sentence “Her aunt is talking and talking,” uses repetition to convey the idea that her aunt is talking a lot or maybe too much. Depending on the story, “She is looking at the clock.” can mean that she is late or bored. Putting these sentences together creates a humorous situation and clarifies the word “late.” “Her aunt is talking and talking. Mary is looking at the clock. She is going to be late!”¹
6. **Make good use of your stories in the classroom.** Create lots of practice opportunities to go with your stories. You can even develop your entire curriculum around them! Have the students create stories with the same theme and save the stories they write for future classes.
7. **Start small, but collaborate with others.** Create one complete unit. Share an electronic copy of your unit with other materials writers who have created similar units. You will end up with a customized curriculum that offers a wide variety of practice opportunities.

Sample Sentences for “Classroom Words” Unit

Open the door. Open the door to the classroom. Walk into the classroom. Turn on the lights. Walk to the closet. Open the closet door. Put your coat in the closet. Take the books out of the closet. Put the books on the desk. Write your name. Sit down. Sit at the desk. Sit at the desk in the front of the room. Walk to the back of the room. Look for the pencil sharpener. Is the pencil sharpener in the back of the room? Where’s the pencil sharpener? Read the name on the board. Are you ready? What am I doing? You are opening the door to the classroom. I am walking into the classroom. I am putting the books on the desk. I am sharpening my pencil.

¹ This is taken from a story in [Sound Sentences II](#), Educational Activities, Inc a division of Siboney Learning, Ltd. Janet V. Payne, 4/29/94, revised 11/7/02, Ann Arbor, Michigan, All rights reserved. Workshop website: www.lifeenglish.net.

Sample Story for “Classroom Words” Unit: The First Day of Class

Greg is opening the door to the classroom. He is walking into the classroom. He is turning on the lights. He is walking to the closet. He is opening the closet door. He is putting his coat in the closet. He is taking books out of the closet. He is putting books on his desk. He is taking papers out of the closet. He is putting papers on his desk. He is walking to the board. He is writing his name. He is sitting in at his desk in the front of the room.

Mary is a student. She is walking into the room. She is looking at the teacher. She is reading his name on the board. “My name is Greg. I am your teacher. This is ESL 101.”

Mary is walking to the desk in the back of the room. She is sitting at the desk. She is looking for the students. She sees no students. She is looking for her pencil. She is looking for the pencil sharpener. The pencil sharpener is in the front of the room. It is next to the teacher.

Mary is walking to the front of the classroom. Mary is looking at the pencil sharpener. She is not looking at the teacher. The teacher says, “Hello! What’s your name?”

She says, “Mary.” She is walking to her desk. She is sitting down. She is not looking at the teacher. She is looking at her pencil. Oh! Mary forgot the pencil sharpener! The teacher is next to the pencil sharpener!

The students are walking into the classroom. They are sitting at the desks. They are looking at the board. They are reading the name on the board. They are writing the name.

Mary is not writing the name. She is standing up. She is walking to the pencil sharpener. She is sharpening her pencil. She is sitting down in her chair. OK! Now she is writing. She is ready for the first day of class.

Student-Created Stories and Other Writing Ideas

Beginning students can create their own stories. Some students will be ready to write their stories after they have had enough practice. Others will need to be directed at first. If students are ready to write on their own, suggest that they write about something they have experienced. Show them how surprise and humor adds to the story. They will have difficulty working within the constraints of their limited language, but they will have had good models.

- 1. Model Whole-class Stories** – Start by writing a story together on the board. Ask questions to get the type of sentences you need in your story. “Who is going to be in the story?” “What happens next?” When you have studied weather, housing, and everyday activities, write a fantasy about where someone lives. “What’s the weather like in that city?” “Tell me about the house.” Then ask the students to write about the city they lived in as a child. They can use the story on the board as a model.
- 2. Stories from Pictures** –I have used a picture of a living room for activity in # 9, page 4, and followed the activity with story writing about what the cat on the sofa did all day. (The picture had a cat on the sofa, an open window, a goldfish bowl, and food on the dining room table.) The stories were only a few sentences long. They traded stories and read each other’s papers. Photos of interesting people work well. Enlarge a photo and show it on the overhead projector. Ask questions about the person and write a model story based on their answers. Then pass around a variety of pictures and ask the students to answer the same questions

about their picture. Ask them to draw a floor plan of their childhood home (homework). This will initiate a lot of discussion and stories.

3. **Round-Robin Stories** – Do you remember campfire stories in which one person starts the story and others have to add on one at a time? Stories can be created this way. Using the photos of interesting people from the above activity, have students write one sentence in response to your first question, then have them pass the paper to the next person. That person reads the first sentence and answers the second question about that new photo. In the end, a group of six has six stories with one line on each story from each person. See [Community Spirit](#) for more ideas.

4. **Holiday Poems** – Before students have the language to describe events in detail, they can share some of their culture in a poem. Ask the students questions, and have them write individual words as directed. They will need to ask you for several words they do not know, but that adds to the interest of the lesson. I asked them to draw a little picture to accompany their poems and made class sets. Line One: What is the holiday? Line two: What do you see? Three: What do you smell? Four: What do you hear? Five: What do you taste (eat)? Six: What do you touch? Seven: What is the holiday? Example: New Year's/New clothes, paper dragons/ money, flowers, fireworks/Bells, singing, Boom, Pop/ All the food, candy/ New Year's. (A cinquain poem is similar. It asks for one word, two words, three words, two words, one word. I wasn't usually successful in getting the correct number of words from my students, so I relaxed the structure.)

5. **Holiday Stories** – With a little more language (and the past tense), I ask the students to write a story about an important holiday in their life. They are told to write the story about something that happened to them when they were children. The audience for their story is a child they know. They need to keep the audience in mind as they write. We make booklets of these stories so they can give their story to a child as a gift.

6. **Classroom Sets** – Each year I (or a volunteer) type up either holiday poems, holiday stories and another set of stories. I give them a separate typed copy of their own story and a set of all the stories. I make enough for an extra set for future classes to read. I even have them sign a paper allowing me to use their stories. Some years these stories are edited and rewritten.

7. **Letters** – Letters (and emails) produce some of the student's best writing because they are conscious of their audience, be it the president or first lady of the United States or an email pen pal. Letters can request information, thank a fake benefactor, or politely complain to a fake landlady. At the end of class I ask them to write me a letter.

Themes for Stories

Classroom	Weather	Housing	Everyday Activities
Clothing	Shopping	Schools	Government
Holidays	Emotions	Descriptions	Families
Occupations	Office	Around Town	Getting a Job
Food (Eating Out, Shopping, Cooking)	Medical (Illness, Bodies, Doctors, Emergencies)		American History
Transportation	(Travel, Traffic Signs and Laws, Mass Transportation, Car Repair)		Childhood
			On the Job