

## Types of Stories

From Dr. Lockett's Book – The Basics of Storytelling, 2008

**Anecdotes** are short casual stories. They are often entertaining accounts of, or entertaining facts about some incident told in a manner that one would use in sharing a memory with a family member. Originally, an anecdote was a little-known, entertaining fact of history or from a biography. Now, anecdotes are usually a short, often entertaining accounts of some situation that is usually biographical or personal. Anecdotes are often woven into stories in a concept called “a story within a story.”

**Ballads** are romantic or sentimental songs that tell a story in poetic format. Prior to the invention of the printing press, many stories were preserved by minstrels and others who sang ballads and shared stories through music.

**Crowd Looseners or Ice Breakers** are short audience participation stories that are designed to elicit feedback and interaction from the audience. Many storytellers use short tales and stories designed to get a response to begin storytelling program and workshops. Ice breakers are also used to stimulate listeners when energy levels become low. “The Button Factory” created by Michael Parent is a good example of a crowd loosener. The song “When I First Came to this Land” can be used along with stories to serve the same purpose as a crowd loosener.

**Cumulative Stories** are predictable stories that build on previous elements in the story. Generally, the teller begins with an interaction between two characters then repeats their part of the story over and over adding one new element with each repetition. Bobby Norfolk's version of the African folktale “Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears” is a wonderful example of a cumulative tale. Other examples include “The Enormous Turnip,” “The Talking Yam,” “The Little Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly,” and “Why Male Mosquitoes Do Not Bite.” Each story builds as elements introduced into the story are added to each repetition. Cumulative stories are also referred to as “chain stories.”

**Epics** are long narrative poems that are told in older dignified styles about the deeds of a traditional or historical hero or heroes. Some epics like **Homer's Iliad** and the **Odyssey** have appeared in story form and told in a less formal manner. Some of the stories from these epics are often told in isolation and not with the entire epic story. Other epics like Beowulf and Gilgamesh are less familiar to people. More often when they are told, they are told in their original forms. Usually only more advanced storytellers attempt to add epics to their repertoires. This is because epics need to be memorized to be told in their original format.

**Fables** are fiction stories that are meant to teach moral lessons. The characters in fables are usually talking animals. Some of the best-known fables were written by **Aesop** (ancient Greece,

6th Century B.C.) and by Jean de **La Fontaine** (French poet and writer of fables, 1621-1695). Many storytellers enjoy adapting fables into short stories. Some storytellers share the moral at the end of the story. Others allow the audience to draw their own meaning from the story.

**Fairy Tales** are stories with magical characters such as witches and fairy godmothers in them. They usually also have human and animal characters. In most fairy tales, the main character has a problem that can only be solved with the help of the fairies or some type of fairy magic. Fairy Tales have been said to comprise all the folktales that deal with strange or supernatural events. Nearly every fairy tale has a happy ending. The popularity of fairy tales around the world is such that nearly 400 versions exist of the story of Cinderella. Her magical helper is her Fairy Godmother. Some of the greatest collections of fairy tales have come from Hans Christian Anderson and the Brothers Grimm.

**Folktales** are stories that have been told by people and handed down through an oral tradition. Most people believe they were created by workers, peasants or just ordinary people for the purpose of amusement. They are simple and direct and often include folk customs and traditions from the countries of origin. Some folktales have survived for hundreds of years and have been passed down through the generations. These are the easiest type of stories for beginning storytellers to tell. Storytellers who wish to tell tales from cultures other than their own need to have a clear understanding of the material they wish to tell in order to correctly portray the culture from which the stories originated.

**Ghost Stories** are stories about ghosts, spirits and supernatural creatures that bring shivers and fear to listeners. Many ghost stories would fit in other categories listed in this section. However, the popularity of ghost stories is such that they deserve to be listed as a type on their own.

**Historical Stories** are stories about people or events in the past. These can be told in biographical format. Telling stories about lesser known historic figures or events might include telling the known truths of the event and filling in the gaps with the most probable information to keep the story as accurate as possible. This has been called preserving valuable truth through an artistic method.

**Holiday Stories** are special stories told in different cultures to celebrate and support dates that are special within these cultures. Every society has its unique celebrations or customs. Storytellers should be certain to add stories from different holidays to their repertoires. The stories are not only fun to learn and tell, but fit in well with other stories for programs around the holidays.

**Jokes** are anything said or done to arouse laughter. Jokes can include funny anecdotes, short stories with comical punch lines or amusing tricks that are played on someone. Some storytellers

take a simple joke and add detail and description and turn jokes into short stories. Every culture has its own funny stories and jokes.

**Jump Stories** are a special type of ghost stories that build the audience's emotions to a point where they are ready to jump and scream when the ending – usually a shout or scream - takes place. These stories are especially popular around campfires or after the lights go out at special times when people gather together.

**Legends** are stories that have been retold and handed down for generations among a people of a given culture. They are popularly believed to have a historical basis, though most cannot be verified. For instance, legends about Johnny Appleseed are based on a real person's life. Johnathan Chapman was an eccentric character in the American 1800's who traveled all across the eastern half of the country planting apple seeds and sharing his love of nature and especially of apples. Legends of Paul Bunyan came from stories written in 1910 to advertise a lumber company. Many other legends cannot be traced to their origins. Every country has its own heroes whose stories have been told as legends. Storytellers find that legends make delightful stories to share with audiences. Local legends often include ghost stories, stories about local landmarks, buildings, and people.

**Literary Stories** are stories that were created by an author and published in a book or other format. In today's modern world, stories can be written on the Internet or recorded in audio forms such as compact disk (CD). However, most literary stories are meant to remain in written form. Literary stories are the most difficult to tell. If a storyteller wishes to tell a literary story that was created by another individual, permission needs to be acquired before performing that piece. If a storyteller intends to make changes in a piece created by someone else, it is also considered appropriate to get permission before performing the story with the changes in it.

**Myths** are stories that were created to explain various phenomenon of nature, the origin of man, origins of popular customs and religious rites of a different people or other events. Most often myths include stories about the adventures and misadventures of gods and heroes. Most western storytellers are familiar with the Grecian and Roman myths from southern Europe, Norse myths from Scandinavia in northern Europe, Celtic myths and Arthurian legends from the United Kingdom. However, Egypt and other countries in Africa, China, India, Japan and many of the older cultures in the world also have wonderful myths and legends of their own that deserve to be told. It takes a great deal of study to do justice in telling the myths of cultures that are different from your own. Margaret Read MacDonald says that one should be prepared to devote a serious critical effort to preparing tales if he or she elects to tell myths.

**Original Stories** are stories that are created by the storyteller. Radio personality, Garrison Keillor, is probably one of the greatest creators of original stories. As one creates original stories, anything can happen. This open format can lead to great pleasure and enjoyment or to total

disaster. In the hands of a master storyteller like Keillor, all loose ends are tied together by the end of the story. All questions get answered, and the listeners are satisfied.

**Parables** are short, simple stories, usually based on an occurrence of a familiar kind, from which morals or religious lessons may be drawn.

**Parodies** are works that imitate the style of a story, song or other work and perform it in a humorous and satirical manner. Parodies are more effective when the original work is well known by the audience. American storyteller, Ed Stivender, may be one of the best users of parodies in the storytelling world. He often retells old folktales in modern-day language. Listeners get so caught up in Stivender's stories that it often takes several minutes before they can figure out the original storyline.

**Personal and Family Stories** are stories about things that have happened to you or your family. They can include stories about ancestors, family traditions, family sayings, celebrations, important events, family pets and stories about extended family members. It seems to be a common perception that personal stories are easy to create and to tell. In reality, it is usually far more difficult to craft and tell a personal or family story than it is to retell a folktale or other story. An expert at teaching the art of telling personal stories is Illinois storyteller Jim May.

**Pourquoi Stories** (How and Why Stories) are also known as origin stories. They are fictional narratives that offer explanations about why something is the way it is. "How the Chipmunk got its Stripes," "Why the Bear Has No Tale," "How the Elephant got its Trunk" are all "how and why" or pourquoi stories. Many legends could also be pourquoi stories.

**Reality Stories** are stories that can be found in books, newspapers and other forms of media (television, radio, film etc). These are not usually good for storytellers to use unless they are highly experienced tellers.

**Tall tales** are stories that involve characters that are larger than life or have super-human traits. They may be based on actual people or events, but they are exaggerated so much that they seem impossible. Many times, tall tales are associated with the American West. However, there are other countries that have their own characters with super-human traits. The "Five Chinese Brothers" from China and "Finn McCool" from Ireland could be considered to be tall tales. Tall tales are often grouped with legends by literature teachers.

**Trickster tales** are stories that involve an animal who outwits other animals through patience and wisdom. Many African tales tell about a creature who sometimes appears as a man and sometimes as a spider. The creature is called Anansi. Children and adults alike revel in the antics of Anansi, The Spider. Indian and many Asian tales tell of how "Rabbit" is the trickster. Many of the stories told by the Native Americans in North America include fox and coyote as the American versions of the trickster.