

WRITING THE STORY



experience.

Introduction: The story you create will influence the rest of your opera. As the story goes, so goes the opera. If your story is simple, direct, and concise, the rest of your opera will fall into place quite nicely. If your story is complicated, long and unwieldy, your opera will turn out the same; it will not be as good an experience as it could have been. We have found over and over again that creating a simple, concise story is vital to having an effective and positive opera

Working with Children

In this section, as with the entire Opera by Children process, it is the students who make the choices. Your role as teacher or drama specialist is to *ask the right questions* and have the *positive, inspiring attitude* so the students can come up with appropriate answers. The three opera rules: 1) No gets Hurt, 2) Everyone participates, and 3) It is entirely the students work, should be referred to and utilized at every opportunity during the writing process. Review these rules with the class at the end of each session to ensure these goals, rather than rules, have been met.

Working with the Curriculum

Stories work best when they interact, enhance, and play key roles in the classroom curriculum in any subject area. A science curriculum can be explored by creating a story that deals with the subject at hand, whether that is weather, mammals, or any other science subject, for example. With the burdens of meeting state core curriculum in today's test-obsessed educational age, teachers are constantly trying to find ways to integrate their curriculum. Crafting stories for opera is a wonderful vehicle to this end.



Character
Climax
Conflict
Denouement
Major action
Exposition
Objective
Oral history
Plot
Point of attack
Resolution
Rising action
Setting
Story details
Story structure
Story version
Storyline

Objectives: Students will be able to create a story that will form the basis of their opera. They will know and understand the following terminology: *story version, plot, storyline, oral history, character, objective, setting, conflict, point of attack, rising action, climax, story structure, story details, major action, exposition, resolution, and denouement*. They will be able to use these words in appropriate context in discussion and in creation of their story.



They will also understand the words “*minimal*” and “*simple*” as they apply to the story for their opera. They will understand and demonstrate through their creative efforts how opera stories are structured, and will be able to write the basic outline of their opera story in 5 simple sentences. They will be able to flesh out their story

outline with basic actions and anticipatory recitative dialogue to complete their story, **with their story totally 1 page in length.**

Process:

Section 1: Ideas for Stories

Explain to the students that ideas for stories can come from many sources.



Fairytales
Folktales
Myths
Legends

Suggest that many of them may already be familiar with folktales, fairytales, myths and legends. Note that it is fun for them to realize that the Cinderella story, for instance, is found in nearly every culture of the world and that the Disney version with which they are familiar is exactly that: the Disney *version*, which is based on the French fairytale. The German Cinderella, another example, is much gorier with the step sisters cutting of parts of their foot to fit into the shoe. Once they realize that there are different versions of such stories, suggest to your students that they should feel free, as one option to writing a story, to adapt and create their own version of a favorite fairy or folk tale, whether it be a cowboy Cinderella or a three little pigs that takes place on Mars. Explain that while they may use the Cinderella *plot*, or very basic action sequence, they may decide to fill in that plot with their own details to create a *storyline* just as the French Cinderella and German Cinderella share the same plot, but the *storylines* and *story details* are different.



Oral
Histories



to the students that another exciting place to find stories is from children's lives. Oral history and lived events make for excellent source material. These stories are often simple enough that they good stories for opera. Besides, we all have really fun and exciting experiences that are great for opera.

Class-
Created
Stories

Suggest to the students that they can, of course, be totally creative and make up a story all on their own, once they know the various parts of a story. There are several ways to do this.

Characters
Settings
Conflicts

As a teacher, you can get their ideas for CHARACTERS, SETTINGS, and CONFLICTS (problems the characters must face) and write them on slips of paper. Then the children can draw them out of a three hats (or throw paper airplanes to them, or use some other fun selection method), until they get a trio about which they are excited, or upon which they vote.

Out of these three story elements, will come your basic *plot*. The *storyline* is the plot after specific details about the characters major actions have been added. As you go through the story-making process, you will come up with more ideas as to how to have your class invent a story.

No Published Books!

Explain to students that published books are NOT good source material for stories. Indicate that even if they are excited about a recently read picture book or story, published stories and books are OFF LIMITS. **This is due to two major reasons:**

First, let students know that it is simply ILLEGAL. It is STEALING or using something WITHOUT PERMISSION. Remind your class of their classroom rules about this topic. Do you steal each other's stuff? Ideas work the same way. Performing copyrighted material for a public audience is against the law, even if it is for a classroom project and even if it is free. Recently passed national and international copyright law is very clear on this fact, and Educational is not excluded if a public audience (such as parents) is present.

Indicate that both YOU and Utah Festival Opera prize **creativity** above all else. Suggest that **whatever they do, it should be theirs and no one else's**. Describe how using someone else's material for a story takes some of the ownership out of the process for them.



In terms of language arts, it is good to have your students look at a wide variety of books and stories and find those elements that make them effective. Have your students **identify elements that make a story fun to read**. Once they do this, indicate that the elements they discovered can be used in their own opera. Indicate any other elements the students may have forgotten.

Structure
Plot
Storyline
Story
Details

Explain that the *structure* of good stories can be used, for many stories share the same structure. Story structures are kind of like the bones in our bodies. They are the framework upon which the *plot*, then the *storyline*, and finally *story details* are attached like muscles (plot), skin (storyline) and clothes (story details) on our bodies.

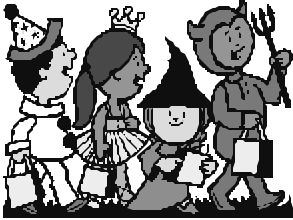


Discuss with the students what kind of story they would like to have for the basis of their opera. Through discussion, general enthusiasm for a particular idea, or voting, come to a consensus. If you choose a class-created story, you may choose to go through the process of selecting the three beginning plot elements noted above.

Key Questions/Comments for Section 1 (examples)

- ? *What are some of your favorite stories?*
- ? *What is it about these stories that make them so fun or interesting or exciting?*
- ? *Wow, that is a great book! I love that book! Now that book was written by [insert author] and he/she actually owns those words. We would be breaking the law if we performed his/her book. Do we want to steal his words? What are some other options we have?*

Section 2: Story Elements found in Operas



At this point, your students should know the type of story they will be doing, whether it will be a fairytale, oral history or classroom created story. Explain (or keep in mind yourself as you go through the process) that of vital importance at this stage of your classroom opera, they need to **KEEP THINGS SIMPLE**.

Major actions **Storyline**

Explain that they should not get into the story details yet. Story details are the many things that the characters do. This step comes later. If the need arises, describe how if they get bogged down in details at this point, the process will be long and frustrating. Rather, they should focus on the *major actions* of the

Characters characters: those few actions that move the *storyline* forward.

Indicate that all stories have characters, and then ask **"Who are the characters in your story?"** Suggest that for classroom operas, the easiest and most effective stories contain **GROUPS** of characters who **DO** things. (This is extremely important, for even at this stage, we want to avoid the heavy use of solos when performing operas. Solos by young children cannot generally be heard by an audience, and they make the staging of the opera difficult. However, this is an individual choice. In a class of older children, soloists can be very successful. We must allow moments for personal achievement.)

Setting Explain that stories take place somewhere. **Ask: "Where does your story take place?"** Suggest to the students that they can have fun exploring the options of

having your story take place on Mars, in New York City, in the desert, or anywhere else. Indicate

Desires and Objectives that for opera, it is usually best if your story takes place in **ONE** general area.

You do not have time for scene changes, and having only one setting, the process will be greatly simplified.

Indicate that characters have desires. They want something. They have objectives. Cinderella wants a happy life and to marry the Prince. Little Red Riding Hood wants to visit her grandmother. The three little pigs want shelter and a place to call home. **Ask, "What ONE thing do the characters in your story want more than anything else?"**



Conflict

Explain that once characters know what they want, there are usually things that get in the way called *obstacles*. **Conflict is the heart of opera and theatre.** The more clear, simple and direct the conflict, the more effective and efficient your opera will be.

Resolution

First ask, **"What will the characters in your story try to DO to get what they want?"** Then ask, "Now we need a conflict: **what gets in their way? Name TWO things that stop the characters from getting what they want."**

Indicate that characters in classroom operas usually overcome the that are before them. They succeed or win, and sometimes in surprising ways.



obstacles

Ask:

"What do the characters finally do to succeed?"

Key Questions/Comments for Section 2 (examples)

? *In opera, we usually have groups of characters who try to get something. What happens when two groups of characters want the same thing?*

? *What happens when one group wants something, but they can't get it because another group is somehow in the way?*

? *Who is in this story? What do they want?*

? *That is a really super idea! We're not working on details right now, but let's make sure that [insert assistant or teacher's name] writes it down so we can use that later when we get to that point. Older students can and should keep these ideas in their opera journal.*

Section 3: Basic Story Structure in

5

Sentences

(NOTE: Depending on the story your class chooses, your basic plot may differ from the elements just described. It is important to note, however, that MOST successful classroom operas contain all of the elements described in the previous section. Nevertheless, even if your class's opera differs in elements, or if you choose to come up with a story in some other way, ***your class should still be able to describe their basic storyline in 5 sentences. If it takes more than 5, your opera is almost certainly too long or too complicated.***)

Outlining the Story

Explain to the students that now that they have the elements of their opera story, they can go about actually beginning to craft one. (There are several models of story outlines, but we have found that the following works extremely well, for it keeps things simple, and it keeps children focused on what is most important. Children tend to want to jump to details and minutia because they readily visualize the story as it is created. They want to share what they see in their minds. Keeping them focused on the outline, at this point, will keep their minds working in general terms, and it will also keep them thinking communally.)

Explain that stories have a beginning, middle and an end. Suggest that to many this is obvious, yet many do not always understand the elements of which each is composed. Once they learn these elements, it will be easy for them to create 5 sentences which form the storyline of their story. Have a student or the teacher take notes and write the 5 sentences on the board as they are created.



the Story

The Beginning— Sentence #1

Exposition Point of Attack Until

Ask what goes at the *beginning* of a story. Explain that the beginning of a story introduces characters in various settings undergoing their routines. Indicate that this is called *exposition*. Describe how the beginning also contains that moment, the *point of attack*, when the routines of the characters are upset or must change. Then the major actions of the story begin. ***Note that when describing the beginning, there is usually an "until" in the middle of the sentence.** For instance:

- ? *Cinderella lives the life of a slave with her step family until an invitation comes for a royal ball.*
- ? *Three pigs live with their mom until she kicks them out of the house for their own good.*
- ? *Kids on Mars having a slumber party have fun until they run out of snacks.*

Ask your class for suggestions to craft a beginning sentence that has the two parts, with an *until* in the middle of it.

The End— Sentence #5

Skipping to the end, ask the class what takes place at the *end* of a story. Explain that the end of the story describes the new routines of the characters, or what they do after the story is over:



- ? *"They were able to eat candy for the rest of their lives."*
- ? *"They found true love and lived in the castle forever."*
- ? *"The three pigs all lived together in the third pig's house."*

Ask the students for suggestions that describe the new routines of the characters in their story.

The Middle— Sentences #2, #3 and #4

Rising Action

Explain that now that they know the beginning and end of the story, they can work on the middle. Ask what happens in the middle of the story. Indicate that the middle of the story contains the *rising action* of the story. The rising action is made up of those events in which the characters try to get what they want, but are thwarted by obstacles. Rising action is usually described with a "but" in the middle of the sentence:

- ? "Cinderella tries to go to the ball, **but** her sisters won't let her."
- ? "The first little pig makes his house, **but** the wolf blows it down."
- ? "Little Red Riding Hood tries to get to her grandmother's house, **but** the wolf stops her on the way."

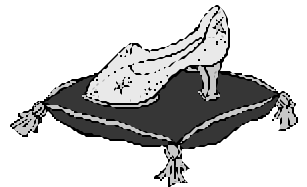


Ask the class to describe what happens in the rising action in TWO sentences, each having two parts with a "**but**" in the middle. These will be sentences #2 and #3.

Climax Resolution

Explain that all operas also have a climax, or the point at which the character often tries hardest and finally succeeds. **When the character succeeds and the conflict is over, this is called the resolution of the story.** Like the other sentences in the middle, the sentence describing the climax will also have two parts. This time, however, there is usually an "**and**" in the middle:

- ? "Cinderella tries on the shoe **and** it fits."
- ? "The pigs hide in the house of bricks, **and** the wolf can't get in."
- ? "The cat finally scares the elephant, **and** he stops sneezing."



Key Questions for Section 3 (examples)

- ? *In one sentence, what is happening at the beginning of our story?*
- ? *What is the one event that changes this routine and starts our story off?*
- ? *There are usually three major things that happen in a story for an opera, what is the first thing that OUR characters do to try to get what they want?*



Section 4: Filling In the Story

As a class, you could skip this part and go to writing recitative (dialogue), based on your 5 sentences, but this is usually not recommended unless time is really of essence.

Remind the students that **their story should be less than one page long when it is finished (see examples), so they only have three sentences to flesh out the story**. With that in mind, work on making Sentence #1 into a paragraph. As you ask what specific story details happen, note that in opera, they only have 3-4 short sentences with which to work for each sentence.

Divide
into
Groups

At this point, you can divide your class into 4 groups, giving each group one of the remaining sentences to flesh out with 3-4 sentences, or you could construct the story together. With older grades (grades 3 and up), groups often work well. With younger grades, it often works better to do it together.



Do LOTS of side coaching to make sure the groups are still writing the same story. When each group is done, read each section out loud and see if the pieces fit together. Vote to make sure the class likes the entire end result.

Key Questions for Section 4 (examples)

- ? *At the beginning of our story, the characters are {insert action here}. What specific things would they be doing (or saying)?*
- ? *What would YOU do if you were in this situation?*
- ? *If the characters are trying to [insert objective here], what would they do or say?*
- ? *How would the other group of characters react? What would they say?*

Evaluation: First, see if the story the students crafted is less than one page (normal, 12 point font, double spaced). If it is too long, study it carefully to see what extraneous elements may be present. Remind students that the story should be less than one page. Ask them to see what extra actions or elements are there that do not need to be there to make the storyline work. Ask if some of what is there should be kept for when they make the libretto, but are not needed for the basic storyline. Make sure the story has a beginning, middle and end as described. Ask students to help fix it, if it does not.

USOE Core Objectives - Language Arts

- Standard 7** Students use process strategies to create text.
- Standard 8** Students, teachers and parents write and respond together.
- Standard 9** Students develop oral language through speaking.
- Standard 10** Students develop language and acquire information through listening



Theatre Core Objectives

- Standard 1** The student will plan improvise plays based on personal experience and heritage, imagination, literature, and history for informal and formal theatre.

Standard 2 The student will cooperate, imagine and assume roles, explore personal preferences and meanings, and interact in classroom dramatizations.