

Telling Back: The Art of Narration

Narrating is an art, like poetry-making or painting, because it is there, in every child's mind, waiting to be discovered, and is not the result of any process of disciplinary education.

Charlotte Mason, *Home Education*

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What Is Narration?

Telling back in the child's own words a passage that was read.

Benefits of Narration

- Beauty of expression
- High degree of recall of material
- Increased mental quickness
- Ability to read and understand quickly
- A means for teacher to evaluate learning

When to Begin Narration

Before 6 years:

Children should not be required to narrate, but not hindered if they do so.

- Finger plays
- Play acting
- Stories from your tribal culture
- High quality literature read aloud, such as *Mother Goose*,

6 Years:

Fairy tales—have the children narrate episode by episode.

Aesop's Fables, in which the whole narrative can be read.

Well-written animal stories

Quality non-fiction books about other lands

7 -8 Years:

Are usually able to read for themselves but continues to require most of their intellectual nourishment by hearing it read aloud.

- All their books should be classics. It is not necessary to break up the reading with many questions.
- Descriptive geography texts
- Sketches from ancient history
- *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Tanglewood Tales*, tales of heroic figures
- Folk tales, myths, and legends of a higher reading level

9 Years and Up:

Is usually able to tackle more challenging material. At this point the children can begin short (1-2 paragraphs) written narrations. Add biographies, well-written non-fiction, and fiction at a reading level appropriate to the children's development.

Method of Lesson

“...if it is desirable to ask questions in order to emphasize certain points, these should be asked after and not before, or during, the act of narration.” *Philosophy of Education*, p. 17.

“In every case the reading should be consecutive from a well-chosen book.”

- Lesson should be no longer than 15-20 minutes.

Before the Lesson

- Ask them to recall the last lesson.
- Say a few words about what is to be read. Beware of explanations by the teacher about the reading to come as it will prevent effective narration of the previous lesson.

During the Lesson

- Read two or three pages (sometimes less, depending on the children’s age), enough to give a full episode or action. DO NOT, read the passage more than once.
- Then, call on the children to narrate, by turns if necessary.
- Do not correct them as they narrate or interject comments. In time they will narrate with fluency.

After the Lesson

“The book should always be deeply interesting, and when the narration is over, there should be a little talk in which moral points are brought out, pictures shown to illustrate the lesson, or diagrams drawn on the blackboard.” *Home Education*, p. 233

“...if it is desirable to ask questions in order to emphasize certain points, these should be asked after and not before, or during, the act of narration.” *Philosophy of Education*, p. 17.

- Ask a few “what” and “who” questions, rather than “why” questions.
- Show pictures or diagrams (if you have them) to illustrate the lesson.

Helpful Tips on Narration:

- Begin with a *short* piece to narrate (as in the samples).
- Choose material that is appropriate to the age of the child.
- Choose material that is of a high literary quality (e.g. Aesop’s Fables as opposed to Disney books).
- Listen without comment while the child narrates.
- Rather than trying narration occasionally, commit to using it consistently.

Further Suggestions for Including Narration

- Use narration-type questions following a lesson. “Tell about...”
- Use narration in Picture Study. For more information see:
Picture Study: Teaching Children to Love Great Art
https://s3.amazonaws.com/LBC_Downloads/TeachingChildrentoLoveGreatArt.pdf

- Timeline--use a timeline from which the child may narrate.
- Diorama—Recreating with figures is more involved but often worth the time.
- Mapping—By mapping the place names of a history book
- Narration Notebooks™--these have been created by Living Books Curriculum and can be viewed on our website.
- Play act—acting out the story is one of the delights of childhood. Very few props are needed; imagination a requirement.

Written Narration

Transcribing an oral narration is preliminary activity, no matter the age of the child. However, independent written narrations begin when the child is able to write a few sentences or a paragraph without help.

Be wary of asking a child to write too much at first. Require a few lines first, then a short paragraph, and later several paragraphs. By the time a child is in 6th grade they should be able to write several paragraphs a day, if narration has been required for several years previously.

Charlotte Mason on Narration

“The Art of Narrating” from *Home Education* (pp. 231-233)

Children Narrate by Nature.—Narrating is an *art*, like poetry-making or painting, because it is *there*, in every child's mind, waiting to be discovered, and is not the result of any process of disciplinary education. A creative fiat calls it forth. 'Let him narrate'; and the child narrates, fluently, copiously, in ordered sequence, with fit and graphic details, with a just choice of words, without verbosity or tautology, so soon as he can speak with ease. This amazing gift with which normal children are born is allowed to lie fallow in their education. Bobbie will come home with a heroic narrative of a fight he has seen between 'Duke' and a dog in the street. It is wonderful! He has seen everything, and he tells everything with splendid vigour in the true epic vein; but so ingrained is our contempt for children that we see nothing in this but Bobbie's foolish childish way! Whereas here, if we have eyes to see and grace to build, is the ground-plan of his education.

Until he is six, let Bobbie narrate only when and what he has a mind to. He must not be called upon to *tell* anything. Is this the secret of the strange long talks we watch with amusement between creatures of two, and four, and five? Is it possible that they narrate while they are still inarticulate, and that the other inarticulate person takes it all in? They try us, poor dear elders, and we reply 'Yes,' 'Really!' 'Do you think so?' to the babble of whose meaning we have no comprehension. Be this as it may; of what goes on in the dim region of 'under two' we have no assurance. But wait till the little fellow has words and he will 'tell' without end to whomsoever will listen to the tale, but, for choice, to his own compeers.

This Power should be used in their Education.— Let us take the goods the gods provide. When the child is six, not earlier, let him narrate the fairy-tale which has been read to him, episode by episode, upon one

hearing of each; the Bible tale read to him in the words of the Bible; the well-written animal story; or all about other lands from some such volume as *The World at Home* [See Appendix A]. The seven-years-old boy will have begun to read for himself, but must get most of his intellectual nutriment, by ear, certainly, but read to him out of books. Geography, sketches from ancient history, *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Tanglewood Tales*, *Heroes of Asgard*, and much of the same caliber, will occupy him until he is eight. The points to be borne in mind are, that he should have no book which is not a child's classic; and that, given the right book, it must not be diluted with talk or broken up with questions, but given to the boy in fit proportions as wholesome meat for his mind, in the full trust that a child's mind is able to deal with its proper food.

The child of eight or nine is able to tackle the more serious material of knowledge; but our business for the moment is with what children under nine can narrate.

Method of Lesson.—In every case the reading should be consecutive from a well-chosen book. Before the reading for the day begins, the teacher should talk a little (and get the children to talk) about the last lesson, with a few words about what is to be read, in order that the children may be animated by expectation; but she should beware of explanation and, especially, of forestalling the narrative. Then, she may read two or three pages, enough to include an episode; after that, let her call upon the children to narrate,—in turns, if there be several of them. They not only narrate with spirit and accuracy, but succeed in catching the style of their author. It is not wise to tease them with corrections; they may begin with an endless chain of 'ands,' but they soon leave this off, and their narrations become good enough in style and composition to be put in a 'print book'!

This sort of narration lesson should not occupy more than a quarter of an hour.

The book should always be deeply interesting, and when the narration is over, there should be a little talk in which moral points are brought out, pictures shown to illustrate the lesson, or diagrams drawn on the blackboard. As soon as children are able to read with ease and fluency, they read their own lesson, either aloud or silently, with a view to narration; but where it is necessary to make omissions, as in the Old Testament narratives and Plutarch's *Lives*, for example, it is better that the teacher should always read the lesson which is to be narrated.

Sample Fable for Narration

“The Crow and the Pitcher” from *Aesop’s Fables*

A thirsty crow found a pitcher with some water in it, but so little was there that, try as she might, she could not reach it with her beak, and it seemed as though she would die of thirst within sight of the remedy. At last she hit upon a clever plan. She began dropping pebbles into the Pitcher, and with each pebble the water rose a little higher until at last it reached the brim, and the knowing bird was enabled to quench her thirst.

Sample Folktale for Narration

Note: How much of this story you read before asking the child to narrate depends entirely on the child’s developmental age and experience with telling back. Begin with two to three sentences before you pause.

The Tortoise and the Lizard

~ A Nigerian Folktale

Once upon a time there was a famine in the land of the animals. One day, the lizard was passing by a farm when he saw the farmer approach a rock. The lizard hid and watched as the farmer rolled the rock away to reveal the entrance into a cave. The farmer went inside and came out a few minutes later with a handful of yams and rolled the rock back into its place. The lizard waited for the farmer to leave then he too rolled away the rock and went into the cave. Inside the cave were several stacks of yams. The lizard took out a yam, and rolled the rock back into its place. Every day the lizard would return to the cave to take a yam and would go home to eat the yam.

One day the lizard was carrying his yam home, he came across the tortoise who asked him where he had gotten his yam. He offered to tell him on the condition that the tortoise told no one. The tortoise promised to keep the secret, so the lizard told the tortoise to meet him the following morning and he would take him to the secret cave. Early the next morning, before the very first cock crow, the lizard and the tortoise went to the secret cave. When they got there, the lizard rolled the rock away to reveal the entrance to the cave. The tortoise could not believe his eyes for there were more yams in there than even he could eat, because the tortoise was a very greedy fellow.

The lizard picked a yam and started on his way home but the tortoise was not done yet. He was going to carry as many yams as he could and maybe even more. Very soon, the farmer came and found the tortoise who was still busy collecting yams. By this time, the lizard was home, had eaten his yam and was taking a nap. The farmer grabbed the tortoise and asked him how he came to be in the cave. The tortoise confessed that the lizard had brought him there, so the farmer took tortoise to the lizard’s house. There they found lizard lying on his back. The farmer asked lizard if it was he who brought tortoise to his cave. The lizard was shocked and said it was not possible as he had been feeling unwell and lying on his back all day. The farmer grabbed the tortoise and threw him against the wall and the tortoise lay on the floor with a broken shell. The tortoise cried out to the insects of the forest that helped him pick up and glue the pieces of his shell together. And that was how the tortoise ended up with a broken shell.

Sample Bible Story for Narration

The Boy Jesus in the Temple

(Luke 2: 42-52) New International Version (NIV)

42 When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom. 43 After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. 44 Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. 45 When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. 46 After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. 48 When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you."

49 "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" 50. But they did not understand what he was saying to them.

51 Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. 52 And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.

Sample Excerpt from a Non-fiction Work for Narration

From *The Discovery of New Worlds*, by M.B. Synge

Under Diocletian, a soldier risen from the ranks who was hailed as emperor by the people, the great Empire was divided into two parts. One man was to rule the East and another West, while each ruler was to select his successor. For twenty years he ruled, and then he made up his mind to give up the responsibilities of empire and retire to private life.

On the 1st of May, in the year 305, a vast number of troops assembled on a great plain beyond the Danube. On a knoll in the midst a throne was erected, on which the emperor sat in the sight of all. Before the gazing crowds he took off his purple robe, his jeweled crown, his imperial ornaments, and put them on his successor. Then descending into the plain he mounted his chariot, drove once more through the streets and away to his seaside palace.

Once, later on, when things were going ill, Diocletian was urged to come out of his retreat and take upon him the purple again, but his answer was ever the same: "Come and look at the cabbages I have planted."



LBC Narration Notebook™

Title of Book

Author

Student's Name

