

Let's Tell an ASL Story

Stephen M. Ryan

Department of Sign Communication
Gallaudet University

Storytelling is one of the best and most basic forms of human communication. It exists in every human culture. Storytelling is a natural human activity that allows people to shape intuitive experiences and perceptions into linguistically recognizable patterns and forms. Historically, storytelling was used to tell myths about the gods, epic tales of heroes, anecdotes of common people, lessons of nature, and fables. People like Martin Luther King, Bill Clinton, I. King Jordan, Greg Illibek, Laurene Gallimore, Mary Beth Miller, and Jack Levesque have added a new perspective on the power of the performed narrative.

ASL storytelling is a combination of gestures, mime, signs, and facial expressions. ASL storytelling is like painting a visual picture of the tale. It also provides a structure for deaf people's perspective: without air, our cells die; without ASL storytelling, our (Deaf) selves die.

In its most basic format, ASL storytelling often includes stories about the Deaf community itself and about relationships with hearing people. The stories often include sign plays and puns. ASL storytellers do not differ from other storytellers in essential characteristics. Deaf storytellers often cross over into other forms (Coleman, 1990).

ASL storytelling helps improve a listener's communication competence and cultural sensitivity. Also, it helps people learn ASL as a second language more quickly when they are taught through ASL stories. ASL storytelling develops listening skills in audience members and provides practice in visualization, creativity, and imagination skills. It exposes members to cultural values and value systems.

ASL storytelling is an invaluable way to introduce the listener to some of the finest literature available. It acquaints the listener with Deaf culture around the world, and it brings the world together. It creates a special bond between the listener and the ASL storyteller. It also provides the listener with valuable information and knowledge and encourages the listener to use his or her imagination—to see thousands of images in the mind's eye. And last but not least, it is great entertainment.

ASL Storytelling Techniques

It is very important to prepare an ASL story before telling it. It is necessary to visualize and plan its presentation. The storyteller must coordi-

nate the gestures, mime, signs, facial expressions, and any additional props that are needed to clearly tell the ASL story.

A. Choosing an ASL Story

1. Choose one that strikes a chord in you. Sometimes I don't choose the story; it chooses me. Humour, suspense, action, love, history, powerful imagery—these have drawn me to stories before. I cannot always put into words just why I feel so connected to a particular story, but I share the ones I am compelled to tell.

2. Consider the different ages and interests of your listeners.

3. Consider the setting and the occasion of the telling.

4. Sources:

Fairy Tales

Folktales

Books and Newspapers (e.g., *Deaf Heritage*, *Silent News*,

Deaf Life, *Deaf USA*, *Broadcaster*)

Stories from your own (Deaf) tradition

Family Stories

Residential Schools Stories

Mainstream School Stories

Oral School Stories

The ASL (story) tradition (feel free to re-tell anything

that I have offered you today)

Listen everyday for a new ASL story to tell.

5. I read many stories for every one story that I choose. As we say in the theater, 90% of directing is correcting the mistakes you made at casting (Benedetti, 1976). Choosing wisely is half the battle.

B. Preparing an ASL Story for Telling

1. Learn the plot first. Establish a clear sequence of events in your own mind. Make an outline of the units of action. Or make a flowchart of the story. Or make a storyboard the way a film maker might.

2. Flesh out the characters. Understand their point of view. Imagine their appearance. Experiment with gestures, mime, signs, and facial expressions.

3. Give your ASL story a sense of place. When telling a story from a picture book, look at the illustrations as well as the text for inspiration. If your story does not come from a picture book, imagine that you are an illustrator bringing the most important visual moments to life.

4. Memorize your beginning and ending "framing" phrases (Garrison Keillor, 1982, p. 210). You may also want to memorize repeated refrains or snippets of characteristic language. The majority of ASL storytelling, though rehearsed, is not memorized.

5. Tell your ASL story out loud, ideally to a sympathetic friend. The first telling is often like stirring up the muck from the bottom of a pond. With each telling, your ASL story will become clearer. Like the magic penny, the

ASL story won't really become yours until you have given it away many times.

6. In the absence of a friend, I have found that cars, dishes, dogs, and showers make good rehearsal partners. A mirror and/or a videotape recorder also may be helpful tools. Often I tell my story to an imaginary audience, sometimes pretending that someone special is there.

7. It is important to rehearse in front of an audience. Rehearsals in your head are helpful, too, but they use different areas of the brain than those required for signing.

8. Imagine the story in your mind as you fall asleep and before you get out of bed in the morning. Allow your inner self to work on the story, too.

9. Imagine your audience enjoying your storytelling.

C. ASL Storytelling Structure

1. Grammatical features refer to the structure, rules, and principles of American Sign Language (e.g., topic comments and non-manual signals).

2. Word order is another important grammatical signal in ASL that indicates the grammatical roles (e.g., subjects, objects) of the symbols in ASL sentences.

3. Symmetry is a general rule concerning signs made with both hands. Both hands show very clearly as artistic presentations. This is very important!

4. Non-manual signals, such as facial expression, provide important information in ASL storytelling. The exaggeration of facial expression is very significant. An inadequate facial expression is like telling a story in a monotone.

5. Eye gaze shows the location of characters and things. For example, the eyes would expand when things get closer or widen when expressing shock.

6. Classifiers are used to represent a noun and its location and action. Also, they are used to describe the noun's physical features. They cannot, however, be used for more than five seconds.

7. When using space, it is important to have well-established referents. A referent is a gesture that is used to represent a person, place, thing, idea, or event. Once established, referents should remain the same throughout the story.

8. Fingerspelling is difficult to read especially when it is used in ASL storytelling. Therefore, it should be used as little as possible.

9. Symbols, moods, and emotions provide significant information in an ASL story. For example, saluting the flag is a symbol of patriotism (note the facial expression and the change in the direction of the face).

10. Role shifting indicates who is speaking. It shows the style or special feature of each character (e.g., walk, facial expression, emotions). By changing your body position so that each character faces a different direction, you help the audience understand which character is doing the action.

11. Characters should be created as they are introduced into the ASL story. Use gestures to define each character's physical attributes and clothes. Pick one of the characters to inform the audience which characters are doing the action.

D. Different Kinds of ASL Storytelling

1. Original—An original ASL story is a new idea. It is not easy to create a new ASL story. It takes time to make the ASL story clear.
2. Adaptation—To change from the original so it becomes suitable to a new ASL story. For example, "Cinderella" is adapted to "Deafella."
3. Translation—A translation attempts to give an equivalent meaning to the ASL sentences from the English version.

Tips for a Successful ASL Storyteller

1. Rapport is everything! Eye contact is essential. Connect with individuals and keep your eyes moving over the group. Each listener should feel that the story is being told just for him.
2. Be present with your audience in the here and now. Be open to events that will make your ASL storytelling unique.
3. Image! The ASL storyteller must create vivid images for himself if he wants listeners to see them too. Visualize the pictures and people you are describing. Encourage the audience to experience your story with all five of their senses.
4. Find your own gesture and signing style as an ASL storyteller. There are as many ways to tell an ASL story as there are stories to tell.
5. Vary your gestures and signs. Vary your expression and intensity. Use pauses to give your listeners time to imagine.
6. Celebrate the Deaf heritage of your ASL story, but do so with respect and love.
7. Capture your audience with a well-baited hook. Make them eager to see your story before you begin the ASL storytelling.
8. Be selective. The storyteller knows how little he needs to tell the story. Choose words, characters, and events carefully.
9. Remember that ASL storytelling is a co-creative activity. Don't try to do all the work yourself. Empower the audience to imagine.
10. Don't perform an ASL story that you don't like. Phyness and condescension will be spotted a mile away. Respect your material and audience.
11. Be prepared. Rehearse your ASL story aloud, for an audience if possible. Don't memorize the story. Outline the sequence of events, perhaps learning certain phrases by heart. Part of the magic of ASL storytelling is its spontaneity. It will vary slightly for each audience.
12. Enthusiasm is a key ingredient for effective ASL storytelling. As L. King Jordan said, "Deaf people can do anything hearing people can, except hear" (Staff, 1988, p. 2). You can too!

ASL Storytelling Resources

Deaf—ASL stories by Deaf informants are typically preserved on videotapes, not in print. Until recently, many ASL storytelling materials were produced explicitly for sign language instruction purposes. Only in the past decade has deaf storytelling come into its own as a genre. Deaf people saw the preservation of their language and culture in ASL storytelling as a tool for empowerment. Still the amount of material available is relatively small.

General—The National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling (NAPPS) serves several functions: it is a member organization for those interested in storytelling of any variety; it publishes and distributes tapes and printed material related to storytelling; it publishes a quarterly journal titled *Storytelling*; it publishes and distributes a national dictionary of professional storytellers; it sponsors summer festivals in other cities; and it established the National Storytelling Archives. The telephone number for NAPPS is (800) 525-4514.

Activities

1. Tell a story using the 5 handshape
2. Explain how you became deaf and where you went to school
3. Tell an entire story using only the non-manual components of American Sign Language
4. Year 2088, this world changes...

Please Note: The author is responsible for the accuracy of the references cited.

REFERENCES

- Aquilino, C. (1988, March 24-25). *Stories for libraries*. Paper presented at the conference on Library Services for the Deaf and Hearing Impaired People, "Opening Doors for Closed Ears," State Library of South Wales, Australia.
- Baker, C., & Cokely, D. (1980). *American Sign Language: A teacher's resource text on grammar and culture*. Silver Spring, MD: T.J. Publishers.
- Bauer, C. F. (1977). *Handbook of storytellers*. Chicago: American Library Association.
- Benedetti, R. L. (1976). *Seeming, being, and becoming: Acting in our century*. NY: Drama Book Specialist.
- Coleman, L. (1990, November 1). Paper presented at the conference on Speech Communication Association, "Using Personal, Family, and Folk Narratives in the Communication Classroom," Chicago.
- Collins, R., & Cooper, P. (1990, November 1). Paper presented at the conference on Speech Communication Association, "Storytelling in the Classroom: Workshop," Chicago.
- Hasman, G. (1989). *From mime to sign*. Silver Spring, MD: T.J. Publishers.
- Kellor, G. (1982). *Happy to be here*. NY: Atheneum.
- Rutherford, S.D. (1983). Funny in deaf—not in hearing. *Journal of American Folklore*, 96, 310-322.
- Staff. (1988, March 21). Leaders speak at press conference. *On the Green*, p. 2.

Teaching the Elephant to Remove American Sign Language Phobia

Fredrick P. Waldorf

Model Secondary School for the Deaf
Gallaudet University

Teaching the elephant to overcome ASL phobia is an interesting metaphor! This unusual title leads us to ask three questions: 1) What is the elephant in the title? 2) What does an elephant do? and (3) What is the relationship between an elephant and American Sign Language (ASL)?

The term "ASL phobia" is related to a person's fear of using American Sign Language. Margaret Hyde (1977) defines the word, *phobia*, as "a real fear, but it is a reaction that is out of proportion to a specific situation or thing." The purpose of this presentation is to explain why the key words, "ASL phobia," were chosen and how the ASL phobia can possibly be modified.

We should discuss at this point the word, the metamorphosis of the elephant. The word *metamorphosis* means a complete change from one form to another. Will the fearful elephant be changed by metamorphosis into the resilient elephant?

Two key words, *phobia* and *metamorphosis* may offer insights into the nature of resilience, as well as the patterns and principles that underlie change in the elephant's behavior and attitudes.

The three definitions of an elephant are as follows:

1. It is strong, but slow, ponderous, and bulky.
2. It learns through conditioning. It has been under control and it is afraid to explore other possibilities.
3. An elephant resists any change, but if it does change, it is a very slow process.

Should we compare ourselves with elephants? When we talk about an elephant's behavior and attitude, it brings to mind phobia and metamorphosis. It is normal for people to resist the comparison between elephants and people. The elephant's experience may be related to our own experience. It is a widely observed fact that the elephant does not change. In Africa, baby elephants are chained to a stake so they cannot go beyond the length of the chain. When fully grown, the elephant can be restrained by a rope and a small spike. If a tiger attacks the elephant, it will break the rope to get away. People are tied to stakes by their value systems and then a major event like a symbolic tiger attack can break loose from their value programming (Crawford, 1991).