

# Exploring Folktales and Family Stories

- Recommended children's books
- Writing activities
- Drawing and other creative activities
- Ideas for sharing children's stories and writing
- Writing organizers



# Folktales

## We Are Storytellers

Folktales are stories "of the people" that are passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. Folktales are found all over the world, in every culture. Have you ever read a [fable](#), [trickster tale](#), or ['pourquoi' story](#)? Those are all different kinds of folktales. They often feature animals that can talk and wisdom about the world that needs to be learned.



Watch this video clip of [children's author Carmen Agra Deedy](#) talk about why folktales matter so deeply.

Many traditional stories share the same powerful themes — the importance of family, kindness, and generosity towards others.

In this second video clip, [Carmen Agra Deedy shares the origins of her picture book, Martina the Beautiful Cockroach](#), a tale that has traveled from Persia to Latin America.

*"But the story's the same. It's wonderful, wonderful. So why are these stories wonderful? I think they connect us, that's one of the things. They remind us we're part of one human family, with one narrative that changes clothes — or eggplants — from one place to the other."*

The folktale tradition of telling stories out loud remains strong throughout the world. Stories are being heard, retold, remembered, rediscovered.

Learn more about folktales at Start with a Book, by browsing our booklists, kid-friendly websites, apps, and podcasts: [Folktales, Fairy Tales and Myths](#).

## Family folktales and stories

With the books and activities on the following pages, we'll look at our own family folktales and family stories.

We'll explore the stories that have been told and re-told in your family for generations. Some of them remain true and believable to this day. Others may sound more like [tall tales](#) as the stories have been [embellished](#) over the years to make the characters more heroic or the stories more entertaining!

We'll also give kids a chance to share stories about their own lives that express how they are connected to their families, culture, and community. **We are all storytellers!**

# Folktales

## We Are Storytellers

In these two video clips, [Family Stories](#) and [Fire Talking](#), children's author Patricia Polacco (*Chicken Sunday*), remembers listening to the elders in her family tell how things were. Now she is the one who passes down family history.

These posts from Reading Rockets talk about the importance of sharing family stories: [Family Stories](#) and [Sharing Family Stories](#).



---

## Get kids thinking

- Tell the kids that folktales started out as oral stories. Over the years they were written down, but we still love to hear them out loud!
- Folktales are about ordinary people, like you and me. They follow a basic beginning-middle-end format. The main character has a problem that needs to be solved by the end of the story. And folktales are often funny!
- Read some folktales together. Look for stories from different parts of the world. You can find a selected list of books on the next page. For more recommended books, visit [Start with a Book: Folktales, Fairy Tales and Myths](#).
- After you read a folktale together, ask the kids about the story. What problem needed to be solved, and how did the characters do it? What part of the story stuck in your memory? Did you learn any new words? Did you learn something about a different part of the world?
- Ask kids if they have any storytellers in their family — a grandparent, aunt or uncle, cousin — or a close family friend who feels like family.
- Can they remember any of the stories they've heard, maybe more than once? This is a great time to let kids share a little bit out loud, to get them ready to dive into the activities here.

---

## Writing activities

Here are two writing and storytelling activities to try after reading folktales together:

- [Exploring Family Stories](#) (see page 5)
- [Who I Am](#) (see page 9)



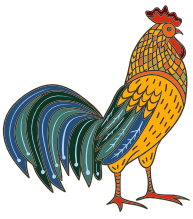
# Multicultural Folktales

## Selected Children's Books



- **Alone in the Forest** by Gita Wolf and Andrea Anastasio, illustrated by Bhajju Shyam (India)
- **Ashley Bryan's African Tales, Uh-huh** by Ashley Bryan (Africa)
- **Beautiful Blackbird** by Ashley Bryan, illustrations by Petra Mathers (Zambia)
- **The Bossy Gallito / Bossy Gallito** by Lucía González (Cuba)
- **Children of the Dragon** by Sherry Garland, illustrations by Trina Schart Hyman (Vietnam)
- **Golden Tales: Myths, Legends, and Folktales from Latin America** by Lulu Delacre (Latin America)
- **Grandma and the Great Gourd: A Bengali Folktale** by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (India)
- **Horse Hooves and Chicken Feet: Mexican Folktales** by Neil Philip, illustrations by Jacqueline Mair (Mexico)
- **Lady Hahn and Her Seven Friends** by Yumi Heo (Korea)
- **Martina the Beautiful Cockroach** by Carmen Agra Deedy, illustrated by Michael Austin (Cuba)
- **Riding a Donkey Backwards** by Sean Taylor Khayaal Theater Company (Middle East)
- **The People Could Fly** by Virginia Hamilton (American South)
- **Porch Lies** by Patricia McKissack, illustrated by Andre Carrilho (American South)
- **Sitti and the Cats** by Marcia Brown (France)
- **Stone Soup** by Sally Bahous Allen (Palestine)
- **Strega Nona** by Tomie dePaola (Italy)
- **Tales Our Abuelitas Told** by Alma Flor Ada and Isabel Campoy (Latin America)
- **Tikki Tikki Tembo** by Arlene Mosel, illustrated by Blair Lent (China)
- **The Tomten** by Astrid Lindgren (Sweden)





# Multicultural Folktales

## Selected Children's Books

---

### When the library is closed

**Is your public library closed?** See if your public library offers [OverDrive](#) where you can borrow and read free ebooks, audiobooks, and magazines on your phone or tablet. All you need is your library card to get access (and check out their [Libby app](#) for Android or iOS phones or tablets).

There are also a number of online services that offer high-quality audiobooks and ebooks: [Audible for Kids](#), [Tales2Go](#), and [Epic!](#).

### Here are some ways to explore myths and legends online:

- [Folktales and Stories from Around the World](#): texts of well-known and not-so-well-known stories (American Folklore)
- [Folktales from Around the World](#): historical and geographic adventure (Google Earth Voyager Story)
- [Folktales and Fairy Tales for All](#): audiobooks (Audible)
- [Animated Stories for Kids](#) (August House / Story Cove)
- [Folktales](#) audio storytelling of traditional tales (The Story Home)
- [Animal Stories](#) audio storytelling of traditional tales with text (Storynory)

# We Are Storytellers

## Exploring Family Stories

---

### Writing activity

For this activity, kids will discover favorite stories from their own families by interviewing a family member from an older generation.

**Individual:** each child works independently on their interview and story presentation.

**Small groups:** siblings can work together on their interview and story presentation.

**This is a home-based project.** For youth programs, the staff can explain the project to parents and let them know how they can assist with the interview.

---



### Supplies

- Notepad or paper, pen or pencil
  - Drawing paper and drawing tools: colored pencils, markers, or watercolors (optional)
  - Smartphone with built-in audio recording feature or other kind of portable recording device; device with a video chat service (optional)
- 

### Let's get started

Tell the kids that they will be trying to uncover a treasured family story by interviewing a family member. Kids should choose someone from an older generation — parent, aunt or uncle, parent's cousin, grandparent, great-grandparent, or great aunt or great uncle. Kids could also decide to choose an older friend of the family, someone who knows them well.

Ideally, this should be a person that the child can **sit down with in person**. It can be helpful to record the conversation with a smartphone or other portable recording device that the family has. Other "face-to-face" interview options are:

- **Smartphone interview:** capture the conversation with the phone's audio recording feature.
- **Video chat interview:** record the conversation with a video chat service (like Zoom).

Hearing each other's voices is a wonderful part of the interview process. However, kids can also do the interview by **email or regular mail**. Warning: snail mail will require patience!



# We Are Storytellers

# Exploring Family Stories

## Getting ready for the interview

Together as a group, talk about the art of doing a good interview. Tell the kids: you could just jump in right away and ask, "*Can you tell me a great family story?*" But sometimes it's better to get to that question within a longer conversation — it gives kids a chance to learn more about their elders and gives the elders time to reflect on the past.

Kids can come up with their own questions, or use some of the questions we've provided on page 8. **Have the kids practice interviewing** each other with a shorter list of questions before they interview their grown-ups.

## Interview day

Have the kids to bring their questions, a pen or pencil, and a notepad or other paper to write down all of the details they will hear about their family stories.

Tell the kids to start the interview by asking their family member to say their name and age. Sometimes the person you're interviewing is shy or quiet and gives a short answer. It can be helpful to then ask, "*Could you tell me more about that?*"

Remind the kids that they are looking for good details to make their stories interesting — things like unusual characters, a colorful setting, unbelievable action, funny expressions, and a satisfying ending.

Next, have the kids give an oral summary of the story and ask if they've left out any colorful or important details. Remind the kids to thank their grown-ups for sharing their family stories.

## Writing time

After saying goodbye and offering thanks again for the shared time, the kids will write down their version of the family story. Younger kids who aren't yet writing can dictate their stories to an adult. Encourage the kids to include a drawing of the family member who shared the story, or a character or event from the story. You can remind the kids about the basic parts of any good story:

- Beginning-middle-end format
- The main character has a problem that needs to be solved by the end of the story
- Family stories (like folktales) are often funny or silly or outlandish, so don't forget the humor!



# We Are Storytellers

## Exploring Family Stories

---

### Simpler activity: A family treasure

**This is a simpler alternative to the family interview.** The only supplies needed are plain paper or a notepad, pen, and drawing tools (markers, colored pencils, or watercolors). Here, kids will ask a parent or other older relative who lives nearby to share a treasured object that they've kept for years and years. It can be an old cooking pot, a handknit scarf, a charm, a painting or photograph — anything that sparks special memories and a story.

Kids will ask their elders to tell them a story about that object — where it came from and why it is a meaningful part of the family's history.

Kids will capture the oral stories in writing as they are talking with their relatives. Younger kids who aren't yet writing can dictate their stories to an adult. Next, kids will write out a final version of the story and include an illustration of the treasured object.

If a camera is available, kids can take a photograph of their relatives with their objects.

---

### Sharing our work

Once the family stories are written down (and illustrated), gather everyone together in a circle to read their stories out loud. Tell kids that they can be as dramatic as they need to be in telling their stories. If you have a rocking chair or a porch swing ... that can make a great spot for the storyteller!

At the end, kids can add some information about the source of their family story. For example, "And that's exactly what happened, according to my Great Aunt Lou."

### Try this!

**Story Circle:** Family stories are great to share at the next family gathering. Set up a simple storytelling circle or tent outside with blankets and chairs and let the stories begin! Stories at night are great, too — add string lights or lanterns for a theatrical effect.

If you have lots of storytellers in the circle, use a prop like a stone, a stick, or a hat. Whoever has the stone gets to share a story, then passes the stone on to the next storyteller.





# We Are Storytellers

# Exploring Family Stories

---

**Suggested interview questions** (Adapted from [StoryCorps' Great Questions](#))

**Start by asking:** What is your name and how old are you?

## Questions for any family member

- Where did you grow up?
- What was your childhood like?
- Can you share an embarrassing childhood experience?
- Who were your favorite relatives?
- Do you remember any of the stories they used to tell you?
- Can you tell me about someone you'll always remember?
- What do you feel most grateful for in your life?
- Can you share a traveling experience that had an impact on you?

## Additional questions for grandparents

- How did you and grandma/grandpa meet?
- What was my mom/dad like growing up?
- Do you remember any songs that you used to sing to her/him? Can you sing them now?
- Was she/he well-behaved?
- What is the worst thing she/he ever did? (that might spark a story ...)

## Exploring family heritage

- What is your ethnic background?
- Where is your mom's family from? Where is your dad's family from?
- Have you ever been there? What was that experience like?
- What traditions have been passed down in your family?
- Who were your favorite relatives?
- Do you remember any of the stories they used to tell you?
- What are the classic family stories? Jokes? Songs?

For more reading, writing, and learning resources, visit [www.StartWithABook.org](http://www.StartWithABook.org)





# We Are Storytellers Who I Am



---

## Writing activity

For this activity, kids will write short poems that explore their own personal thoughts about who they are and where they came from.

**Individual:** each child works independently on their poem.

---

## Supplies

- Notepad or paper, pen or pencil
- Drawing paper and drawing tools: colored pencils, markers, or watercolors (optional)

---

## Let's get started

Tell the kids that they will be writing short poems about who they are — their dreams, their fears, [vivid](#) memories, how they're unique, their families, where they're from — anything they want to express.



# We Are Storytellers

## Who I Am

Adults can look at the **three poem options offered on the following pages**, and select one or more for your kids to try. Explain that they will be using a model to guide their writing. They won't have to think as much about the poem's structure, so they can focus on their ideas and finding the right words to express those ideas. These poems do not need to rhyme.

Encourage the kids to open their minds as they think and write. You might even try some mindfulness breathing exercises before starting on the poems.

Children who speak another language in addition to English can write their poems in their home language, or write them in both languages.

---

## Sharing our work

Once the personal poems are completed, gather everyone together in a circle and invite your young writers to read their poems out loud. Kids can also choose to memorize their poems and present them without notes — in keeping with the oral storytelling tradition. Some kids may not be comfortable sharing their poems in front of others, and that's okay.

## Try this!

**This Is Me:** Encourage the kids to create portraits of themselves to go along with their poems. They can draw their face on a regular-sized sheet of paper. Or they can make a life-sized portrait: have a friend trace around them as they lie down on a big piece of kraft paper, the back side of wrapping paper, or even a few pieces of newspaper taped together. Then they can color in their faces and clothes, if they want to — or write their poem in the torso of the body.

Another option is to have kids make a collage of things that reflect themselves or are mentioned in their poems.





# We Are Storytellers

## Who I Am

---

### Portrait poem #1

(Adapted from Art Belliveau)

I am (first name)

Son/Daughter of (I've also used brother/sister of...)

Who needs ...

Who loves ...

Who sees ...

Who hates ...

Who fears ...

Who dreams of ...

Who has found poems of

Resident of (I've seen people list here everything from their address to "the small blue green planet third from the sun") ...

(last name)



# We Are Storytellers

## Who I Am

---

### Portrait poem #2

(Adapted from Art Belliveau)

#### First section

I am (two special characteristics you have)

I wonder (something you are actually curious about)

I hear (an imaginary sound)

I see (an imaginary sight)

I want (an actual desire)

I am (the first line of the poem repeated)

#### Second section

I pretend (something you actually pretend to do)

I feel (a feeling about something imaginary)

I touch (an imaginary touch)

I worry (something that really bothers you)

I cry (something that makes you very sad)

I am (the first line of the poem repeated)

#### Third section

I understand (something you know is true)

I say (something you believe in)

I dream (something you actually dream about)

I try (something you really make an effort about)

I hope (something you actually hope for)

I am (the first line of the poem repeated)





# We Are Storytellers Who I Am

---

## "Where I'm From" poem

In this project, kids will write and share an autobiographical poem using George Ella Lyon's 'Where I'm From' poem as the inspiration.

Kids will build their poems by thinking about the people, places, things, and events that makes each of them unique. The template on page 15 may be helpful in guiding kids.

Read the original 'Where I'm From' by Lyon to the kids (see the next page), or let them watch the [video](#) or listen to the [audio](#).

Talk with the kids about the language they hear in the poem. Lyon's poem has some words that may be difficult for kids to understand. Remind them that their poems will be written in *their* words, and that a very powerful and personal poem can be written with simple yet expressive words.

Here are two excerpts from a ['Where I'm From' poem crowd-sourced by NPR](#):

I am from marbles  
From empanadas cooking in the street  
I am from orchids and mango trees  
I am from la torta tres leches and ruana  
I am from happy and serious  
From hard work and sweat

—

I'm from grit, respect, and discipline.  
from big family reunions and endless laughs.  
I am from houses never locked  
from the projects in Brooklyn  
and dominoes in the park  
I am from salsa and the car horns blaring

# Where I'm From

by George Ella Lyon

I am from clothespins,  
from Clorox and carbon tetrachloride.  
I am from the dirt under the back porch.

(Black, glistening  
it tasted like beets.)

I am from the forsythia bush,  
the Dutch elm  
whose long gone limbs I remember  
as if they were my own.

I am from fudge and eyeglasses,  
from Imogene and Alafair.  
I'm from the know-it-alls and the pass-it-ons,  
from perk up and pipe down.  
I'm from He restoreth my soul  
with a cottonball lamb  
and ten verses I can say myself.

I'm from Artemus and Billie's Branch,  
fried corn and strong coffee.  
From the finger my grandfather lost to the auger  
the eye my father shut to keep his sight.  
Under my bed was a dress box  
spilling old pictures,  
a sift of lost faces  
to drift beneath my dreams.  
I am from those moments —  
snapped before I budded —  
leaf-fall from the family tree.

# Where I'm From poem template

Adapt the template as needed for younger children. Not all the lines need to be filled in.

Your Name \_\_\_\_\_

I am from \_\_\_\_\_

(a specific item from your home)

from \_\_\_\_\_

(two objects from when you were very young)

I am from \_\_\_\_\_

(a phrase describing your home)

and \_\_\_\_\_

(more description of your home)

I am from \_\_\_\_\_

(a plant, tree or natural object from your neighborhood)

I am from \_\_\_\_\_

(two objects from when you were very young)

from \_\_\_\_\_

(two family names or ancestors)

and from \_\_\_\_\_

(two family traits or characteristics)

from \_\_\_\_\_

(another family trait or characteristic)

I am from \_\_\_\_\_

(a religious memory or family tradition)

from \_\_\_\_\_

(two foods from your family history)

from \_\_\_\_\_

(a specific event in the life of an ancestor)

and from \_\_\_\_\_

(another detail from the life of an ancestor)

\_\_\_\_\_

(a memory or object you had as a child)

I am from the moments... \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
(continue this thought or repeat a line or idea from earlier in the poem)