

Storytelling Competitions: University Interscholastic League

Keep 'em Reading • by | Aileen Kirkham

Grades
2-3

In the early 1900s, the University Interscholastic League (UIL) was created by the University of Texas to provide a competitive venue for Texas public schools and a few private schools, too. It started with two platforms—one for governing the debating competition and the other for athletic events—but has expanded over the years to include a variety of other curriculum-based competitions, including storytelling. The storytelling competition is limited to second and third graders, who must individually listen to a brief story, between 600 and 1,000 words, and then tell that story in their own words to the judges. The student is not timed for this competition. The rationale that the UIL gives for the storytelling competition is that the development of creative expression is receiving more credence in the professional world and this contest addresses skills needed for the future. As stated in some of its literature, it also “helps the participant develop stronger skills in listening, thinking, and speaking.”

Peggy Doss, the librarian at Willow Creek Elementary in Tomball, Texas, has successfully coached four groups (two second grade and two third grade) in two years. At Peggy’s school, the gifted and talented teacher is the coordinator for the UIL competitions. Her coordinator disseminates the UIL criteria for the competition, prints resources available from UIL, and coordinates the master schedule for the competition notifications to parents and students. As a librarian, you may wish to volunteer to be the coordinator, a coach, or both for your school.

There are two methods for soliciting students to audition for the storytelling competition. First, teachers may nominate students whose behavior and creativity are conducive to working within UIL parameters. Second, teachers and/or librarians may generate a list of minimum criteria that students must meet, attach the list to the application form, and send it out to parents of second and third



graders. Children who are not straight-A students should not be excluded from the selection process. Creativity is a gift that everyone has to varying degrees, independent of other academic and achievement factors.

At Willow Creek Elementary, Peggy collects application forms and contacts students regarding auditions, to be held one afternoon after school. She also recruits another staff member to assist with judging the auditions. Peggy tells the students they will hear a story and must individually compete to see who will be selected for the group. She provides students with paper and pencils to take notes about the story she reads, with the reminder that characters, plot, and setting are critical components for storytellers. Students listen to the story (one from a prior year of UIL competition), and

Keep 'em Reading

in isolation in front of Peggy and the other judge, each child takes his or her turn acting out the story. Students are selected as candidates based on their abilities to communicate effectively; command attention; tell a story with ease; exhibit enthusiasm; utilize facial expressions, vocal variety, and characterization; make good eye contact; maintain good posture; speak clearly; and use gestures effectively.

Three candidates and one alternate are selected for each grade level. It is important to explain to the alternate that his/her role is to step in to fulfill a commitment for someone else if that person has to drop out. With the completion of the selection process, Peggy sets up a practice schedule and contacts parents and their children to confirm their willingness to do a “working lunch and recess” (eat first, then rehearse) twice a week. If your library’s schedule cannot flex to this kind of schedule, consider holding sessions before or after school.

Peggy’s initial practice sessions consist of reading *Bubba the Cowboy Prince*, by Helen Ketterman. She focuses on reading it with expression and discusses the characters’ behaviors, plot, and setting. Then she has the kids watch Barbara McBride Smith’s storytelling video of the same story, available on YouTube.com, noting facial expressions and the body language of the actors. If you cannot find *Bubba*, try one of these titles: *Old Granny and the Bean Thief*, by Cynthia DeFelice; *Goldie Socks and the Three Libearians* or *Three Armadillies Tuff*, by Jackie Hopkins; or *Little Gold Star: A Spanish American Cinderella Tale*, by Robert D. San Souci. Alternatively, select a tale such as *The Poor Turkey Girl* from the Planet Oz for Kids website.

For the next practice sessions, Peggy reads aloud stories from previous UIL competitions and has each student act out one story while she videotapes it with her flip camera. Students are cautioned to stay within the “stage perimeters,” meaning that they must stay in a confined space so that the camera will record their body instead of a blank space with a voice talking. When all the students have been taped, they critique each other’s performances, including both “good things” and “needs improvement.” A good phrase for critiquing positives is “I like how ...”; a “needs improvement” comment can start with, “Rethink how to tell ...” One of the best results of this critiquing process is that the students become very supportive of one another, promoting their success.

Peggy burns a CD of each child’s storytelling to take home and share with parents, along with the critique of what to keep and what to revise. Prior to passing out the CD, she talks to the students about what a storyteller should wear and includes a note to parents about dress. Since nerves can escalate on competition day, kids are cautioned not to wear clothing with pockets so they will not stick their hands in their pockets instead of using them for storytelling. Other things to avoid on competition day include jewelry, key chains, tie belts, and anything else that would lend itself to being twisted or played with, distracting from the storytelling.

The competition pep talk and confidence builder includes Peggy’s three key points of bravery: brave enough to try out, brave enough to be filmed and critiqued in front of peers, and brave enough to participate in a competitive contest with adult judges. Peggy cautions the students not to be overly dramatic. They can embellish to a degree, but must be sure to stick to the story. During the actual competition, the students hear the story as a group and then are called in individually to tell it for the judges. The child’s coach is not allowed to go in with the student.

After the competition, be sure to have all students’ names announced during the school’s morning announcements for their participation in the UIL storytelling competition. If any of the children placed, be sure this is announced, too. Set a date for a celebration of their participation, and invite the parents, the co-judge of the school auditions, classroom teachers of the contestants, the UIL campus coordinator, and administrative staff. Keep it simple. For example, send an invitation reading “Pop In for Congratulations,” and have a popcorn party. You may wish to coordinate this with the other UIL coaches at your campus and do this together as one UIL celebration.

Optional: Visit with the classroom teachers of the contestants, and share what language arts objectives were addressed as a result of their students participating in the UIL competition. Since many school districts require extensive documentation regarding the instruction of curriculum objectives, the teachers can record these students as having been introduced to and taught those objectives.

Although this is a Texas-based competition, if you are a librarian in another state, please consider the value this competition offers students for their future professional careers. Take on the challenge of creating a similar competition in your school and/or school district. Also, check to find out if your state's school library organization holds a student storytelling competition. It would be an excellent way to benefit your students; generate quality public relations for the library with students, their families, and campus and district administrators; and serve to advocate for the necessity of your role as a librarian who teaches curriculum objectives in a creative format.

Bibliography

- *Bubba the Cowboy Prince*, by Helen Ketterman. Scholastic Press, 1997.
- *Goldie Socks and the Three Libearians*, by Jackie Hopkins. UpstartBooks, 2007.
- *Little Gold Star: A Spanish American Cinderella Tale*, by Robert D. San Souci. HarperCollins, 2000.
- *Old Granny and the Bean Thief*, by Cynthia DeFelice. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.
- *The Three Armadillies Tuff*, by Jackie Hopkins. Peachtree, 2011, c2002.

Websites

- Bubba the Cowboy Prince – Digital Storytelling www.youtube.com/watch?v=CN22zHsNq1o&featured=related
- How to Tell a Story: Quick-Learn Storytelling Techniques www.youtube.com/watch?v=mOA8mUflH-Q
- Planet Oz for Kids, The Poor Turkey Girl www.planetozkids.com/oban/legends/turkey-girl-legend.htm
- University Interscholastic League, A+ Storytelling, www.uil texas.org/aplus/events/aplus-storytelling

❖ ❖ ❖

Aileen Kirkham is the author of Library Lessons for Little Ones and the intermediate Collaborative Bridges series (both from UpstartBooks), and articles for Library Media Connection and LibrarySparks. After thirty years as a school librarian and classroom teacher, she's now a full-time educational consultant for staff development, professional storyteller, and program chair for the Houston chapter of the Society for Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. **She would like to dedicate this article to the memory of author and educator Bill Wallace, who knew the secret to writing for even the most reluctant readers.** Visit Aileen at www.aileenkirkham.com or email akirkham4u@hotmail.com with the subject heading "LibrarySparks Reader."

