

How to tell a story: Fairy tales

When you hear “fairy tale” do you automatically think of a sweet story for children? If so, you’re cutting yourself off from one of the most powerful forms of story. These tales from the oral tradition are from every culture and cover most aspects of human experience. As a storyteller, it’s worth working with fairy tales; they’ll help you expand your imagination, connect with the past and understand how symbols can work in a story. Your audiences will also find comfort in the rhythms of a fairy tale, so it’s a good idea to have a few handy. Bear in mind, from a telling perspective, you need to do much of the same work you would for any other kind of story so please refer to *Storytelling 101* for some basic storytelling tips.

Fairy tales capture the whole range of human experience in symbolic language: Growing up, leaving home, conquering fears, being disregarded or over-blown, growing old and dying. They help us understand ourselves and how our individual experiences are more alike than different. They give us a roadmap to use as we travel our lives. They are the stories that ripple through our cultures and our lives, giving us a common language with which to understand the world.

- **Just because it's a fairy tale doesn't mean it's a simple story.** Many of these stories are dark, frightening, or at a minimum explore some of the more challenging times of life (childlessness, parental abandonment, learning who you are, adolescence, etc) so spend some time with the story and decide how you want to tell it and what the key elements are.
- **Understand where the story comes from.** These stories come with a cultural context, so you should have some understanding of where the story comes from and what it means in context. If there are words you don’t know, find out. If there’s something that doesn’t make sense to a modern audience, consider changing it to something that does (e.g. if a character is wearing a “girdle” in the text, perhaps you should say “belt”).
- **Explore why the story appeals to you.** Fairy tales are rife with symbols, so it's worth spending some time understanding why a particular story appeals to you, what the symbols mean to you. This can be the work of years, so please tell the story as you unfold it, but just don't be surprised if it has unexpected meaning for you.
- **If you change the story do so carefully,** without stripping the heart out of the story. The Disney version of *The Little Mermaid* overlooks her death at the end, entirely changing the meaning of the story; if you choose to change a story make sure you understand why you're doing it and how the meaning will be altered. If you modernize the story make sure you honor the original text in whatever way makes the most sense to you; please consider carefully before you take all the tough stuff out of a story. It’s probably there for a reason – the reward at the end may be more meaningful if the journey was arduous.
- **Consider the point of view** you want to use while telling the story. Do you want to focus on the happy endings or the dark journey? Are you more interested in the voice of a minor character? What about the villains?
- **Select the right story for the audience.** This is a tenet no matter what kind of story you're telling. Be wary of using accents unless you're very good at them, and if you choose to tell stories from a particular culture to that culture and you're not of that culture, make sure you treat the stories with utmost respect and be prepared to get some feedback from people who *are* of the culture. For example, I have told Irish fairy tales and been told by people with Irish grandmothers that my telling is very different, and implied inadequate, compared to what they grew up with. This doesn’t mean I don’t tell these stories; I just try to tell them respectfully and understand that my telling cannot equal a telling in a deep cultural context.

Fairy tales are among the most enjoyable stories you can tell - they are deep in our psyches and convey experiences we can all relate to. Who hasn't been lost in the woods or undertaken a journey from home? Enjoy telling these stories. They are part of our human heritage. Just don't forget to do the same work you would for any other kind of story.

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