Learning How to Begin and End a Story
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Learning How to Begin and End a Story

In order to study the developing opening and closing narrative strategies of young children, I analyzed 360 stories collected by Pitcher and Prelinger (1963) between 1955 and 1958. In this sample are 60 stories by two year olds, 120 by three year olds, 120 by four year olds, and 60 by five year olds. There were equal numbers of boys and girls in each group, and all children were middle class and of above average intelligence.

To analyze these stories I established seven categories. For openings, or how children entered their narratives, I distinguished between immediate action ("The eency weency spider jumped out of the window and hurt himself." or "The fish ran to the brook.") and primitive setting ("Once upon a time there was a little man and there was a camel." or "Once there was a big wild teeth."). Additionally, I kept track of all variations of once-upon-a-time including "one day," "once," "this is about," "now I'll tell," and "there was."

For closings, or how children exited from their narratives, I distinguished between random conclusions ("Dog fell in the fence. I got a big fence. Daddy broke my fence. I hurt my knee. I go bang on the big rock. I go back home again."—age 2.9 years) and logical conclusions ("Boy. He fell in the lake. He got on the land. He got his boat, put it in the water and got in. He went fishing. Then he went home with one hundred fish. He ate them and blew open. They buried him."—age 5.11 years). I also recorded all occurrences of conventional exits, including those borrowed from fairy tales or other stories ("lived happily ever after," "died," "went away"), and those that represent central events in the lives of the young children ("going to bed," "night-night," "went home," "got it all fixed," "went to school," "eat it all up," "took a bath"). Finally, I noted whenever a child concluded with a formal tag ending, such as "That's the end of the story" or "That's all."
Sixty-five percent of the two year olds favored immediate action as an entrance strategy in the stories they told Pitcher and Prelinger, but with the five year olds this figure had declined to twelve percent (see Table 1). Correspondingly, primitive setting as a strategy went from thirty-five percent for the two year olds to eighty-eight percent for the five year olds. This shift, which reflects both the child’s greater sensitivity to an audience and his or her sense that linguistic markers are needed to indicate that a story has begun, is paralleled by the increased use of the conventionalized once-upon-a-time form, a marked climb from twenty percent for two year olds to seventy-three percent with five year olds.

The children’s exit strategies showed a similar but less dramatic developmental trend. Although the average length of a story more than tripled when the five year olds were compared with the two year olds, there was not really a commensurate growth in narrative ability. Logically concluded stories only increased from thirty-seven percent to fifty-seven percent. Moreover, these figures are not that stable, because the “logic” of the narratives in many cases is not easily categorized, especially when we consider that these children for the most part still lack an adult sense of chronological and thematic coherence. Frequently these stories appear to be little more than a random lumping together of associations and elements lifted from both their own real life activities and adventures and the stories that they have been told. While much of the personal symbolism in these stories is obvious, we do not always get the full picture of what is going on. In many instances as much of the story is occurring in the children’s heads as actually ap-

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opening and Closing Strategies According to Age Level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 years (N=60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Openings</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primitive Setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Closings</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Random Conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logical Conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>X² = 55.87, with 3 df, p &lt; .005</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once-upon-a-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conventional Exit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tag Ending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>X² = 26.98, with 3 df, p &lt; .005</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

22 Language Arts
pears in their spoken words—an early form of narrative ellipsis. In hearing the fishing story quoted above, by implication we fill in the gaps with "he caught 100 fish" and "he died," but this gives us no final assurance that we are being entirely faithful to the intended world and logic of the child. The search for specific exit strategies, however, becomes increasingly noticeable with age. Conventional exits are being learned, as is evidenced in their being used in forty-eight percent of the stories of the five year olds as opposed to only thirteen percent of the two year olds. Tag endings also increased sharply from none to twenty-eight percent.

In analyzing these results I have deliberately distinguished between entrances and exits on the one hand and beginnings and endings on the other—the latter representing successful instances of the former. With this perspective in mind we begin to notice how young children gain the form of an ending without yet grasping its substance or essence. They get out of or exit from their stories without really completing them, something which would require a more complex series of expectations and relationships. Leonard Meyer elaborates on this point when he describes the experience of listening to music.

Completeness and closure are possible only because the motions presented in music are processes involving relationships between antecedents and consequences. Completion is possible only where there is shape and pattern. Repetition in itself does not make for completeness and closure, nor does change in itself. For completion is not simply cessation—silence. It involves conclusion—almost in the syllogistic sense that the conclusion or completion is implicit in the premises, in the earlier phases of the musical motion. (1956, p. 129)

In this sense the true beginning of a story sets the problem which the successful ending will resolve for us. When our fictions are working, we are essentially setting up the anticipation phe- nomenon of "waiting-for-the-second-shoe-to-drop." Such fictions are marked by a sense of inevitability (even when surprise twists occur) which the child's stories have yet to possess; they merely wander hither and yon through the still inchoate symbolic regions of their experience.

One's sense of an ending is directly related to how one deals with the expectations that the successful beginning serves to set up within us. In creating stories we are involved in an endless series of transactions of cause and effect relationships. In the natural world if we saw through a tree limb, it crashes to the ground; in the social world if we drive over fifty-five mph we get a speeding ticket, maybe—prediction in this second world is much more a matter of probabilities, and, of course, the connections in the world of dream and fantasy can be even more problematic. In reliving our experience through narrative, our powers of discrimination develop, and we learn to anticipate and thus control when an action is about to be completed. Knowing when the curtain is to be brought down on ourselves and others is fundamental to our monitoring of when things are over. Things, of course, are over when we declare they are (and we can see the child trying to get the adult off his or her back with "That's all.") but pure fiat will not do when we are trying to exist in a meaning network shared with others. Here we must operate on the basis of social conventions, and these conventions dictate what the essence of a story is to be. One cannot gain the essence of a story if the story is incomplete. Perhaps I am telling you a story about something that happened in the lunchroom today; you, as listener, are not satisfied until I get to the punch line. Until that point you keep bombarding me with, "What happened next?"
Narratives can also fit into a pattern of concentric circles in which one ending leads to a still more elaborate ending. "You know Mr. Johnson? Well, our gang was fooling around in the lunchroom today, and Eric threw part of his orange at me and messed up my shirt. So I took half my banana and aimed a return shot in his direction, but with my luck, he ducked in time, and who got it, but Mr. Johnson who just happened to be walking down the aisle at that moment. It didn't take him long to send me right down to the office." But this is only episode one. My listener questions me immediately, "Well, what did the assistant principal do? Were any of the other guys caught too?" And depending upon my answer the dialogue might shift into interpretation, "Do you think Mr. Johnson will be out to get you now in English class?" along with a consideration of the fairness of the punishment and the role of luck in my recent series of disciplinary misfortunes. Stringing through these subevents will be a sense of felt rhythm. Our goal will be to put them together into a coherent pattern for both ourselves and our listeners so that we can understand the events that shape our experience. Finding a pattern to our words helps us to find a pattern to our lives; for each story is a partial answer to the question, "Who am I?"

The child's movement toward this sense of form, with its beginning-ending frame seems to be characterized by at least three stages. First, the undifferentiated stage of global egocentricity which is evident in most of the stories told by the two year olds. Then there is the stage of ritualized, repetitive behavior which leans heavily on the clichéd formal conventions of the outside world. This stage characterizes many of the narratives of the five year olds, even as invention is on the increase. Finally, we have the stage of identity in which conventions are internalized and exits transformed into true endings—a stage that frequently exceeds even the adult's grasp.

The tag ending strategy deserves our special attention because the child's abrupt announcement "And that is the end of that story," immediately conjures up a response in us that may not always be appropriate. We might consider this particular exit behavior in at least two ways. First, the child's interest or invention span is exhausted and "the end" is an effective way of getting on to other matters. It aims to avoid a lot of unnecessary questions from adults like, "Did anything else happen?" or "What do you think the lost bunny is doing now?" ("If I knew I would've told you.") Such adult probing, though quite natural, is inappropriate because the storyteller has flatly declared the case closed, even if it is not properly concluded by adult standards. Second, "the end" really might be the end for the child even if it fails to appear complete for us. This is not paradoxical in terms of reference; rather, it points to the notion that children are tuned to a different completeness frequency than adults, and thus the adult is better off suspending any immediate judgement. The child might very well be functioning on the basis of bodily integrated meanings in the story and not be referring to a verbally constructed measure. The words are truly inside the child and the end signals his or her body sense that it is over—the story is done.

This second way of perceiving children's exit strategies suggests a more accepting and patient response on the part of the adult. In the first case, our response frequently has involved pressuring the child to elaborate the world more fully in a linguistic sense (we have
entire language arts curricula which seek to move the child in ever more elaborated and abstract directions—and we wonder why youngsters lose touch with their feelings), rather than revelling in the feelings of mastery created by the evoked verbal world of the previously lived experience, real or imagined. In applying this pressure we push children further and further away from how they actually feel about the story. They give us more words just to pacify us. If, on the other hand, we adopt the second approach and take “the end” seriously, we encourage a more integrated mode of perceiving on the part of the child. This mode involves trusting the body in the thinking, constructing process. It calls attention to the myriad of loops that occur when language is being used, but that these loops primarily include body-word relationships, not just word-word relationships. By integrating the bodily felt-sense with the language children are using to construct their worlds we offer them new dimensions of power previously untapped. Using this power should directly influence the meaning process which is finally the foundation of our moral sense properly conceived. In this sense children must learn, as D. H. Lawrence remarked, to trust the tale. More complex linguistic growth will follow, including a more socio-centric concern for audience, but such growth will then be based on the firmest of foundations.

Encouraging children to tell stories is an important way of not only fostering their personal-social development, but of allowing them to develop a rhythmical sense of order and relatedness to events. In telling stories children are acquiring the formal aspects of what makes a gesture complete, of how experience is organized, and they are acquiring these things in terms of an internalized body-sense (“How does it feel or sound?”), rather than an externally imposed set of rules (“Avoid a succession of loose sentences.”). In a somewhat different context, Vernon Lee made a similar educational proposal: “... the first preference for beauty of shape must be sought for in those arts like stone and metal work, pottery and weaving, which give opportunities for repetition, reduplication, hence rhythm and symmetry” (1913, p. 94). So too with the shapes of our narratives which create rather than imitate the actions of our ordinary existence. If children learn to earn their endings from the inside, they will not have to spend their lives mired in graceless outside exits. By reinforcing their ability to predict and anticipate, we help children to construct unique identities which is the only way they will become masters of their own social destinies.

References


