
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

What makes a good story?

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This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Neil.

Georgina

And I'm Georgina.

Neil

Let me tell you a story, Georgina. Are you ready?

Georgina

Yes!

Neil

Grandma had always warned me not to look into the mirror at midnight. There was something strange about that mirror, she said. How childish – to believe silly stories! Later that night I heard a noise. I woke up, dark and alone. A clock chimed midnight. The floorboards were creaking as I walked towards the mirror. I looked into my face reflecting in the glass, when suddenly - my eye winked!

Georgina

Agh, stop Neil! You're scaring me!

Neil

Oh sorry, Georgina! OK, let's try another story: Once upon a time there was a beautiful servant girl who lived with her wicked stepmother and two jealous stepsisters...

Georgina

Ah, that's better, Neil, and I know this story – Cinderella – more romantic and much less scary!

Neil

As you can see from Georgina's reaction, telling stories is a powerful way to connect and communicate with people - and the topic of this programme.

Georgina

Stories help us make sense of the world which is why we've been telling them to each other for millennia – and why some of the earliest **folk tales** – stories that parents have told and passed on to their children over many years – are still being told today.

Neil

According to the novelist, Sandra Newman and other academics, there are seven classic plotlines which are constantly being recycled into new stories. They include 'rags to riches' plots, like Cinderella...

Georgina

'Defeating the monster' plots, like Dracula...

Neil

...and other plots such as 'comedies', 'adventures' and 'tragedies'. So, my quiz question is this: which of the following well-known folk tales is a 'defeating the monster' story? Is it:

- a) Beowulf?
- b) Beauty and the Beast? or,
- c) Goldilocks and the Three Bears?

Georgina

Well, they all have beasts, bears or wolves in the title, so I'll guess b) Beauty and the Beast.

Neil

OK, Georgina, we'll come back to that later. It's interesting to ask how we can explain the lasting appeal of these classic plotlines. Someone who might know is anthropologist and writer, Professor Jamie Tarani.

Georgina

Here he is talking to BBC World Service's, The Why Factor. See if you can spot his answer.

Jamie Tarani

Often the reason why we feel so motivated to pass on stories is because the stories do **tap into** certain **universal** human fantasies and fears that will often

transcend the concerns of particular times and places. [...] We are intensely moralistic – most of the time, the bad guys have unhappy endings and the good guys have happy endings. We know that in the real world it doesn't actually work like that so there's an element of **wish-fulfillment** that somehow satisfies our moral appetite.

Neil

Stories from very different cultures often have plots with similar fantasies and fears. These human emotions are **universal**, meaning they exist everywhere and relate to everyone in the world.

Georgina

Classic stories work because they **tap into** basic human emotions – they understand and express what it means to be human.

Neil

Unlike in the real world, stories can reinforce our sense of morality - evil stepmothers get punished, Cinderella marries her prince and everyone lives happily ever after. In this way they create **wish-fulfillment** – the achievement of what we really want and desire.

Georgina

Well, so much for plotlines, Neil, but that still doesn't explain how stories have the power to catch and hold our attention.

Neil

Let's hear from novelist, Sandra Newman, author of *How Not To Write a Novel* – a handbook of over 200 common mistakes.

Georgina

Here she tells BBC World Service's, *The Why Factor*, that her absolute number one storytelling rule is comprehensibility – people need to understand your story.

Sandra Newman

There are some people who actually are so unfortunately bad at communicating that even when they tell a story to another person it becomes incomprehensible. And gradually as they stop making sense and **ramble** and digress and don't know where they're going, you see everybody not only lose interest but become hostile – people become very frustrated when someone is not **getting to the point**.

Neil

According to Sandra, the biggest mistake is incomprehensibility or not understanding the plot because the storyteller is **rambling** – talking in a confused way, going off the subject or not making sense.

Georgina

When listeners give a story their time and attention, they want the storyteller to **get to the point** - start talking about the most important and relevant information.

Neil

But to cut a long story short, Georgina, it's time to return to the quiz question. Remember I asked you which famous folk tale had a 'defeating the monster' plot. What did you say?

Georgina

I said the answer was b) Beauty and the Beast. Was I right?

Neil

Your answer was...

Georgina

Oh, do get to the point, Neil!

Neil

...wrong! In fact, the answer is, a) Beowulf - an Old English epic about the hero, Beowulf, who defeats dragons and beasts.

Georgina

Well, Neil, there are two sides to every story, as the saying goes. So, let's recap the vocabulary we've learned, starting with **folk tales** – popular stories that have been told and passed down over generations.

Neil

Many folk tales contain **universal** ideas – ideas which exist everywhere, in every age and culture. Stories **tap into** these ideas, meaning they understand, connect to and express them.

Georgina

Wish-fulfillment means the achievement or realisation of things you really want and desire.

Neil

A good storyteller will never **ramble** - talk in a confused way, often going off the subject or not making much sense.

Georgina

And instead will **get to the point** - start talking about what is most important and relevant.

Neil

That's all we have time for, but remember to join us again soon for the inside story on trending English topics and vocabulary, here at 6 Minute English. Bye for now!

Georgina

Goodbye!

VOCABULARY

folk tales

stories that parents have told and passed on to their children over many years

universal

exist everywhere are related to everyone in the world

tap into

understand, connect to and express something such as people's beliefs or attitudes

wish-fulfillment

achievement of things you really want and desire

ramble

talk in a confused way, often going off the subject or not making much sense

get to the point

start talking about what is most important and relevant