

# POWER OF STORIES

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LITERACY AND CRITICAL THINKING

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AN INITIATIVE OF



## ■ RATIONALE

What is literacy? Is it the ability to read and write? The aptitude to understand and purposefully employ words? Is it a human right? In 2011, the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimated that 84 percent of the global adult (ages 16+) population has basic literacy skills. While this number may seem decent, 16 percent equates to 774 million adults without any literacy skills. Furthermore, many of the 84 percent struggle through everyday life because more advanced literacy skills are necessary to succeed in today's highly educated workforce.

Literacy is much more than just reading and writing. By nurturing those skills, full literacy—reading comprehension, purposeful writing critical thinking about what is read and written—can be achieved. UNESCO believes it is a basic human right. International laws such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child call out for the eradication of illiteracy globally. Here in Canada, 97 percent of adults are considered to be literate, but in the 2008 census, Statistics Canada found that two out of five adult Canadians struggle with low literacy. It doesn't need to be this way. Literacy can grow through reading and writing.

WE Schools believes literacy is a personal journey. The Power of Stories is inspired by the personal connection to stories that an individual finds in reading novels of their choice or by writing what is important to them in a short story. Use this resource to inspire literacy, enhance critical thinking and share the power of a story with your students and your community. The activities are designed to work in the classroom and in an after-school club or social group, as well as to be shared with family and friends.

### Core Skill Sets

Look for these icons at the top of each lesson. The icons identify the most relevant core skills being developed. Learn more about the WE.org: Learning Framework at [www.weday.com/weschools](http://www.weday.com/weschools).



CRITICAL THINKING



RESEARCH AND WRITING



INFORMATION LITERACY



ARGUMENT FORMATION



LEADERSHIP SKILLS



ORGANIZATION



ACTION PLANNING



REFLECTION

## INSPIRING LITERACY



**Hold a conversation with your class about reading. Ask students questions like:**

- Why read? (For content, for context, for pleasure, etc.)
- What do you read? (Fiction, non-fiction, newspapers, music lyrics, etc.)
- When do you read? (Only when it is assigned reading, whenever I can, once in a while, etc.)
- Is reading a personal or communal activity? Explain how reading can be personal and community oriented.
- What is the value of literacy?
- What are the benefits of reading?
- Is it important that everyone can read? Why or why not?
- Is it important to read regularly? Explain your answer.
- What is your first/favourite/strongest memory of reading?

### Reading circles

Provide students with a selection of novels. Have students sign up for one of the novels and create reading circles.

Reading circles can take different forms. For example, create a community of mentors by dividing the class into “support” groups while conducting a class novel study. Or for individual novel studies, create time for groups of students to discuss general reading strategies, tips and considerations in addition to sharing what their story is with the rest of the group. Begin with a few options from the following selection of novels:

- Anne of Green Gables, L.M. Montgomery
- Artemis Fowl, Eoin Colfer
- Bridge to Terabithia, Katherine Paterson
- Charlotte’s Web, E.B. White
- The Giver, Lois Lowry
- Hannah and the Salish Sea, Carol Anne Shaw
- The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, C.S. Lewis
- The Little Prince, Antoine de Saint Exupery
- Outcasts of River Falls, Jacqueline Guest
- One Story, One Song, Richard Wagamese
- Peter Pan and Wendy, J. M. Barrie
- Redwork, Michael Debard
- Shadows Cast by Stars, Catherine Knutsson
- The Tuesday Café, Don Trembath
- The Way Lies North, Jean Rae Baxter

**Ask students why they think reading is a good part of literacy.** Have students list some of the wider applications, skills, practices and experiences reading provides them with. Some examples may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Opening up to new and different ideas
- Learning to see and look for different opinions
- Considering different opinions to help form your own
- Looking for different perspectives
- Considering bias
- Recognising who is represented and who is missing, who’s voice is being heard and who’s may be silent

**Encourage conversations about what books students are enjoying to promote their reading, assess understanding, foster personal reflection, stimulate discussion and help them form opinions with, use the following conversation starters:**

- |                     |                   |                    |
|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| ○ I think...        | ○ I assume...     | ○ I hear...        |
| ○ I’m interested... | ○ I know...       | ○ I respect...     |
| ○ I believe...      | ○ I understand... | ○ I agree...       |
| ○ I find...         | ○ I’ve learned... | ○ I don’t agree... |

**Create an extracurricular book club.** Allow students to take the lead by selecting a book for the group to read and discuss. Students should set a reasonable pace and take turns developing questions for the group to discuss based on the sections they have read. The club should meet regularly and spend some time discussing what else they might be reading or writing, creating a culture of shared literacy. The following questions can be used in many reading situations; therefore, the term “story” has been used as a general term that can be replaced with novel, biography, poetry, etc.

- **General opinion**
  - Did you like/dislike the story?
  - What did you like/dislike specifically?
  - How does it compare to other stories you have read?
- **Structure**
  - How was the story structured?
  - What structural or narrative devices were used (flashbacks, multiple storytellers, etc.)?
  - Were the structure and literary devices used effectively?
- **Perspectives**
  - Whose perspective or point of view did the author use?
  - How would the story have changed if another perspective was used?
- **Characters**
  - Was the plot of the story propelled by decisions characters made, or were the characters at the mercy of the plot?
  - Was the plot believable?
  - Did it need to be believable?
  - What part of the story stands out to you? Why?
  - Was the story chronological?
  - Was there foreshadowing, or was information provided early in the story?
- **Plot**
  - Was the plot of the story propelled by decisions characters made, or were the characters at the mercy of the plot?
  - Was the plot believable?
  - Did it need to be believable?
  - What part of the story stands out to you? Why?
  - Was the story chronological?
  - Was there foreshadowing, or was information provided early in the story?
- **Themes**
  - What were some of the major themes of the book?
  - Are these themes relevant to your life?
  - Were the themes effectively developed?
- **Was the novel realistic (consider the characters, situations, issues, conversations, outcomes, etc.)?**
  - Do you think it was intended to be realistic?
  - What kept it from feeling realistic?
  - How could it have been more realistic?
- **What kept you reading the novel?**
  - Did it meet, fall short of, or exceed your expectations?
- **Ask students to come prepared with a favourite passage or two to share with the class. Students should explain why they selected the specific passage.**

**Take it home.** Encourage students to share literacy by reading with their siblings, parents and grandparents. Discuss ways for them to share literacy. Some examples may include:

- Reading the newspaper and discussing recent news issues with their parents.
- Finding out the favourite stories of grandparents and reading the tales with them.
- Beginning a bedtime routine of reading stories with younger siblings.

## INSPIRING LITERACY ACTIVITY



### Where I'm From

1. Remind students that Canada is a uniquely diverse country. Looking into our family histories, many of us can trace our roots back many generations to locations across Canada and areas around the world. Whether our heritage is a combination of many cultures, primarily one or two cultures, or a mystery, we celebrate the similarities and differences we share with each other equally.
2. Ask students to put their heads on their desks and close their eyes. Read George Ella Lyon's poem "Where I'm From" to the class.
3. Tell students that people of all ages and backgrounds from around the world have written their own versions of George Ella Lyon's poem. Today, they will be joining this growing group. From the citizens of the United States to those in China to the people of Ecuador—from students to refugees—people everywhere have mapped their personal life journeys through poetry.
4. Distribute the "Where I'm From" poem template for students to use while writing their poem. Ask them to explore the suggested format but also to feel free to go beyond the parameters.
5. Allow students time to reflect on their life journeys so far. Provide class time for writing, assign for homework if necessary. When students are finished, consider holding a poetry reading to allow students to share their story.

### "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'm 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.*

## BLACKLINE MASTER

## "WHERE I'M FROM"

## "Where I'm From" by George Ella Lyon

I am from clothespins,  
 from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.  
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**Use this template to share your own where I'm from story.**

I am from \_\_\_\_\_ (specific, ordinary item), from \_\_\_\_\_ (product name) and \_\_\_\_\_.

I am from the \_\_\_\_\_ (home description: adjective, adjective, sensory detail).

I am from the \_\_\_\_\_ (plant, flower, natural item), the \_\_\_\_\_ (plant, flower, natural detail).

I am from \_\_\_\_\_ (family tradition) and \_\_\_\_\_ (family trait), from \_\_\_\_\_ (name of family member) and \_\_\_\_\_ (another family name).

I am from the \_\_\_\_\_ (description of family tendency) and \_\_\_\_\_ (another description).

From \_\_\_\_\_ (something you were told as a child) and \_\_\_\_\_ (another childhood tidbit).

I am from \_\_\_\_\_ (representation of religion or lack of it).

\_\_\_\_\_ (Further describe).

I'm from \_\_\_\_\_ (place of birth and family ancestry), \_\_\_\_\_ (two food items representing your family).

From the \_\_\_\_\_ (family story about a specific person and detail), the \_\_\_\_\_ (another detail), and the \_\_\_\_\_ (another detail about another family member).

I am from \_\_\_\_\_ (location of family pictures, mementos, archives and several more lines indicating their worth).

**Source:** George Ella Lyon's "Where I'm From" [georgeellalyon.com/where.html](http://georgeellalyon.com/where.html)

## CRITICAL THINKING



**Hold a discussion with students about critical thinking to find out what they know about it and how they use it in their daily lives. Ask students:**

- What is critical thinking?
- If you think critically about what you are reading, are you thinking about it negatively?
- How do you know you are thinking critically about something?
- Why is it important to incorporate critical thinking into your everyday life?
- Can you always trust what you read? Why or why not?
- What is bias?
- Why is it important to always acknowledge the bias of what you read?
- How can thinking of bias affect your understanding of what you are reading or writing?
- What are some good critical thinking questions you can ask of what you read, write, watch and hear? (I.e., come up with a list of questions to keep in mind.) Use the following questions to begin:
  - Who is the author?
  - Who is the intended audience?
  - What is the purpose?
  - How are different types of people portrayed?
  - What is the genre?
  - It is realistic?
  - How could it be misinterpreted?
  - What is left out or missing?
- Advise students to allow their “gut” to take the lead, to ask questions of what they read, write, see and hear. For example: I think..., I feel... etc.

**After reading, writing, listening or watching something, use the four corners or barometer technique to have students**

**consider the text.** Help students understand that there is rarely a “right” answer when engaging in issues-based discussions. While it is good to be passionate about issues, students should remember that opinions are best expressed when they are based on fact. They should harness their passion by allowing it to drive their interest to learn more about the issue. During discussions, when using the four corners and barometer, students will be required to form an opinion on the piece they just read and will need to be prepared to share this opinion. Students should be encouraged to be open to new ideas and opinions. As they hear from their classmates, they may move to a new corner or pole on the barometer.

- **Four corners:** Label the four corners of the classroom with the following signs: strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree. With no neutral options, students must take a position. This option might also be a better activity for larger classes where space is tight.
- **Barometer:** Before class begins, stretch a piece of masking tape on the floor, from one wall to the parallel wall. The line should be at least a foot from the wall that runs parallel to the taped line and should be clear from obstruction. Students will be asked to place themselves along the line so there needs to be room to stand. On the wall, at one end of the tape, post a sign that reads “strongly agree,” and on the opposite end, post a sign that reads “strongly disagree.” A mark at the middle may be added for “neutral.”

## CRITICAL THINKING ACTIVITY



Around the world, music has historically been an important method for sharing knowledge, self-expression and community celebration. Songs belonged to a society, clan, ceremony or an individual, and they were a unifying force. Each song from the past and the present is the self-expression of an individual or a community that has come together to communicate with the listener. Use the following activity to foster critical literacy skills by connecting with the oral tradition of sharing stories through song.

### Critical literacy through music

1. Every song tells a story. Some are written by those who perform them; others are passed down for generations and are performed from tradition. Some songs are written to entertain, while some share information. Ask students to share what music means to them. Ask students:
  - Why is music important?
  - How has music been used?
  - How would the world be different if there was no music?
2. Instruct students to choose one song that they enjoy listening to. Have students transcribe the song by listening to it repeatedly in small sections. Note: students should record the lyrics exactly as they are performed even if they are not proper English (e.g., "I ain't got no satisfaction").
3. After the song is transcribed, instruct students to translate the lyrics into another style of language. These styles may include, but are not limited to, a traditional language, Shakespearean or Middle English, or slang from a specific time period such as the 1920s, 1960s or 1980s, etc. Review the selected style of language if students are unfamiliar with it. For example, the 1920s vernacular included "doll" (a physically attractive person), "bee's knees" (a good thing) and "beef" (problem).
4. Once students have finished their translation, ask the following questions:
  - What did you learn about the song that you did not know before?
  - Did you think about what was being said before transcribing and translating it?
  - Who was the intended audience when the song was in its original form?
  - Does the audience change with the translation? How?
  - Why is it important to understand what we are listening to?
  - How will this change the way you listen to music in the future?

## CRITICAL THINKING ACTIVITY



We all have a story to tell. We all have a story to share. Some stories are interconnected; some stand on their own. Some take a lifetime to write. Others can be told along the way. Whatever your story is, it is up to you to share it.

The following story is Craig Kielburger's. It isn't the whole story since his work and adventures continue, but it's a start. Take time to read the story as a class or distribute copies of it for individual reading. After reading it, discuss what Craig's story captures and what is left out. How did it start? Was anyone else involved in his story? What roles did they play? How might their story be different even though they are connected?

### Ask students: What's your story?

Tell students they will be writing a personal biography. They will decide what story they would tell about themselves if they could only share one story with the world. The story should be based on fact. It should be about an event, a person or place in their history that encapsulates them as a person. Alternatively, students may write about the person they want to be. What do they want their story to be five, ten or twenty years from now? If they could see into the future, what would they see? Add in a community element by asking students to think of themselves as a social activist. What will they do to change the lives of the people around them? How will they make an impact?

## BLACKLINE MASTER

### CRAIG'S STORY

My journey as an activist began on an ordinary Wednesday morning when I was 12. Sitting at the breakfast table, I flipped through the paper toward the comics when a headline jumped out at me: "Battled child labor, boy, 12, murdered."

Curious, I read the article. That's when I first learned about the life and death of Iqbal Masih, a former child labourer-turned-child rights activist. Sold into slavery at the age of four, this Pakistani boy spent six years chained to a carpet-weaving loom before escaping to become an advocate for the rights of enslaved children. His pleas captured the world's attention. It also prompted a carpet-maker to have him killed.

Iqbal's story shocked me. I couldn't believe that, although Iqbal and I were the same age, our lives were so different. Of course I'd seen suffering on TV and in the newspaper, but like most others, I'd learned to tune it out.

Reading Iqbal's story changed that. I was angry. I headed to the library to learn more and that's when I made another horrific discovery: In many parts of the world, instead of going to school, children exactly like me were forced to work in the most awful conditions. It seemed unbelievable that I'd never heard about any of this before.

I decided to share what I'd learned with my class. I can still remember how nervous I felt standing in front of my peers, telling them about Iqbal and the plight of all child labourers. I finished by asking, "Who wants to help?" Before I knew it, 11 hands flew up! That's when I learned that having the courage to try makes even the hardest things possible.

When the 12 of us got together that evening, Free The Children was born. None of us had much experience with social justice work—just a desire to take action.

In the beginning, our main goal was to raise awareness about child labour. But many of the people I was speaking to would often ask whether I'd ever met any child labourers. This got me thinking: What better way to find out how to help child labourers than to ask them? There was only one problem: I wasn't even allowed to take the subway by myself, much less travel half way around the world. I wasn't sure how I would convince my parents.

As luck would have it, a family friend, 24-year-old Alam Rahman, was planning a trip to South Asia and generously invited me along. My parents trusted Alam and, before I knew it, the trip of a lifetime was taking shape.

In December 1995 we embarked on a seven-week tour of Bangladesh, Nepal, India, Pakistan and Thailand. In Bangladesh, I saw poverty up close. Curious children wearing only dirty rags ran to us, their bulging stomachs evidence of poor nutrition. Homes were little more than bits of cardboard and tin. There were no buildings, schools, or hospitals.

I was in tears. I managed to ask a local human rights worker, "How can I help?" To my surprise, he told me to go home and describe to my friends the suffering I'd seen. He encouraged me to ask them whether it was fair that some people have so little in our world of plenty.

This advice stayed with me throughout my trip. I'd expected child labour to be a secret, but everywhere we went children were out working in plain view. In India, I met children who'd spent their entire lives making bricks out of mud. In a factory, I spoke to an eight-year-old girl who pulled apart used syringes (needles) to sell the parts. She worked without shoes or gloves. Many times, she got pricked by the dirty needles, putting her at risk of getting AIDS. She'd never even heard of the disease.

Every day, I was sickened by the things that children had to do to survive. Again and again, I was told it was the only way the poor could survive. I was amazed by the courage and capacity for kindness and fun of every child I met. In the most desperate places, we laughed and played together. I wanted to help each of the children I came to know. But I couldn't. Slowly, I came to realize that the one way I could really make a difference was by sharing their stories just like the human rights worker in Bangladesh had advised.

I also began to understand that we had to work hard at convincing all the children of the world that we weren't too young to bring about positive change.

When I returned to Canada, life in our Thornhill, Ontario, home changed forever. Requests for information started to pour in, with students from across the country wanting to know how they could become involved with Free The Children. Our organization began to take off and continues to grow today.

## ■ ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

In addition to the lesson plans, share these resources with your students:

- Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada: [www.freethechildren.com/clubpenguin](http://www.freethechildren.com/clubpenguin) to access resources and downloads.
- National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation: [naaf.ca](http://naaf.ca)
- The Virtual Museum of Canada: [virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/Traditions/English/teachers\\_cornor.html](http://virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/Traditions/English/teachers_cornor.html)
- Aboriginal Canada Portal in Resources for Teachers: [aboriginalcanada.gc.ca/acp/site.nsf/eng/ao31045.html](http://aboriginalcanada.gc.ca/acp/site.nsf/eng/ao31045.html)
- George Ella Lyon's "Where I'm From": [georgeellalyon.com/where.html](http://georgeellalyon.com/where.html)
- UNESCO's Education for All Global Monitoring Report, Chapter 5 "Why Literacy Matters": [unesco.org/education/GMR2006/full/chapt5\\_eng.pdf](http://unesco.org/education/GMR2006/full/chapt5_eng.pdf)