Storykit Hints

Hint: Keyword lists

When putting together your own keyword list, look for a single word in each section of the story that best sums up, for you, the salient feature of that section. Try to keep the key words to no more than a word or two, though sometimes it will be necessary to write a short phrase next to the key words or in place of them. Try to reduce clutter on your cue-sheet. You may prefer to replace words with pictures depending on your own learning style. To help with memorisation, you may also want to create your own synopses-in-threes (see online).

Hint: One-spot storytelling and movement

Sometimes it is appropriate to move around and to make use of the space you may have, for instance, when you are storytelling with very young children. However, on the whole the best kind of storytelling is done on one spot. Gestures and movement are to be encouraged, but using the 'less-is-more' approach. So, if your character is walking somewhere then 'walk on the spot' to physicalise this but keep the movement(s) small and understated. When you describe events such as the trapdoor opening under the wooden horse in the first story then indicate the opening of a trapdoor with your hands as you say it – or just before (see Storykit Hint: Anticipate on page 41).

Hint: Anticipate (using movement to pull your listeners through the story)

Following on from 'one-spot-storytelling', another good storytelling tip for movement is to move in anticipation of something. So, if your character is about to draw a sword, then do the action of drawing a sword just before you say, 'he drew his sword'. This helps to pull the audience through the story, engaging their imaginations as they piece together the narrative before you say it out loud. This requires a bit of conscious effort to begin with but soon becomes natural if you persevere.

Hint: Memorising stories

This is one of the longest stories in the *Odyssey* to memorise but unfortunately it happens near the beginning of the epic, so you'll need to have a go at memorising a longer story sooner rather than later to tell this in its proper place. Here are some memorisation hints and tips:

- Read the story through several times and *read actively*. That is to say, don't read in that lazy way we are accustomed to do when reading for pleasure. Read it *out loud* and let the images formulate fully in your mind before reading on.
- On the second or third reading, make your own *Keyword list*. It is better to make your own list because it helps you to process the information more thoroughly and you will choose the words that are best for *you* to help recall the story. (See Keyword lists on page 11.)
- Visualise the events of the story in your mind so that you are simply describing 'what you see' rather than trying to remember a long list of words. (See Storykit Hint: Visualisation and confidence building on page 77.)
- Causally link the sequence of events. They are shipwrecked (The Lotus Eaters), so what do they need to do? This should jog your memory about what comes next: 'Oh yeah,' you say to yourself, 'they will need to repair the ships and seek for help because they're low on water.' This should lead you naturally to the forest scene (what do they find?), which leads to the clearing scene etc. If you try to remember a series of isolated events then memorisation is much harder, but in stories, *everything happens for a reason*.
- Practise telling the story either on your own when you have a minute (such as when you are on a journey or waiting for a bus, etc.) or tell your children, your spouse, a friend – anyone who'll listen! The more you tell, the easier it

is. You will also find that the more stories you learn, the easier learning new stories gets.

- Take *pauses* in your storytelling to take stock. Pausing when you speak is also a very effective way of drawing people into what you are saying. Of course, if you pause too much your telling becomes laborious, but get the balance right, and your telling will be more engaging *and* you will have the benefit of giving yourself time to think.
- Turn your long list of words into easy, bite-size *chunks*. The Cyclops story, for instance, can be reduced to just three things: 1) they explore; 2) they get trapped; 3) they escape – just! Then 1) can be reduced to just three things again: a) they arrive; b) they find the cave; c) the Cyclops returns. Carry on like this 'in threes' as long as necessary. (See online for more synopses 'in threes'.)

Hint: Describing your story and building an atmosphere

Some of the stories in the original *Odyssey* are remarkably short and devoid of description and atmosphere while others are given a great deal of both or, in some cases, are overburdened with detail. Whatever the reasons for this and whatever audiences 3,000 years ago expected, there's a lot we can do to improve the balance of description, atmosphere and detail for today's younger audiences.

Set the scene: It is important to describe the scenes with enough detail for them to be able to imagine the scene well but without too much detail that they lose interest. Do this whenever there is a change of scene but keep your description to what is necessary.

Provide clues: Everything in a story should be there for a reason. Describing the cave of the Cyclops with its huge furniture gives the audience some information about the owner: whoever they are, they're huge! The pen that you describe houses the animals that will play a crucial role in the men's escape, and the food they find is the motivation for them to act imprudently so that they get trapped. You should not spend time describing features that will play no role other than to build an atmosphere, and this should be done sparingly as you should never lose sight of the plot. However, though the plot is important, if you simply enumerate the events of the story you are not storytelling. I once set a class the task of telling the stories of the *Odyssey* to someone at home. When I had finished the stories I asked them if anyone had

told the stories. One of the children said, 'Well, I didn't really *tell* the stories, I just said what happened.' He had made a distinction between 'saying the plot' (usually 'and then x, and then y and then z happened') and *storytelling*, a large part of which is getting the balance right between plot and description.

Some choice moments in the *Odyssey*, where description can help to build an atmosphere or provide clues, are:

- As the men enter the forest during The Lotus Eaters and their awareness of being watched.
- The cave of the Cyclops.
- The description of the coast of Ithaca when they reach home but just before they are blown back out to sea in Aeolus.
- The cliff-encircled harbour in The Laestrygonians.
- The summoning of the dead in The Underworld.
- The engulfing sea-mist as they approach the island of the Sirens.

Thoughts and feelings: Occasionally you can describe the thoughts and feelings of characters, letting your audience into the character's internal world: for instance, Odysseus' regret at having not told the crew of Scylla. You can also hint at these rather than fully reveal them, as for instance with Circe and Kalypso when intimating their feelings for Odysseus.

Hint: Adapting the story to suit your audience

One of the many virtues of storytelling is that your presentation is not limited to what is written. If a story has been written with a particular age group in mind, then it is very difficult to *read* to audiences of a different age, due to tone, humour or content. However, if you tell a story rather than read it, then it can be instantly adapted. You simply add or subtract longer words, adjust the jokes, or remove unnecessary characters and events for younger ones. You can also change the tense at will or the person-perspective as well as the tone and register (language used). When you have 'the telling' at your fingertips, suddenly all kinds of resources become open to all ages and audiences.

Hint: Visualisation

Any storyteller will tell you the importance of visualisation as a key tool for storytelling: 'seeing' the events happening before you, as it were, renders the story much more than a list of memorised words. This is important for memorisation but also as a source for your descriptions and it helps you convey your own love and enthusiasm for the stories (see 'Enjoy the stories' on page 96). Taffy Thomas, the first Storyteller Laureate, says that you tell stories with two parts of yourself: the left side sees the image of the event in the story and the right side chooses the words to use to describe what you see, painting a picture with words.

It is significant that the bard in the *Odyssey*, Demodocus, is blind, for, though he is blind, he 'sees' what others cannot (it is *said* that Homer was blind too). Demodocus is described by King Alcinous as having been given a special gift by a god. For the Ancient Greeks, the Muses (or, more precisely, the one called *Aoide*, meaning 'song' or 'tune') were the goddesses who were more than just an inspiration, as *we* tend to think of the word – they were the *source* of the storytellers' art in that they gave the stories to the storytellers. They weren't just making it up. This helps to understand how the Greeks understood what we might call *inspiration* and it is worth noting that the *Odyssey* begins with these words: 'Tell me, Muse, the story of that resourceful man ...'

Visualisation and confidence building

There are many visualisation techniques for building confidence but I would like to share one that comes from the *Odyssey* itself, from the part when Odysseus arrives on Phaeacia, though I have not included this in my children's version. At the beginning of Book 8 (The Phaeacian Games), the goddess Athena, disguised as a herald, tells the captains and counsellors of the Phaeacians to gather so that they can listen to the stranger who has been wandering over the seas. She tells them that 'he looks like an immortal god'. Homer tells us that these words acted as 'inspiration and encouragement to all'. Athena then imbues Odysseus with a divine beauty and makes him seem taller and broader so that he will inspire the Phaeacian people 'not only with affection but with fear and respect'. One can read such passages in the *Odyssey* as a kind of 'cheat' for the hero – extra divine help that somehow undermines his own resourcefulness. This is sometimes known as the *deus ex machina*-effect (literally, 'god in the machine'), where gods step into the story to solve

problems. However, it can also be understood psychologically, as a metaphor for his state of mind. And it is in this latter way that we can make use of the following visualisation:

Before entering the classroom, imagine yourself imbued with a special confidence, just like Odysseus after meeting Athena. Like Odysseus, you stand straighter, your shoulders broader, ready to bring 'inspiration and encouragement to all'. Imagine also that the Muse Aoide then 'gives' you the stories as fully-formed, visual-audio images in your head. Then all you need do is look to them and describe them as they happen.

Hint: The Bubble (making time for the story)

You can't do good storytelling whilst still trying to do other things. You'll lose the children if you stop halfway through to take the register or to send someone on an errand or to have a word with another teacher / teaching assistant. The storytelling bubble is precisely that: a bubble. It's a special place cut off from the rest of the world but, like a bubble, it is also very fragile. The bubble is crucial for creating an atmosphere such as the one you will want for The Underworld story. Devote some time each week to your storytelling / philosophy sessions (usually an hour) and have a 'Do Not Disturb!' sign on the door during the allotted time. Minimise – to absolutely necessary – any interruptions to your sessions. (See also Storykit Hint: Tone and pace on page 116)

Hint: Enjoy the stories (or 'rediscover' them)

The storyteller Hugh Lupton says 'only tell stories you like, stories that speak to you'. It is very difficult to tell a story successfully, no matter how well you know it, if you simply don't like it. This approach, however, would rule out loads of good stories, so here's my take on the matter. Sometimes a story just needs to be reinvigorated. You will draw pleasure from audiences that enjoy a story, so, if you don't enjoy the story the chances are the audience won't enjoy it and you, therefore, won't enjoy telling it. But if you tell it in such a way that the audience enjoys it, then you will begin to enjoy telling it. See how it works? This is how you rediscover a story.

I have noticed that even the most hackneyed stories that I thought I didn't like have often found a new glow for me, when I've told them to children who have never heard them before. Suddenly I find myself thinking, 'Actually, I *do* like that story and I can see why it endures.' On this basis, I could tell the Cyclops story over and over again, even though it's the most well-known in the *Odyssey*. It is so well structured and full of excitement and ingenuity that children who have never heard it are enthralled and those who have heard it love hearing it again when it's told well.

Hint: Eye contact, posture and breathing

By having the right body language you will convince your audience (and yourself) that you are in control. These hints are useful for both performance and confidence: by making eye contact, breathing calmly and standing well, you will make your audience feel comfortable, and consequently you will begin to feel comfortable too.

Eye contact should be maintained with your audience when telling a story. Try not to focus on just one person, however. Make sure your eyes address each part of the class on a fairly regular basis or some children will begin to disengage as they won't feel as though they are being spoken to. You shouldn't look like you are trying to remember something, as this naturally leads to a loss of eye contact as you look down to the ground or as your eyes roll to look up to the corner of your head. If you have to glance at your cue-sheet then, the moment you have seen your keyword, look up again. While you are looking at your cue-sheet you will lack confidence but the moment you look up to begin explaining what you are 'seeing in your head' then you'll find that your confidence returns. It is worth noting here that if you do need to look at your keyword list that you should not break the 'bubble' (see page 89) by apologising – stay in the story, glance at the word and then carry on (see also 'Memorising stories', page 47, for using pauses).

Posture tips:

- Shoulders down.
- Neck relaxed and in line with body, not thrusting forward.
- Chest out so that your body is 'open' in a 'giving' posture.
- Your feet should be flat on the ground, slightly apart.
- Your face should be towards your audience.
- Your hands should be free to gesture and gesticulate in a controlled way.
- Your body should be ready for movement.
- If sitting to 'tell', then keep a straight back.

Breathing should be relaxed, slow and rhythmic; your breaths should be deep and from the diaphragm. Shallow breathing often comes from being nervous and can result in loss of voice and other voice-related problems. So, be mindful to breathe properly for your storytelling.

Hint: Tone and pace

On the whole, a calm, relaxed, rhythmically consistent tone in the mid to lower range of your voice is to be preferred when storytelling. And remember to pause at the end of thoughts, sentences or descriptions. This gives your audience time to create a picture in their imaginations of what you have said. It also helps to draw them in, ready 'for the next bit'.

In this story there is a good example of an extended action sequence, from the point where the ship is destroyed all the way to where Odysseus is cast adrift again before arriving at Kalypso's island. One thing after another happens here, so it is of paramount importance that you, as the storyteller, convey the excitement as it happens. Speaking clearly and knowing exactly what is going to happen is the first rule for achieving this, but you must also pay special attention to how you are speaking.

As the action starts to unfold, move out of your usual voice-tone and pace and gradually raise your tone as you pass through this sequence of events. Gather your pace, making sure that you climax at the point at which he looks to be swallowed up by the whirlpool. Give the audience the full impression that 'this really is the end' (pause) ... only to offer a lifeline for the story to continue at the last second.

This italicised section is perfectly suited for you to practise gradually raising your tone and gathering your pace and then bringing it down before picking up again. Try it to see what I mean, and then apply the same principles to similar passages in the story itself, such as when the crew make their escape from Polyphemus' cave to the point where they sail from the island but having lost one ship and some men in the process.

Hint: Clarity and enunciation

Clarity is essential when storytelling and it is a well-known adage that clarity of thought produces clarity of expression. So, make sure you know what it is you are going to say. Most of the time, knowing *generally* what's happening in the story will be enough for you to be clear, but there are times when more rehearsal is needed. Beginning and ending your story may need rehearsal, as the start is when you are most likely to be nervous, and because the end is the bit that your audience will leave the session with, it needs to be clear, leaving them wanting more.

There are other parts that may also need special attention. For instance, when Kalypso offers Odysseus his (false) choice, '*You may leave this island only when you have either learned to love me. . .*', umming and ahhing around such central lines will take the edge off your storytelling, so make sure you know what it is you are going to say. Clarity doesn't come only from what you think but also from how you speak. Accents shouldn't matter but enunciation does. Try not to mumble your lines. Here are a few optional exercises that should help to prepare for storytelling, or, for that matter, any public speaking situation you find yourself in:

1 Open your mouth reasonably wide and roll your tongue around the circle of your lips, first from left to right and then from right to left.
2 Tighten your lips to make an 'ooooh' sound and then smile widely to make an 'eeeeee' sound. Repeat this action, getting gradually quicker.
3 Say the following sound-sentence repeatedly and quickly (with a short, closed vowel sound for the b, d and g, opening the vowel for the bah): 'b-d-g-bah'. Try changing the vowel sound at the end of each one: 'b-d-g-bah, b-d-g-bee, b-d-g-bor, b-d-g-boh ..', and so on. *Note*: Any tongue-twister sentence makes for a good warm-up exercise.
4 Touch your nose with your tongue and then try to touch the bottom of your chin with your tongue.

Hint: Adopting multiple storytelling points of view

The storyteller is not just a narrator. Of course, sometimes the teller *is* the narrator ('the ship sailed for many days on the ocean before land was spotted ...'), but at other times the teller is the speaker of dialogue ('I most certainly *will not*. What kind of a dragon do you take me for?'). When speaking, the teller *becomes* the character, often adopting appropriate voices and facial expressions on behalf of the speaking character. If the teller describes something like an eagle flying over, for instance, they can inhabit different points-of-view for the audience: the teller can spread out her arms as she explains that the eagle is flying over. In this case, the teller has *inhabited* the eagle itself. However, she may 'look up' as she speaks, inhabiting one of the characters that 'sees' the eagle from the road below. Her actions can inhabit different characters' points-of-view from sentence to sentence. Leaping from body to body, the teller hops effortlessly from character-to-character, even object-to-object, point-of-view to point-of view. This is just one of the many ways the storyteller can bring the story to life.

A story within a story

This chapter gives the storyteller the opportunity to really make use of this particular virtue of the storytelling art. When the character of Demodocus tells the story of Odysseus the madman – a *story within a story* – it is important to distinguish Demodocus' voice from that of the narrator so that the listeners know that it's a story within a story. Done well, it should be easy for your audience to follow; done badly, it is likely to lead only to confusion. To achieve this effect effortlessly you can pull on a variety of techniques: you could:

- adopt a distinctive voice or accent for Demodocus;
- physicalise him with your hands and body;
- make use of props and throw a cloak over your back and hold a stick in front of you;
- insert the words 'said Demodocus' reasonably frequently into the story.

Alternatively, you could try all – or a combination – of the options together.

Hint: Telling the story differently (can you step in the same story twice?)

A good storyteller never tells the same story in exactly the same way. Of course, when they have told a story many times, much of it will be the same, but because they have not learned the story line by line, they have an enormous amount of freedom denied the actor in a play, for instance, or the reader of a book, or the reciter of a poem. Storytellers can tell a story the same way if they want to, but they can also change it to suit their audience, or to suit the time of day, the mood they are in, or they may change it just for fun! Often a teller likes to experiment to see if changing the tense, for example, will make it better, or reversing the sequence of events, and so on. Try out different ways of telling your stories and use your audience to gauge whether they should be changes you keep.