

Once Upon a Time: A Story Time That Teaches Kids to Read

Introduction

A Science of Reading-Aligned Storytime with Four Complete Ready-to-Use Storytime Models You Can Customize for Your Community

Public libraries hosting weekly storyhours are sources of great anticipation for toddlers through preschool age children, and their caregivers. The voice cadence, body language and eye contact of a skilled librarian offering a read-aloud is engaging, lulling and often emotionally, physically interactive for a young audience.

Pre-readers need to develop critical neural pathways that lead to learning to read and write. Public library workers who manage and facilitate story hours can help.

Engaging pre-readers in a variety of activities that engage their brains in recognizing sounds, sound similarities and contrasts through oral language as well as developing letter sound-correspondence and fine motor skills increases the likelihood of their future success as proficient readers and writers.

Library workers can plan and initiate high value activities that prime pre-school brains to develop life-long literacy skills. And yes, this engagement can lead to a life-long love of libraries and patronage!

This sampling offers an updated version of a 60-minute story hour that includes evidence-based activities library workers can prepare to engage their youngest patrons and caregivers in high value literacy skill learning, while having fun!

SOR-Aligned Storytime: So That ALL Can Learn to Read

Know your goal:

To support early literacy learning and prepare children to read through engaging storytime sessions that use evidence-based literacy to focus on developing oral language, phonological awareness, vocabulary, letter sounds and recognition skills embedded in joyful, relationship-building routines customizable for every community's unique identity and needs.

1. Know the 5 Pillars of SoR-Aligned Storytime

Each storytime session should integrate these:

- **Oral Language:** rich conversations, open-ended questions
- **Phonological Awareness:** rhyming, clapping syllables, beginning sounds
- **Vocabulary:** explain new words from books and songs
- **Print Concepts:** track print, show left-to-right, point out letters
- **Letter Knowledge:** spotlight one letter per session, name and sound

2. Follow a Weekly Storytime Structure

Here's a brief overview of a storytime structure library workers can follow and customize:

Each session should follow a consistent, predictable routine.

Welcome (2-3 minutes)

- Greet each child by name if possible.
- Sing a hello song, eg. [Good Morning Earth](#)

Phonological Awareness Activity (3-5 minutes)

- Do a song or fingerplay with rhymes or syllables.
- Example: "Down by the Bay" (rhyming), clapping out names.

Read-Aloud (7–10 minutes)

- Choose a book with rich vocabulary and clear print.
- Pause to ask questions: "What do you think will happen next?"
- Point out text features and vocabulary.

Letter Spotlight (3–5 minutes)

- Introduce the letter of the day (e.g., "Today's letter is M!"). Show uppercase and lowercase.
- Talk about the sound(s) it makes and words that begin with it.

Vocabulary Boost (1–2 minutes)

- Revisit a new word from the story: "Gigantic means very, very big."
- Use the word in a new sentence or action.

Song or Movement Break (3–5 minutes)

- Reinforce a sound or theme with a song, chant, or dance.

Book Talk or Extension (1–2 minutes)

- Show other books with the same sound for rhyming, letter focus or topic.
- Suggest how families can reinforce learning at home.

Goodbye Song (2–3 minutes)

- Try a goodbye song that includes everyone! This one is to the tune of *Coming 'Round the Mountain*

It's time to say goodbye to all our friends, it's time to say goodbye to all our friends

It's time to say goodbye, to give a wave and wink your eye. It's time to say goodbye to all our friends.

Then sing each child's name - it's time to say goodbye to [child's name] and [child's name]...

[3. Use Engaging Read-Aloud Practices](#)

- Use expressive voices and gestures, pauses that communicate emotion.

- Ask questions that get kids thinking and talking. Pause to explain vocabulary, show interesting pictures.
- Give attention to the sound / letter of the day, the rhyme by pointing it out while reading
- Model print tracking with your finger under the words.

4. Prep Materials Weekly

- Gather books, visuals, props, and letter cards.
- Make sure to have one or two backup books or songs in case of extra time or attention shifts.
- Review the “Sound of the Week” if you're using a scope and sequence and refer to a visual of the letter featured, review the letter sounds you’ve included so far

5. Create a Literacy-Rich Environment

- Display letters, sounds, and vocabulary words visibly at children’s eye-level.
- Have books available for browsing before and after storytime.
- Have decodable (aka. controlled text) available for emergent readers to access
- Use name tags or signs connected with routines, movement activities and linked the the song / featured book for each storytime to build print awareness.

6. Engage Caregivers

- Briefly explain what you're doing and why:
“We’re clapping syllables to help kids learn how words are made of parts—this helps with reading later!”
- Offer take-home tips or a printed handout with the letter/sound of the week and book list.

7. Establish Routines and Be Flexible

- Storytime should always feel joyful and responsive.
- If a child-led moment arises (e.g., they notice a sound or word), embrace it!
- Include a routine greeting and routine goodbye song, chant or movement activity

First Storytime: Rhyming Word Eye Spy

Literacy Activity	Activity Description
Phonemic Awareness	A call and respond game to hear Rhyme in words of different spellings. Eg. I say: I spy with my little eye. You say: I spy with my little eye. I say: Something red on Fred's head. You say: Something red on Fred's head. I say: What is it? You say: It's a hat!
Story	Alfred's Alphabet Walk Alphabears Animalia Buzz said the Bee Catch a Little Fox
Song Activity	And the Green Grass Grew All Around: Folk Poetry from Everyone by Alvin Schwartz (HarperCollins) Anna Banana: 101 Jump-Rope Rhymes by Joanna Cole (Morrow)
Letter Play Activity (use lowercase letters)	Alphabet hunt - find featured letters in a poster, or posted around the children's library Make featured letters out of Wikki sticks Trace letters and produce their sound in sand using sand trays

Second Storytime: Say & Clap

Literacy Activity	Activity Description
Phonemic Awareness	An oral language word game to hear the syllables in words. Eg. Say and clap each part of the word elephant: El-e-phant, then use arm like an elephant trunk and move like that animal
Story	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each Peach, Pear Plum • A Giraffe and a Half • A House is a House for Me
Song Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arroz Con Leche: Popular Songs and Rhymes from Latin America by Lulu Delacre (Scholastic) • <i>Baby Beluga</i> by Raffi (Crown) • <i>Butterscotch Dreams</i> by Sonja Dunn (Heinemann)
Letter Play (use lowercase letters)	Letter figures (use materials from the fiber arts, clay or playdough) Tactile Letter Cards to trace letters, produce the sound - can be used to build names, words that rhyme

Third Storytime: I Say You Say

Literacy Activity	Activity Description
Phonemic Awareness	A word game to hear and produce the first letter sound in a word Eg. I say: the word is bat (show an image of a bat) You say: bat I say: bat - ball Now, you say: bat, ball and a new word that makes the first sound in <u>bat</u> , <u>ball</u> ...
Story	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Hungry Thing • Jamberry • See You Later Alligator • Sheep in a Jeep
Song Activity	<i>Peanut Butter and Jelly</i> by Nadine Westcott (E.P. Dutton) <i>The Playtime Treasury</i> by Pie Corbett (Doubleday) <i>Roll Over</i> by Merle Peek (Houghton Mifflin)
Letter Play (use lowercase letters)	Letter books Genre themed alphabet books (eg. <i>Alphabet City</i> by Stephan T. Johnson, <i>Nature's Alphabet</i> by Bob Coor, <i>Smithsonian Kids: A is for Astronaut</i>) Paper-printed casement letters match and paint with watercolor or color with crayon, or match magnetic / foam letters. See how many you can collect!

Fourth Storytime: Sound Tongue Ticklers

Literacy Activity	Activity Description
Phonemic Awareness	A sound alliteration word game to attach letter sounds to symbols. Can be a call and respond game by chunking 2-3 words. Eg. Letter F: Funny Fred finds fireflies first with their flashlight!
Story	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Street Rhymes Around the World • Yours Till Banana Splits • Zoophabets
Song Activity	<i>Shake My Sillies Out</i> by Raffi (McKay) <i>Tingalayo</i> by Raffi (Crown) <i>The Zebra-Riding Cowboy: Folk Songs from the Old West</i> by Angela Medearis (Holt)
Letter Play (use lowercase letters)	Nature made letters Sensory ABC bag Hear the letter sound! Children listen for the sound of the letter and pick up the match using easy squeeze tweezers made for ages 3-5

Citations

Reading Rockets: Launching Young Readers. [Phonological and Phonemic Awareness: Activities for Your Pre-K Child.](#)

WeAreTeachers. 2024. [Phonics vs. Phonemic Awareness: An Overview of Two Key Literacy Skills](#)

Credits

Written by Emily Carley, M.Ed. Professional Literacy Specialist @theliteracyspark for downloadable use as a component of the Dyslexic Positive Libraries Initiative Toolkit 2025. [Creative Commons BY 4.0](#)