

STORY STYLE AND STRUCTURE

Key Focus: Literacy

Observation: After reading a story you ask children to retell the story.

Noah tells you the ending.

Fatima offers a beginning, middle, and end.

N'keea shares a very descriptive story, but it is about when she went to visit her aunt.

Reflecting on the Documentation:

**Participants may quickly shift from reflecting on the documentation to interpreting the observation or suggesting strategies for extending learning. Remind participants to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the documentation technique.*

Ask: How would you classify this observation? How can it be strengthened?

Sample Responses: This anecdotal jotting by the teacher is more of an interpretation than a statement of evidence. We don't know how elaborately Noah described the ending or if he captured the important pieces of it. Similarly, with Fatima, we don't know whether the information she offers about the beginning, middle, and end are the important details. N'Keea's story may be off topic or there may be a relationship to the story that the teacher does not understand. The teacher makes the judgment that N'Keea's story is "descriptive" but we do not know how and in what ways. A stronger observation might have included direct language samples, either through tape recording or through writing down verbatim what the children say. That way, we would have actual text to analyze in the future and we could see children's growth over time.

Alternatively, the teacher could note the important events in the story beforehand and check off those that the children describe.

The Tortoise and the Hare:

	Noah	Fatima	N'Keea
The hare laughs at the tortoise		X	X
They race		X	
The hare falls asleep	X		
The tortoise wins the race	X	X	

Interpretation of the Observation:

**Remind participants that in their interpretation they are looking for patterns, critical incidents, or errors. It is important to stick to the data.*

Ask: What can you learn about the children from these observations?

Sample Responses: Based only on what the teacher wrote, it seems that only Fatima is able to offer a "conventional" retelling of the story using the beginning, middle, and end. Noah talked only about the ending—

preschoolers will often relate the last thing they heard. N'keea seemingly tells a story that is off topic—although a story that is very descriptive.

Relating Your Observation to the Child Outcomes Framework:

**Although participants can defend other interpretations, there should be general consensus that this observation demonstrates:*

2B3 (Literacy/Book Knowledge and Appreciation): Demonstrates progress in abilities to retell and dictate stories from books and experiences.

2D2 (Literacy/Early Writing): Begins to represent stories and experiences through dictation (if the teacher takes dictation from their retelling).

1A1 (Language/Listening and Understanding): Demonstrates increasing ability to attend to and understand conversations, stories, songs, and poems.

1B1 (Language/Speaking and Communicating): Develops increasing abilities to understand and use language to communicate information, experiences, ideas, feelings, opinions, needs, questions; and for other varied purposes.

Next steps for large group instruction:

**Help participants make connections between what they learn from the assessment and the next steps they want to take in instruction. If suggestions for instruction extend activities to new areas of learning, ask participants to consider what aspects of children's progress they would assess and how they would do so during those extension activities.*

Ask: In what other ways can you promote children's understanding of story components?

**Responses will vary but might include:*

- One possible idea is to have children experiment with the story in dramatic play. For example, props in the dramatic play area can relate directly to items that were used in the story and children can have the opportunity to pretend that they are in the story themselves by acting it out.
- They can arrange pictures of the story in order and you can talk about the beginning, middle, and end of the story.
- Children can be encouraged to read (retell) the story to a friend in the book corner. Rereading stories helps promote this behavior.

Next steps for individualized instruction:

Ask: Given Fatima's knowledge of beginning, middle, and end, what would you want her to learn next?

** Responses will vary but might include:*

- You might help Fatima think about setting/introduction and background, consequences, and resolution. This might involve introducing her to words like "because" and "then."
- Perhaps ask her to tell how the characters felt at different points in the story.

Additional Notes: Although knowing the beginning, middle, and end of a story is a critical developmental literacy milestone, it is important to note that in some cultures, stories do not take a canonical (beginning, middle, end) form. For example, many African American children often tell stories that are not strictly temporal, but are meaningful and well told nonetheless. Teachers need to be aware of these distinctions in storytelling style and be able to help children explore different structures, valuing the structures that children might bring because of cultural influences.

One way to do this might be to invite parents and other community members of different cultures into the classroom to tell stories.