

West African Storytelling

Many tales from the rich oral tradition of Ghana, Mali, Nigeria, Angola, and other West African nations of the past and present have been preserved in writing. Do research to find some of these tales, and choose one you especially like. Then take on the role of classroom griot by learning the tale and telling it to your classmates.

You may wish to work with a partner. You can share the responsibility for telling parts of the story and support each other with drumming or other music.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- musical instruments such as a drum, guitar, tambourine, or any object that can be turned into an instrument, such as a box or a can filled with dried beans that can be shaken

LEARN YOUR TALE

The best griots do not memorize tales word for word. They adapt them to their own style of speaking and to their audience and the situation. Try this technique yourself by finding your own way of telling the tale. You might, for instance, find a better sequence for telling about events. You might elaborate on events that appeal to you, or that may appeal to your audience. Feel free to refer to situations or memories shared by your audience that may help them understand or identify with the story. Don't alter the main plot and ideas of the story, however.

PRACTICE YOUR TALE

After you've learned the story, practice telling it.

- Consider how you can change the emphasis you give to words and phrases to call attention to certain ideas or events and to make the story more exciting.
- Practice changing the loudness and softness of your voice to express certain feelings or to dramatize the events you are telling.
- Speak more quickly or more slowly as the pace of the story speeds up or slows down.
- Use gesturing and facial expressions to help convey your story and the emotions of the characters.

PERFORMANCE ACTIVITY CONTINUED

ADD MUSIC AND TELL YOUR TALE

Traditional griots often use music to complement their tales. They may use drums, a *kora* (a guitar-like instrument made from a gourd), or a *bolaphone* (an instrument like a modern xylophone). But any good griot will use whatever musical instrument is at hand. If you play a guitar, the drums, a flute, or another instrument, think of ways you can incorporate it into your story. If you don't have an instrument, you might clap your hands or make a shaker can. Think how you can use music to enhance the story. Working with a partner can help the teller concentrate on the story while the partner adds the music.

Now tell your tale. Don't rush. Imagine that there are no movie theaters, television, video games, or other electronic devices. A thousand years ago, storytelling was the main form of entertainment. As a storyteller, you must entertain and sweep your audience into a world of the imagination. Take your time and enjoy the adventure.