

From the desk of Kevin Wright, NCTE rep.

Have you got a lot of students who would rather die than speak in public? Do you have students who would prefer to stay away from school rather than do an oral presentation even if it is with a group of other students? Lesley James, a teen services librarian working for the Seattle Public Library and Marcy Miller, a teacher at Seattle Girls School presented a workshop on how to create a booktalk.

The premise behind having students learn about how to create and present a booktalk was to help students learn real-life skills, especially the skill to persuade. As well, public speaking skills are improved along with writing skills. Another skill, which they found important, was to learn how to present information about books without telling the story from cover to cover.

A critical piece of information for the neophyte booktalker is to recognize "turning points" in a story. They emphasize the fact that a turning point occurs when an important event happens: a meeting, a discovery, ...; characters change their feelings beliefs, ...; the audience discovers something about a character, new character is introduced.

Lesley and Marcy suggested that using a familiar children's story such as **Where the Wild Things Are** by Maurice Sendak would be useful for practising where to find turning points. As a group, discuss where the turning points come in the story. Emphasize which points might be more interesting or important than others.

Lesley and Marcy also pointed out that in order to do a convincing booktalk, it is necessary that the book already have been read and loved by its presenter. They explained that sequels or collections of short stories do not necessarily make good booktalks.

The next element demonstrated in the workshop was the structure of a booktalk. The sections, in order, are the opening; the situation at the beginning of the story; the turning points; the situation at the point where the listeners are left hanging; and, finally, the closing.

Again, it is useful to use a well-known children's book to demonstrate the five parts in a booktalk as a preliminary activity.

The presenters recommended that at least two draughts of their booktalk be written, each time getting feedback from parents, fellow students, and their teacher. This is the final step before the in-class presentation.

Other tips offered to achieve good booktalks include informing students that the most interesting thing about a book might not be found at the beginning of the story, and that the cliff-hanging point might not be at the end of the story.

Student outline for writing a booktalk:

A: What is the most interesting thing which will get people hooked into reading your book? If it is something that people can relate to, start with "Have you ever ...?" If it is not something that people can relate to, it might be easier to begin with, "Imagine ..."

B. Optional: If the book is set in an unusual time or place, write three sentences at the most to describe the setting. It would only be necessary to write this paragraph if the setting would be unfamiliar to most people.

B. Required: Write a maximum of three sentences describing the situation at the beginning of the story. Give only the facts that people need to know in order to understand the rest of the talk.

C1: Write a maximum of three sentences describing the first turning point which was chosen: something that happens or changes, or something you discover.

C2: Write a maximum of three sentences describing the second turning point which was chosen. Be sure to use transition words such as "next," "then," "however," ...

C3: Write a maximum of three sentences describing the third turning point chosen. Again, be sure to use a transition word, to link this paragraph to the previous ones. It is recommended that if you chose to write the optional B paragraph (unusual time or place as the setting) leave this paragraph blank.

D. Write a maximum of three sentences describing the situation at the point where you are going to leave your audience hanging. You should lead up to something people will want to find out. Do not tell them what happens!

E. End your presentation with, "Will ...? Find out in ..." Write the closing sentence.

The following is an example of the written form of a booktalk written by a student. The letters at the beginning of each paragraph refer to the outline. They would not appear in the final product.

A. Have you ever felt like you have to wear the same clothes, listen to the same music, and talk about the same things as the other people at your school, or you won't fit in?

B. That is definitely what is like for Leo, who goes to a high school where conformity rules. No one joins after-school clubs or goes to basketball games or really cares about anything except fitting in. The basketball team always loses anyway.

C1. Then Stargirl shows up. Stargirl has a pet rat and a weird name, and she wears whatever she feels like wearing. Somehow, she knows when

everybody's birthday is ... And she sings, "Happy Birthday," to them ... In front of the entire lunchroom ... While playing the ukulele. She joins the cheerleaders, but she cheers about everything ... Someone gets an A on a test ... Picks up litter ... Wears unusual earrings ... Stargirl cheers for them.

C2. Although, at first, everyone thinks Stargirl is really weird, slowly, but surely, they start to follow her lead, to experiment with being different, with caring about things with having a basketball teams that wins. But the person who changes the most is Leo. He doesn't fully understand Stargirl, but he knows one thing for sure: he has fallen in love with her.

C3. Then things start to go wrong. People notice that when Stargirl says she cheers for everyone, she really does mean *everyone* ... Including the other school's basketball team. They can only handle so much eccentric behaviour before they go back to thinking that Stargirl is really weird ... And that Leo is also really weird for going out with her.

D. Leo doesn't want to choose between being with Stargirl and being popular. He tries to convince her to tone down the ukulele-playing and weird-clothes-wearing, to act more like other people, to not be *too* different, but there may be no way to be popular again without losing Stargirl, one way or another.

E. Will conformity or true love triumph? Find out in **Stargirl** by Jerry Spinelli.

Try this, and let us know what you think. We owe an extremely special note of thanks to the two presenters who shared their expertise with a very attentive audience.

Kevin Wright
March 2007