

Let Me Help You

Sell Your Homework

12-Week Course of Study:

*24 Ways to Write
Stories for Kids*

Lesson 4

**REPETITIVE STATEMENT
QUESTION AND ANSWER**

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Glory Press
West Linn, Oregon

Introduction

Lesson 1: SELL YOUR HOMEWORK

The Picture Book

Lesson 2: SELL YOUR HOMEWORK

The A, B, C

Cycle

Lesson 3: SELL YOUR HOMEWORK

Chronological Narrative

Tales Retold

Lesson 4: SELL YOUR HOMEWORK

Repetitive Statement

Question and Answer

Lesson 5: SELL YOUR HOMEWORK

Cumulative

Sunk and Saved

Lesson 6: SELL YOUR HOMEWORK

Bible

Plant and Pick Up

Lesson 7: SELL YOUR HOMEWORK

Frame and Flashback

Problem and Solution

Lesson 8: SELL YOUR HOMEWORK

Multiple Problem

Other Problem

Lesson 9: SELL YOUR HOMEWORK

Come-to-Realize

Factual

Lesson 10: SELL YOUR HOMEWORK

Slice of Life

Rhyme

Lesson 11: SELL YOUR HOMEWORK

Concept

Surprise Ending

Lesson 12: SELL YOUR HOMEWORK

Catalog

Whimsy

Gospel

Let's

Repeat a Statement

You want to emphasize a good thing? Say it again and again. Repetition can make stories you write for children

UNFORGETTABLE !

As far back as King David, people have used repetitive statements to tie their writings together.

His Psalm 107 includes this statement four times:

**Oh that men would praise
the Lord for His goodness,
And for His wonderful works to
the children of men!**

Minstrels of old time capitalized on the tool of the repetitive statement in their choruses and songs. Secular poets have used it—"And they'll be hanging Danny Deever in the morning!" Christian poets have used it in many of our grand hymns.

At Christmas we sing all ten verses of "Who is He in Yonder Stall?" and after each, the chorus:

**'Tis the Lord! Oh wondrous story!
'Tis the Lord! The King of glory!
At His feet we humbly fall
Crown Him! Crown Him, Lord of
all!**

Helen E. Buckley in **Grandfather and I** (New York: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard Co., 1959) uses the words in her title, "Grandfather and I," as her repetitive statement.

She tells how "Grandfather and I" take long walks and spend all the time in the world feeding animals, patting some, meandering and moseying around to their hearts' content. Now and again would come the statement that he and she could take their time and never have to hurry.

The last page tells the one time they do hurry—when Momma yells for them to come home.

YOUR TURN: This has a twist that cuts across the repeated statement and cancels it out. None of us can say we "never hurry." We do. Perhaps there are things you and Grandfather

SELL YOUR HOMEWORK: REPETITIVE STATEMENT

always do and one you don't. Always look for a variation of the way things have been done to see if you can write something new, fresh.

Poetry lends itself, just as easily as prose, to the use of the repetitive statement. First lines of verses can be identical as well as last lines. Or you can put your repeater in the middle. But the thing to be most conscious of in writing poetry is the meter. So many aspiring poets fail to keep a steady beat.

I've used seven DI-DAW feet as the rhythm in my example poem, showing the use of the repetitive statement in the first line of each stanza.

Louie

By Dick Bohrer

**Here comes Lou-ie.
See him way down there?
He looks like just a little dot
But he's a hungry bear.
He's taking little tiny steps; He's
looking left and right.
My brother tells me Louie eats
Small boys—in one bite!**

**Here comes Lou-ie.
See him down the street?
He's looking like a leopard cat
Finding things to eat.
He's walking, oh, so quietly.
There's nothing on his mind.
He's smiling cause he knows
that boys
Aren't all that hard to find.**

**Here comes Lou-ie,
Just a block away,
Walking like a lion would
Tracking down his prey.
He'll pounce upon my tricycle,
Smash it to smithereens.
He'll shake me till the stars come
out
In reds and blues and greens.**

**Here comes Lou-ie,
Almost to my house.
He's taller than an elephant.
I'm smaller than a mouse.
He's got the strongest muscles.
He's got the thickest wrists.
He's got the biggest knuckles.
He's got the hardest fists.**

**"Hi, Louie."
"Oh, hi, Dickie."
OH, WOW! OH, WUP! WUP!
WUP!
That Louie boy just talked to me
He didn't beat me up!!**

**There goes Lou-ie,
Walking like a king.
I'm sure he wouldn't know my
name
If he didn't know everything.
Now what my brother told me
Must have been all hooey.
'Cause that big boy who walks by
here
Is my friend—MY FRIEND Louie!**

Notice, there was a twist after the confrontation. Instead of "here comes," we had "there goes." Louie is

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SELL YOUR HOMEWORK: REPETITIVE STATEMENT

no longer coming toward the boy. He has passed and is walking on. The line that was the hardest to think up was OH, WOW! OH, WUP! WUP! WUP! There's almost no word that rhymes with "up" other than sup and cup and pup. So when all else fails, invent.

One little book you should try to find is "If I Were a Bird" by Conklin. Also, ask your children's librarian for special help in finding other stories using the repetitive statement.

Make copies of the research sheet at the end of each of my lessons to use in the library as you find other books in each pattern. Find the address of the publisher in *Writer's Market* (your library has a copy) and write it on your sheet.

Then, when you want to submit a story of your own, you will have the address.

I've done much of your research in these lessons as I've gone to the library and analyzed all these books for you. Consider the following:

In **THE LITTLE RED HEN** by Paul Galdone (New York: Seabury, 1973), we have a modern version, newly illustrated of the busy little mother hen who does all the work around the house and asks for help each time she starts a new enterprise.

"Not I," say the cat, the dog, and the mouse over and over when she asks who will help her.

They learn all over again the old lesson that what goes around comes around. They live to regret the day they said, "Not I."

YOUR TURN: You can turn this into something that happens at home every day where mother asks for help and no one wants to leave the mystery on TV. This would be especially helpful if mother wanted someone to help her cut out paper projects for children's Sunday School. When no one budges, we realize the Lord isn't in first place in their lives no matter what they say on Sundays.

Three of the four words in the title, **IT LOOKED LIKE SPILT MILK** by Charles G. Shaw (New York: Harper and Row, 1947), introduce a series of things when the fourth word, "Sometimes" is added to the front.

The author builds suspense by saying that "Sometimes it looked like"—spilt milk, a rabbit, a bird, a tree, an ice cream cone, a flower, a pig, a birthday cake, a sheep, a great horned owl, a mitten, a squirrel, an angel.

The mysterious "it" that looked like these things is not revealed until the end. The suspense builds because each page repeats the four words as it tell us "it" wasn't the thing it looked like.

Finally, we learn at the end that "it" was a cloud.

YOUR TURN: Young readers like the suspense of this. You could write an "It" story. Or you could write about a very defensive mama who thought everything her child wanted to do was dangerous and would hurt him or soil his clothes. Your statement could be "My mother said 'Don't' when I—"

In **CURL UP SMALL** by Sandol Stoddard Warburg (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964) a fish mother, a bird mother, a bear mother, and a human mother tell their babies about their world. Each in turn begins her free verse philosophizing with a warning

about how big and wide the world is. Each baby in turn responds.

The human baby whispers, "Sleep."

YOUR TURN: Reverse this and have mothers telling their youngsters what to do the first day of school or the first day in the toddlers' class in Sunday School when they will be left on their own. Those human babies will whine, "No." A picture at the end of the book would show the "Bawl Room" with all the babies howling their protests.

Triangles, rectangles and circles are all around us but we have to really see when we look, Ed Emberley says in **THE WING ON THE FLEA** (Boston: Little, Brown, 1961).

These shapes will escape us, though, unless we look closely. He repeats the "look and see" phrase several times—three times in the first chapter on triangles, once at the end of the chapter on rectangles and twice in the third chapter on circles.

He concludes restating that the wing of a flea is a triangle and so is the beak of the bird. We'll notice these things if we really "look and see."

YOUR TURN: Find something identical that God put in several beings—animals or birds or fish and encourage the reader to look closely.

HILDA HEN'S HAPPY BIRTHDAY by Mary Wormell (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1995).

Summary: Hilda Hen finds birthday presents even in places her farm friends didn't intend.

She wonders on a sunny day if anyone has remembered her birthday. To find out, she goes in turn to the horse

stable, the apple orchard and the garden.

She filches the horse's oats, the picker's apples, the farmer's tea and cookies to the distress of those concerned. To each of which the hen replies (the repeated statement), "Lovely. Thank you so much." She thinks she's cute.

At book's end, she jumps on a crumb table in the hen yard and thanks the hens and rooster for her happy birthday with the same words.

YOUR TURN: This character believes that by repeating sweet words she can get away with stealing things belonging to others. This could lead to interesting developments for your character in the church or school family. Be sure your hero doesn't get away with it.

HILDA HEN'S SEARCH by Mary Wormell (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1994).

Summary: A mother hen tries several different places before she finds the right spot to lay and hatch her eggs.

Repeating "and off she went" each time Hilda Hen failed to find a suitable place to lay her eggs, the author takes Hilda to the hen house, a stack of hay bales, a basket on a bicycle, a laundry basket and a horse feed-basket. She ends up in a doll house—just the right place.

YOUR TURN: Your heroine could be a cat looking for a place to have her kittens or a girl looking for a place to keep her new Bible. It could be Grampa looking for a place to keep his keys and his glasses and his teeth (☺).

IT'S PERFECTLY TRUE, adapted from Hans Christian Ander-

sen and illustrated by Janet Stevens (New York: Holiday House, 1988).

Summary: A chicken's innocent remark about losing a feather is repeated so often from bird to bird that it turns into a wild story about the suicidal deaths of five love-sick hens.

Repeating "It's perfectly true," in the beginning, middle and end, we learn how rumors start and avalanche.

The chicken was overheard to say that she became more beautiful the more feathers she pecked out of herself.

At the end of the rumor, five love-sick hens had stripped off their feathers and pecked each other to death all for the love of a rooster.

YOUR TURN: This is another story about the injury a rumor can do once it gets started moving through the student body or the church family or the neighborhood where young children play. When a youngster, I told a neighbor my mother beat me with a broom handle, I learned what false rumors could do. Ouch!

WILLIAM AND THE GOOD OLD DAYS by Eloise Greenfield and illustrated by Jan Sivey Gilchrist (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

Summary: A little boy remembers what his grandmother was like before she became ill and imagines how things will be when she gets better.

The first sentence has the boy telling how mad he gets when he thinks about the fly that carried the germs that got his grandmother sick.

The repeated statement is "Back in the good old days."

Also, in frame and flashback structure, this story starts with present day

William blaming a fly for his grandma's illness. He tells what life was like before she became ill and then looks forward to what it will be for her and him when she has recovered.

YOUR TURN: You can use this kind of story to press home the point that God knows everything that happens to us and, though He may not cure us, He cares for us.

LUCKY MORNING by Sally Noel (New York: Greenwillow Books, 1994).

Nora's grandma and granddaddy go to Montana for a week every summer. This year they take her with them. Telling this, is how the author begins her story.

Several phrases are repeated in the story. As Nora and her granddaddy walk to the river to fish, she asks him if he thinks they'll see some wild animals? A bear? A moose?

Granddaddy answers three times that there is a chance they might.

On the way home they see the moose, the bear and wild animals.

She asks him if he thinks they've seen all the animals.

This time he says, not a chance.

YOUR TURN: Here's a twist on the repeated question. You can use a question like "Do you think we'll see . . .?" in all sorts of stories. Children in the Exodus and in the wilderness with Moses would have asked this question. Shepherds running to Bethlehem, the two disciples from Emmaus running back to Jerusalem with their news. You can think of many biblical incidents.

MY LITTLE SISTER ATE ONE HARE by Bill Grossman and illustrated by Kevin Hawkes (New York:

SELL YOUR HOMEWORK: REPETITIVE STATEMENT

Crown Publishers, Inc., a Random House Company, 1996).

Summary: Little sister has no problem eating one hare, two snakes, and three ants, but when she gets to ten peas, she throws up quite a mess.

First sentence: The title of the book.

Repeated statement: we thought she'd throw up then and there. But she didn't.

Each successive rhyme tells what little sister ate: one hare, two snakes, three ants, four shrews, five bats, six mice, seven polliwogs, eight worms, nine lizards. With each new addition, the author goes back down the list to repeat what the child had eaten in reverse order. The repeated statement appears each time he gets to the bottom of the list to the one hare.

But the little girl can't quite stomach healthy food and upchucks the menagerie when she must eat ten peas.

Kids love this book.

YOUR TURN: Think of all the foods you have disliked in your lifetime and put them in a book like this. The brother is the narrator. He could be a mouse or a lion cub or a vulture. Look for this book in your library.

CIRCLE OF THANKS by Susi Gregg Fowler and illustrated by Peter Catalanotto (New York: Scholastic Press, 1998).

First sentence: There is no color on the tundra in winter, no color and no sound except the howling of winds and wolves.

Repeated statement: It is good to know they are not alone.

These words are repeated like parentheses at the beginning when a boy and his mama see wolf tracks around their remote home and at the end, after a wolf rescues the boy and he and his mother are safe at home.

Internally, the boy rescues an otter pup who rescues a raven who rescues a caribou calf whose mother caribou rescues an arctic fox.

Each doesn't say thank you, but each rescuer doesn't mind. What can you expect from an otter pup or raven, etc.

Only when the arctic fox rescues the boy and he says "Thank you" are those words carried in the wind to the ones who were rescued.

A beautiful book, worthy of a Caldecott award.

YOUR TURN: The underlying theme is that it is important to say thank you to those who have helped you—a practice Christian youngsters should make a habit. Find other phrases that are important to say and weave them into a story like this. Perhaps "May I help you" could be one to consider.

DRUMMER HOFF adapted by Barbara Emberley and illustrated by Ed Emberley (New York: Prentice-Hall Books for Young Readers, a division of Simon and Schuster, Inc. 1967). **CALDECOTT AWARD**

The first sentence places all the blame on Drummer Hoff who lit the match that fired the cannon off.

That blame is repeated as each new soldier brings a part to the cannon—the carriage, the barrel, the powder, the rammer, the shot. The general gives the order to fire, but the cannon

is aimed back into his own troops and himself.

KABOOM!!

Drummer Hoff did it.

YOUR TURN: A hilarious book because these soldiers in perfect order and obedience bring the weapons and carefully put together the machinery they are aiming the wrong way. Children notice this and squeal with anticipation. What else can you put together and then point in the wrong way? Gather a hose and the nozzles and stands that go with it and let us see a formal ladies tea party or a wedding or a concert taking place on the other side of the hedge.

MAY I BRING A FRIEND? By Beatrice Schenk de Regniers and illustrated by Beni Montessor (New York: Atheneum, 1985).

Book jacket: "What could be more natural, when invited by the King and Queen to tea, than to ask to bring a friend?"

The repeated statement is given in the title.

The little boy comes six days of the week and brings a giraffe, then a hippo, then monkeys, then an elephant, then a lion, then a seal.

On the seventh day, the animals invite the party to the zoo.

YOUR TURN: Think of places you would want to bring a series of friends and then work them into six days of the week. Have something special happen on the seventh. Perhaps all week he/she invites people to come to church on Sunday. On Sunday your character brings everyone to church and invites them home to lunch at his house.

WHAT NEWT COULD DO FOR TURTLE by Jonathan London and illustrated by Louise Voce (Cambridge, Mass.: Candlewick Press, 1996).

Library of Congress summary: Af-

ter Turtle has saved him several times during the spring, summer and fall, Newt finds a way to repay his friend before winter comes to the swamp.

The first sentence announces that the swamp is finally enjoying Spring.

Turtle saves Newt's life three times—when he's stuck in the mud and when a snake and then a crocodile are going to eat him.

Newt asks himself repeatedly, what can he do to show his appreciation to Turtle.

When a bobcat turns Turtle over, Newt turns him back and saves his life.

They go happily into hibernation.

YOUR TURN: This is a case of looking for something nice to do for someone who has done nice things for your character. You could find things at church, at home, at school, at Grandma's house, in the library downtown, or at an ice cream store.

ALEXANDER AND THE TERRIBLE, HORRIBLE, NO GOOD, VERY BAD DAY by Judith Viorst, illustrated by Ray Cruz (New York: Atheneum, 1989).

This is both catalog and repetitive statement.

The first sentence has 62 words that describe the awful things that happened to Alexander from the time he got out of bed.

He had gum in his hair. He tripped over his skateboard. He dropped his sweater in the sink and got it wet.

He just knew it was going to be—and here the author repeats the title every time she gives a list of the aw-

ful things that happened to the boy. The rest of the story rehearses all the things that indeed did make it the kind of day the title declares.

YOUR TURN: We all have days—and mothers have days—when everything goes wrong. Noah and Moses and David and Solomon had bad days when everything went wrong. Students in school can have bad days that turn to good days at the end. Write in the style of this book, telling in a matter-of-fact manner what goes wrong on a “day you’d like to forget.” Don’t use Judith Viorst’s title on your book if you are going to send it to a publisher. Always change the words so you don’t get into legal trouble.

So, in conclusion, you see that some repeated statements are obvious, and some are submerged in the story so they are barely noticed. Unless it is used several times, however, a statement can hardly be called repetitive, obviously. But it’s a marvelous tool for emphasis.

It can take a truth that you’ve approached from several angles and pound it home.

If you’re clever, you can make the word or phrase part of the vocabulary of the families who read you. You know, it happens in your own family when your toddler sighs after his oatmeal and says, “Good dinner!”

All of you repeat it forever after, remembering as at my house, who said it first.

And you analyze everything you do to see if there is material for a story there.

It was my job, when we lived in Lynchburg, VA and taught at Liberty University, to walk our toy poodle around the block—a very large block

every night. He would perform his functions routinely, and I would think. Could I turn this into a story for children?

Here is another story from my files that I’ve never sent out. I got it from studying Rufus and his routine, wondering what was going through his head as he approached a tree. This story is full of repetitive statements—ad nauseum. It is made almost entirely of one-syllable words. It has two two-syllable words: paper and Rufus.

Again, I’m using my own stories because this way I don’t have to get anyone’s permission; and I can explain what I did when I wrote it.

My daughter hates it when I refer to bathroom matters. She says she would, on encountering the word “wetpot” in my seven-year-old sister’s poem, turn the computer off and walk away.

But when it took you years before you could say you had had a dry night, bladder-matters lose their shock value.

If the following insults you, simply scoot over to the next lesson. Please don’t turn your computer off and walk away from me.

Rufus: My Mark

By Dick Bohrer

I’m a dog, and I can read.

You don’t think dogs can read, do you?

But I can.

I can make books, too.

You don't think that I can make books, do you?

But I can.

I make books and leave them for my friends.

You don't think I make books and leave them for my friends, do you?

But I do.

My friends make books, too.

You don't think my friends make books, do you?

But they do.

I make books each day when my boy takes me out to walk.

You don't think I make books each day when my boy takes me out to walk, do you?

But I do.

My friends make books each day when their boy or girl takes them out to walk.

You don't think my friends make books each day when their boy or girl takes them out to walk, do you?

But they do.

My friends read my books and I read theirs.

You don't think my friends read my books and I read theirs, do you?

But we do. . . .

I'm cutting out large chunks of this. It goes on for page after page. The point the poem makes is that Rufus's effluents carry his identity

whether in material or liquid form.

They are his mark and they say his name, showing he's been wherever he's been whenever he goes out with his boy.

I've pondered about what to do with this one. I know that youngsters think nothing of bodily evacuations.

I've included it because it demonstrates what a writer can do with one syllable words. Beginning readers can work their way through this and the incessant repetition simply gives them more practice reading, reading, reading at their own level.

See what you can do with one syllable?

There are children's magazines looking for stories little ones can read to themselves.

Will editors like it?

You can't predict what they will like without reading a number of issues of their periodical.

By making yourself very familiar with the style and tone and length and subject matter of the stories they print, you can go a long way toward insuring that the stories you write will be bought and published.

Remember, children scare easily. They like stories about their world and we've already discussed what they like and understand about spiritual matters.

Oh, for the writers who will write wonderful stories that draw little hearts to the Savior.

Let's Write

Q&A Stories

Comic strips have an undying appeal to readers.
They illustrate dialogue.

Question and answer stories do, too. They are
colorful dialogue stories that some editors find

DELICIOUS!

I think that good writers are like Red Riding Hood's grandma—they've got BIG eyes and BIG ears and BIG noses, very BIG mouths and very STRONG fingers.

They see all, hear all, smell all, tell all as they type their words on their computer screens.

Good writers eavesdrop and note how people actually talk. They hear the interrupted sentences and the verbal commas—those “you know” bridges between thoughts that are the modern day substitute for “um” and “uh” and “mmmm,” you know.

It's the astute writer who picks up authentic language. Editors look for it. So we must study it and to study it we must hear it—really hear it.

So listen, listen, listen everywhere you go. And stare. See how people move their face and their hands and body as they talk. Listen to the struc-

ture of their speech. Do they always begin with subject and verb? With adverb clauses? Do they talk in simple sentence? Or compound? Or complex?

Listen.

Verbalize the words in your head that you would use to describe them and their actions on paper and do this while you watch them.

A family member tells you to stop staring? That it's embarrassing and someone will come over and hit you in the face if you don't stop. At least, shut your mouth while you look.

I reply, can't I have even one vice?

Write stories that are just dialogue.

Do it for practice.

So what if you never sell one. The practice will help you polish your skills.

In the example I'm giving you, I've written the child's questions in all caps and the mother's answers in lower case. There is no mention of “he said/she said.” There is no speaker's name label such as you

would find in a scripted play.

I picked a bus ride for my story. With Question and Answer stories, you can go anywhere in the world—anywhere people go.

The Bus Ride

By Dick Bohrer

MOMMY, WHY ISN'T THE BUS HERE—NOW?

It's not time yet.

WHY ISN'T IT TIME YET?

Because we came a little early. We don't want to miss the bus.

WHO IS MISS THE-BUS?

We don't want the bus to drive away without us.

IS THAT THE BUS COMING NOW?

Yes, and it's right on time.

WILL IT STOP FOR ME?

Yes, Bobbie.

HOW WILL WE GET ON?

A little door by the front will open for us.

WILL THE BUS STOP RIGHT HERE?

Yes. Here it is now. Step up high.

IS THAT THE DRIVER?

Yes, but come on now before he starts. There's a seat back here.

WHERE ARE ALL THESE PEOPLE GOING?

Probably to town like we are.

HOW COME THEY'RE NOT SAYING ANYTHING?

They don't know each other.

THEY'RE NOT FRIENDS?

No.

HOW COME THAT LADY UP THERE HAS A BIG NOSE?

Shhh. Not so loud. She'll hear you.

BUT HOW COME SHE—

God made her that way. Not so loud.

HOW COME THAT GIRL HAS RED HAIR?

Her mommy probably had red hair.

AND SHE LOOKS LIKE HER MOMMY?

Yes. Hush.

HOW COME THAT LADY HAS A CANE?

She needs it to help her walk. She leans on it.

HOW COME THE END OF THAT LADY'S NOSE GOES UP AND DOWN WHEN SHE CHEWS HER GUM?

That's just the way God made her.

HOW COME THAT MAN IS SMOKING? HASN'T HIS MOMMA TOLD HIM IT WILL MAKE HIM—SHICK?

He's a big man. He can do what he wants to do.

WHY DOES THE BUS KEEP STOPPING?

To let some people get off and others get on.

WHY IS THAT MAN STANDING UP?

All the seats are taken.

WHY IS HE JUMPING UP AND DOWN? DOES HE HAVE TO TINKLE?

No. He's a jogger. He's practicing his running.

WHY IS THAT LADY BOWING HER HEAD? IS SHE PRAYING?

No. She's just resting until she has to get off.

THAT MAN HAS A BIG TUMMY. IS HE GOING TO HAVE A BABY?

I told you to hush up. You're talking too loud.

HOW COME THOSE PEOPLE ARE LOOKING AT ME?

They heard you talking.

HOW COME THEY'RE ALL LAUGHING AND TALKING? ARE THEY FRIENDS NOW?

Yes, they're friends now. Sit down here and be quiet. We're almost to our stop.

WILL WE GET OFF?

We'll get off.

See? It's simple. There's just a little "plant and pick up" (we'll get to that shortly) in the matter of the people being friends. This provides a little tie between the beginning and the ending, and it satisfies the reader.

There are several varieties of Question and Answer style in children's books. In some, the title asks the question that the text answers. In others, as in the case of my sample, a series of questions and answers in the text follow one another.

In **WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE?** By Francoize (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), the author asks six children what they

want to do when they are grown. The pictures and text list 20 vocational choices.

YOUR TURN: Probably in 1957 a book like this had never been published before. The first bird there always gets the worm. Originality is king. But this is a good idea for a book or story. Ask six children a question and then give lots of answers. Write it up as if it were a play. Make it a spiritual question and you may get some unexpected answers from kids.

Arnold in **CAN I KEEP HIM?** by Steven Kellogg (New York: Dial Press, 1971) wants to keep every animal he finds. He wears his mother out asking the title question of the dog, kitten, fawn, bear, tiger cub, python, dinosaur he finds. And his mother always has the same objection—until he finds Ralph, a friend from down the street.

YOUR TURN: See what a nice twist Ralph gives to this story? Write one like this with a twist that will surprise the reader.

In **WHO HAS A SECRET?** by Ann McGovern (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964), the viewpoint character lies on a hillside and decides the earth has a secret, the pond has a secret, the woods, the tree, clouds, the night, seeds, rabbits, autumn, winter, a house and finally "the mirror has a secret—"you."

YOUR TURN: Children love secrets. You have an oil well when you tap this source. Weren't there secrets in Scripture? David's hiding from Saul? Saul's hiding from Samuel? Elijah's hiding from Jezebel? Seek and ye shall find.

You can be as fanciful as you like when writing stories for youngsters. But in the matter of dialogue, fanciful

language can kill a good story. Writers need to have an ear peeled for conversation that is true-to-life.

American's don't talk in complete sentences. We constantly interrupt one another—and ourselves. We seldom finish the sentence we start. And often we interrupt another person's story with one of our own.

We certainly would never find someone writing a four-sentence speech from Jack followed by a five-sentence speech from the giant.

We try to get our language to sound like real people. We use contractions to make it familiar and authentic. We realize that dialogue reveals what the speakers are like whether rude, brash, conniving, officious, innocent, sincere, flighty, stolid, childlike.

One secret for the writer is to read your dialogue aloud once it's written. Does it catch the rhythms of ordinary speech? Does it read the way we talk?

If you listen closely, our voices will rise and fall as we naturally emphasize with our vowels. Read that last sentence aloud and hear your voice rise on “closely” and “rise” and “fall” and “nat” and “vowels.”

(Forgive me for repeating here what we have in other lessons. It's just that this is so important a matter.)

Similarly, when you write conversation, the same rhythm should permeate your dialogue.

One other thing to watch as you write is the way you tag speeches. Be willing to use “he said/she said/ he

said/ she said” again and again. Readers see these and overlook them.

If your “he” reiterates, complains, minces, stutters, barks, attests, questions or one of the other 200 synonyms for “said,” then you call attention to the tag.

That's a no-no.

You don't need a tag with every speech if only two people are talking. But you do with three. Often you can work it into the business as in—

She opened the door. “Is that you, Tommy?”

Or—

“And just what do you think I am?” She shoved the letter into his hand and left.

Question and answer stories, remember can be largely conversation.

Or you can begin with a question and have the entire story be the answer.

WHERE'S SPOT? by Eric Hill (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1980).

This book is like that.

The first sentence has his mother asking the question that appears in the book's title, “Where's Spot?”

He hasn't had his supper so she goes looking for him. She looks in seven places around the house. In each, a wild animal says “no” to her question.

Is he a bear behind the door inside the clock?

A snake in the piano?
A hippo under the stairs?
A lion in the closet?
A monkey under the bed?
An alligator in the box?
A penguin under the rug?
A turtle tells her to look in the basket.

Oh, there he is.

In the last picture he is eating supper and his mother is telling him he is a good dog.

Another way to do this is to have the question and answer appear on every double-page spread or have the question appear on one and the answer on the next—whether that “next” is a spread or whether the reader has to turn the page to get the answer.

YOUR TURN: Obviously, this story is about a boy and not about a dog. It's a game mommas play to get their imaginative youngster to the table or to bed. Write about a boy who grows up thinking he's a kitten. Or write other games parents play to get their kids to go to bed happily.

WHOSE FOOTPRINTS? Written and illustrated by Molly Coxe (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1990).

As the mother and daughter set out for a walk, carrying an iron pan sled, they spot prints in the snow—first a cat, then a rooster, a mouse, a pony, the sheep, the dog, and then their own and Daddy's.

Library of Congress summary: A mother and her daughter discover and identify animal footprints in the snow on an intimate walk they take together through their farm.

On every other double-page spread

the two words in the book's title, “Whose footprints?” appear. The answer is shown on the next spread. This story could be a cycle because they leave home and then they return to sit bare footed on the floor, eating popcorn and drinking hot chocolate.

YOUR TURN: See the family warmth there is in this? Your stories can have that same family love Christian homes should have. Take your mother and daughter around your block and tell us who lives in each house or which children live where.

AROUND THE POND: WHO'S BEEN HERE? by Lindsey Barrett George (New York: Greenwillow Books—William Morrow).

Library of Congress summary: While picking blueberries on a warm summer afternoon, Cammy and her brother see signs of unseen animals and their activities, including footprints, a dam and a floating feather.

The first sentence describes the summer afternoon as warm and muggy.

The children ask the words of the book's title, “Who's been here?” every time they find a sign of forest life.

A double-page spread gives the answer.

YOUR TURN: These are stories you can do so easily. Every time you take a family trip, write one of these stories. If you send it to a publisher, you can deduct your own expenses on your income tax—your food, lodging, your share of car expenses. Make this a habit.

One marvelous source of material for question and answer stories is the daily newspaper. Interesting articles appear frequently and can become

grist for the enterprising story writer.

Consider the following article and the story one of my students wrote from it.

Woman gets 60 replies on husband-for-sale ad

WESTMINSTER, Md. (AP)

A woman who put her husband up for sale as a joke says she got about 60 telephone responses to her classified ad, some of them serious. Now she's printed a retraction.

"I had no idea we would have any reaction like this," said Louise Horner, 40, a nurse at a Baltimore area hospital. "I felt like Ann Landers at the end of one day."

The notice, "Husband for sale, cheap," appeared in the Carroll County Times for three days this week.

The advertisement included the following description: "Comes complete with hunting and fishing equipment, one pair jeans, two shirts, boots, black Labrador retriever, and 50 pounds of venison. Pretty good guy, but not home much from October to December and April to October. Will consider trade."

The volume of calls Mrs. Horner received prompted her to run the following ad in Friday's newspaper: "Retraction of husband for sale cheap, everybody wants the dog, not the husband."

Her husband, Charles Horner, appreciated the joke, she said.

My Liberty University student, Denise Tully, used that story, peppering it with questions and answers like this:

"People sell so many different things in the want ads these days," Louise thought aloud to herself as she thumbed through the morning paper. "Here's an ad that says the city is selling stop lights—only one dollar each. Interesting."

And then she bit her lip. "I wonder . . . no . . . well . . . maybe someone **WOULD** buy—"

She dialed the phone.

"Hello. Carrol County Times classified," a crackly voice said. "Can I help you?"

"Yes. I want to place a classified ad for Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. This is the wording . . ."

Tuesday morning Louise rushed to find her ad.

"This is funny," she laughed. "No one will buy . . ."

B-r-r-ing! B-r-r-ing!

"Hello. Horner residence," she answered.

"Hello. Is this the husband-for-sale cheap?" a voice inquired.

"Ummm, yes, it is."

"The ad said you'd consider a trade. How about a set of Samsonite luggage?"

"Well, I don't think so. I'm not really selling him," Louise said.

She was amazed someone really

answered her ad. She looked at the paper again.

Br-r-ing! Br-r-ing!

“Hello. Horner residence.”

“Husband for sale cheap?” a demure voice inquired.

“Yes.”

“Would you consider a ten-day trial basis for the man?”

“Ha! A ten-day basis? I’m not selling him. It was a joke.”

Louise laughed.

Phone calls came all day.

Wednesday night, her husband glanced through the paper.

“What will people think of next?” he laughed.

Br-r-ring! Br-r-ring!

“Hello. Horner residence. Louise speaking.”

“Yeah, sweetie, is this where the husband is for sale?” a kind elderly lady asked.

“Yes, it is, but . . .”

“Well, I don’t want the old geezer, but I’d like to buy the dog. How much?”

“I’m sorry. The ad is a joke. Nothing is for sale.”

“Who was that, dear?” her husband asked.

“An old lady.”

“Anyway, listen to this ad . . . ‘Husband-for-sale cheap. Comes complete with hunting and fishing equipment, one pair jeans, two shirts, boots, black Labrador retriever and 50 pounds of venison.’”

He stopped and laughed.

“That’s not all. It says, ‘Pretty

good guy but not home much from October to December and April to October. Will consider trade.’”

“This wife has a good sense of humor . . . Hey! Louise, this is our phone num—”

Br-r-r-ing! Br-r-r-ing!

Obviously, this is not a children’s story. It is inserted to prove a point that you, as an enterprising writer, can write such a story.

Turn an ad into a family story by having a youngster try to sell a brother or sister or parent or some relative or teacher. The story would be handled the same way Denise did it.

My basic point?

You can also take a news story and turn it into a feature. Probably, if you are thinking of publishing such a story, you should change the names. But by retelling the story in simple language and in chronological order, you can create a captivating piece.

You’ll have fun if you take this story and turn it into a children’s piece, treating it the same way with questions and answers and ending with another phone call coming in.

Or find another news story and, by aiming it at children, write away.

Or listen to a conversation, whether around the dinner table or in a public place, and reproduce it. It should have a point and a purpose as well as questions and answers.

Let it test your skill in reproducing normal talk in the rhythm we use in

SELL YOUR HOMEWORK: Q & A STORIES

daily conversation.

In our next lesson we will consider Cumulative stories where the characters gather together to do some great thing and Sunk-and-Saved stories

where people in desperate straights find a solution for their problems.

Master these as well.

You'll find you have the where-with-all to write compelling stories.

Research Sheet

Title: _____

Author: _____

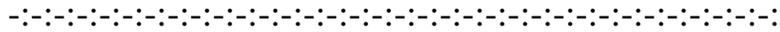
Publisher _____ Date _____

Participants in Q&A _____

Library of Congress Summary: _____

First Sentence: _____

Synopsis _____



Title: _____

Author: _____

Publisher _____ Date _____

Participants in Q&A _____

Library of Congress Summary: _____

First Sentence: _____

Synopsis _____

