Once Upon a Time: Adapting and Writing Fairy Tales

Lucy Calkins, Shana Frazin, and Maggie Beattie Roberts

Photography by Peter Cunningham

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Essential Question: How can I raise the level of my narrative writing by working on structure, (Third grade fairy tales) development, voice, figurative language and language conventions?

Bend I: How can I learn about how fairy tales go—their structure and craft—by comparing and contrasting published fairy tale adaptations and from storytelling and dramatic performance?

Bend II: How can I learn enough about how fairy tales go to make my own fairy tale adaptation?

Bend III: How can I use my adaptation to write another fairy tale adaptation, this time working with greater independence?

Bend III: How can I draw on all that I have learned to write an original fairy tale, this time working hard on things like symbolism, figurative language, and complex sentence structure?

Welcome to the Unit

When you were little, did you ever stomp about, calling, “Fee fi fo fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman”? Or did you ever stand at the door, calling, “Little pig, little pig, let me in”? What is it about fairy tales that makes them so participatory and so gleeful (even in their gruesomeness)? We are not sure of the answer to this, but we do know that your children, after months of writing information and opinion texts, will be enchanted by the invitation to write adaptations of fairy tales.

You'll be enchanted, too, once you see the ways your children's deep connection to fairy tales functions as a very beautiful scaffold, enabling them to write stories that are beyond anything they could have done otherwise. Years ago, Adriann Peetom, a Canadian literacy leader, told us, “Trust the books. Trust the books. Get out of their way and let them teach kids to write.” Over all these years, we've repeatedly found that there is enormous truth in Adriann's advice. Texts themselves can teach writing. Fairy tales, in particular, can teach children to write with a story arc, to bring the resonance of a storyteller's voice onto the page, to create the world of a story, and to bring characters to life. In short, we believe that fairy tales can, in large part, help us to teach children to write fiction.

We originally developed this unit because the Common Core State Standards put a spotlight on the importance of folk and fairy tales in children's education. We soon found, however, that the unit had power beyond anything we could have imagined. Perhaps it is because fairy tales are by nature taut tales with clear story arcs, archetypes, and lessons. A group of innocent pigs face trouble with a dangerous wolf, and the trouble gets worse and worse with each house that falls. Then, too, in fairy tales, the unlikely hero often wins in the end. A young girl, constantly brushed aside by her not-so-loving family, wins the heart of a good prince in the end. Above all, we found these tales to be terrific models of the craft moves that youngsters can use in their own stories.

We also quickly discovered that the form of a fairy tale naturally led children to explore the writing qualities called for in the Common Core State Standards for Narrative Writing. This standard emphasizes a clear event sequence that unfolds naturally, the use of dialogue and description to develop the events, and language that signals event order (W.3). As we have taught and retaught this unit, it has become clear that this genre is a near-perfect vehicle for children to learn and practice this work. For example, as children read and think about phrases such as “Once upon a time,” “Later at Grandma's house,” and “Just then, along came a wolf,” we realized that fairy tales are perfectly suited to teaching children how to use transitional phrases to glue the scenes of their own stories together (W.3.3c). And one trademark of fairy tales is the universal ending that provides closure for the characters and the problems they face with the simple phrase, “And they lived happily ever after.” This form for ending helps children provide a sense of closure for their stories (W.3.3d). All of this made it clear to us that there could be great power in a unit on writing adapted and original fairy tales.

We also realized that since this unit is located at the end of the third-grade year, it's positioned to incorporate a few of the fourth-grade narrative writing components. You'll notice that this unit does not hit the brakes when writing moments arrive that are technically aligned to the fourth-grade standards. Instead, this unit embraces them, hoisting children up to try some of these writing moves on for size. For example, there is technically not a component in the third-grade narrative standard that highlights specific words and sensory details that help convey experiences. But the language of fairy tales is iconic, and we couldn't resist teaching children to embrace this language as their own.
own when they wrote. So as we watch children become immersed in fairy tale language (“In the deep, dark woods” or “The big, bad wolf” or “Cinderella was the last to try on the shiny, glass slipper”) and we help them name some of the ways authors use words with alliteration and sensory language to create effects, we begin to grasp the teaching power of this genre (W.3.4d).

Children move through three narrative writing cycles in this unit, writing two adaptations of fairy tales as well as their own original fairy tale. At the end of the unit, they pick one of these three stories to bring to publication. These multiple writing cycles allow children to practice many important writing lessons—structuring stories so that the reader can’t turn the pages fast enough; finding the precise words and phrases to capture a moment, an image, an emotion; and, above all else, writing with a storyteller’s voice. This unit design of multiple writing cycles will help your young writers see the value of hard work and become more willing to revise their writing, because each fairy tale draft improves upon the last. You’ll end the year with a busy, buzzing colony of fairy tale writers!

OVERVIEW OF THE UNIT
This unit relies on your children having been steeped in at least a few fairy tales, so if your children have no background with “Cinderella,” “Little Red Riding Hood,” and “The Three Billy Goats Gruff,” you’ll want to do some reading aloud. You might tell children that actually, fairy tales are often shared by being told and retold, and then invite them to retell a tale or two to a partner. Then you will suggest that each writer in the room has the power to become this kind of writer—a fairy tale writer.

During the first bend in the unit, you’ll rally each child to adapt a fairy tale that is one of two class favorites (we suggest children choose between either “Little Red Riding Hood” or “The Three Billy Goats Gruff”). If it seems odd to you that children aren’t able to choose the fairy tale they want to adapt, know that in the second bend in the unit, they will be able to do this. The reason for channeling children toward these two stories early in the unit is that this allows for more scaffolding, which we find children need as they do this work for the first time. While children choose between “Little Red Riding Hood” and “The Three Billy Goats Gruff,” you, meanwhile, might use the classic tale of “Cinderella” as the demonstration text for whole-class fairy tale adaptation work. This means that in your minilessons, you and the class might write (co-write) an adaptation of “Cinderella” while the children work on their own adaptations of one of the two other stories. On the CD-ROM, you’ll see examples of “Cinderella” adaptations.

Of course, once a writer has made the choice to adapt a particular tale, that writer will need to reread the classic version of that tale. At the start of the unit, then, children will take some time to reread and study and annotate “Little Red Riding Hood” or “The Three Billy Goats Gruff.” In part, as they do this, the children will notice the storyline, and in part, they’ll notice the qualities of fairy tale writing. Children will then plan their adaptations, thinking about which parts of the original tale they’ll adapt. Will they change the setting from a countryside to a city? Will they change the characters from goats to kittens? Children will also learn to make significant changes that alter the course of the tale. For instance, maybe Cinderella should want something more significant than a handsome prince. Furthermore, children will learn that one change leads to another change, thereby affecting the course of their story. For example, if these are kittens instead of goats, they may not trip-trap across a bridge, and their destination may not be the soft green grass in the meadow.

At first, your children will be apt to write their stories in a “just the facts” sort of way. Their attention will be on getting the adaptations right and on reporting what happens first, next, and last. All of this will probably change midway through the first bend in the unit when you teach your children drama and storytelling as ways to rehearse and plan their fairy tale adaptations. Suddenly, in partnerships, children will use gestures, small actions, facial expressions, and dialogue to act out their adaptations. Their drama will bring their imagined stories to life—so much so that this work with drama will become one of the defining features of the unit.

Your children will be writing Small Moment stories, or scenes, but they’ll quickly learn that a fairy tale requires more than one scene, one small moment. In this first bend, then, you will teach them that a narrator can function a bit like Jiminy Cricket once did in old-fashioned movies. Just as Jiminy Cricket would come onstage between scenes and tell viewers that time had passed, that the scene had changed, so too, youngsters will learn that they can use a narrator to stitch two or three of their small moments together.

In the second bend of the unit, your children will write their second adaptation of a fairy tale. This time, instead of being channeled to one of two tales that the class has studied, children can pick their own fairy tale to adapt,
Like the previous bends, Bend III is fast-paced and rigorous. You will launch applying all they’ve learned from Bends I and II to this final piece of writing. You will, in this bend, teach your students to write original fairy tales, including similes and metaphors. You’ll highlight passages such as descriptions of the lamb whose “fleece was as white as snow.” Children will also revise for the use of alliteration, as in “big, bad wolf,” and for memorable word choice, as in “huff and puff and blow this house in.”

This bend wouldn’t be complete without revision lessons that help children revise their fairy tales with an eye (and an ear) to their language. Specifically, you’ll remind children of the power of using comparisons in their writing, including similes and metaphors. You’ll highlight passages such as descriptions of the lamb whose “fleece was as white as snow.” Children will also revise for the use of alliteration, as in “big, bad wolf,” and for memorable word choice, as in “huff and puff and blow this house in.”

After two rounds of writing adaptations, students will be ready to write their own original fairy tale. To celebrate their growth and to ensure continued growth, you will, in this bend, teach your students to write original fairy tales, applying all they’ve learned from Bends I and II to this final piece of writing. Like the previous bends, Bend III is fast-paced and rigorous. You will launch by teaching kids that writers of original fairy tales draw from the qualities of strong narrative writing. You might find it too tempting to draft a multi-scene fairy tale, filled to the brim with flashy fairy tale qualities, like magic, that overshadow the fundamental elements of strong narrative writing—elements such as showing, not telling, writing with detail, writing with voice, including a blend of dialogue and action, developing a setting, and so on. Remember, this is a moment to assess students on their knowledge base in narrative writing. It might prove to be easier to tell a story about your own life, allowing all of the attention and time you have in the on-demand sitting to let your knowledge of the elements of strong narrative writing shine.

With that in mind, you could decide to use the exact same prompt from the beginning of the school year. The advantage of this is you can compare apples to apples, their first on-demand with this recent one. You can find that prompt, of course, in the Writing Pathways: Performance Assessments and Learning Progressions, K–5 book.
This on-demand task will give you vital information about students’ current strengths in terms of their knowledge of narrative writing as a genre—its purpose, craft, and structure. You and your students will be able to assess these on-demand pieces against a checklist, or students can lay them out and describe to each other what they already know how to do as writers, which they’ll carry into this unit. The Narrative Writing Learning Progression, located in Writing Pathways: Performance Assessments and Learning Progressions, K–5, can guide your assessment of this work. You can look at the rubric for third grade, noting which students meet grade level expectations (a level 3 on the rubric) and which students fall below (levels 2 and 1) or exceed (level 4) expectations.

Another form of assessment used in this unit is self-assessment, as used at the end of the first bend. Children return to the use of the Common Core State Standard–aligned narrative writing checklists used in the first narrative writing unit. Students reflectively assess their first drafts, take stock of what they’ve learned and what needs improvement, and set new, rigorous writing goals for the next two bends in the road. It is important to be sure to have these checklists printed and/or charted before the final session in this bend (see CD-ROM). You’ll note that both the third-grade and fourth-grade narrative writing checklists are used, because children are on the cusp of ending their third-grade year and may move to more sophisticated writing goals.

One last note: there are moments in between drafts to informally assess your young writers. Students produce one draft at the end of each bend (sometimes more than one). Seize this time to cull the class’s drafts and looks for trends. What is the majority of children struggling with in their writing? What is the majority of children succeeding in? Use these trends to inform the angle of your upcoming teaching. If you notice outliers, students that are soaring ahead of the class or students that are struggling to keep up, use this assessment to inform your small groups or conferences in the upcoming bend.

GETTING READY
Because this unit involves writing adapted and original fairy tales, you will want to invest time and energy collecting a stack of fairy tales. As you read your way through your stack, read as a reader and as a writer. As a reader, notice which versions of which tales are most engaging. Plan to read these aloud to your students. As a writer, read to notice which tales have a clear, replicable structure. (We found “Little Red Riding Hood” and “The Three Billy Goats Gruff” to be particularly well structured.) As a teacher of writing, you will also want to pay attention to which tales support the unit goals of crafting stories told in a storyteller’s voice with rich and beautiful language. Mark up these texts with all the possible things you might teach your students, from structure to development to language conventions. Reference the bibliography of fairy tales on the CD-ROM if you’d like suggestions as you gather your fairy tales.

Next, it will be important for you to identify a mentor fairy tale adaptation. We chose Prince Cinders by Babette Cole because of its humor, its inclusive message (fairy tales aren’t just for girls), and because it provides a strong example of narrative writing. A wide range of adapted and original fairy tales written by students can also be found on the CD-ROM.

As noted earlier, storytelling is at the heart of this unit. We aim to teach kids not only to write well-crafted tales, but to story-tell those tales with drama, precise action, and language that captures the hearts and minds of the listener. So you might spend some time watching video clips of storytellers, especially fairy tale storytellers, as a way to highlight excellent examples of storytelling to use when teaching.

Finally, give yourself a bit of time to begin planning your own fairy tale adaptation. A text that serves as your demonstration text. We chose to adapt Cinderella,” and you are welcome to do that too. You might even take yourself through the first sessions as a writer. Giving yourself the small gift of time can have big payoffs as you discover the writing road on which your students will travel in the unit. There are three different adaptations of “Cinderella” included on the CD-ROM for your reference.
IN THIS SESSION, you’ll teach students that writers adapt fairy tales in meaningful ways. When changes are made, they must be consequential changes that affect other elements of the story, rippling throughout.

GETTING READY

✔ ✔ Students’ writers notebooks (see Link)
✔ ✔ “How to Write a Fairy Tale Adaptation” chart (see Connection)
✔ ✔ “Ways Authors Adapt Fairy Tales” list (see Connection)
✔ ✔ Chart paper and markers (see Small-Group Work and Conferring)

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS: W.3.3.a, W.3.5, W.3.10, W.4.3.a, RL.3.1, RL.3.2, RL.3.3, RL.3.5, RL.3.10, RL.4.2, SL.3.1, SL.3.4, SL.3.6, SL.4.4, L.3.1, L.3.3, L.3.6

Session 2

Writing Story Adaptations that Hold Together

THE CHALLENGE WHEN TEACHING is not finding topics one could teach, but selecting from the many possibilities to make the biggest difference for children. As you embark on this unit, your mind will brim with observations about the genre that you could share with your children. Do children know things generally come in threes in a fairy tale? Do they understand these stories were written to teach life lessons—that *Little Red Riding Hood* is a cautionary tale, warning children against talking to strangers? Do they know that in fairy tales, there is often a villain in the shape of a troll, a giant, an ogre, a mean stepmother? One could easily imagine an inquiry lesson that channels students to talk about what they notice in this genre.

That lesson will come in this unit, but we postpone it until the start of the third bend. At that point, children have lived inside fairy tales for a few weeks, so they’ll be able to draw on a close knowledge of fairy tales to make those observations. They’ll also need at that point to be conscious of the characteristics of the genre because they’ll be embarking on the project of writing their own original fairy tale.

For now, we immerse students in the genre and provide them with opportunities to work inside the supportive scaffolds of a familiar fairy tale; we don’t overwhelm them with too many specifics about the particular genre. This is a deliberate decision, made because our priority is that students use fairy tales as a vehicle for understanding story and writing fiction. We want them to see the structure of a short story that undergirds all fairy tales, and for now it is less important that they learn the unique features of fairy tales.

Of course, it is not a small challenge for children to learn traditional story structure. Within that general topic, this unit spotlights helping children learn the plotting work that a short-story writer does. It is essential that children learn that in a story the main character usually wants something and encounters a bit of trouble along the way. That’s the focus of this session.

As the children work with fairy tale adaptations today, help them to grasp that the parts of a story are interconnected. As you read aloud an adaptation or two of one story, show
children how any adaptation, any change in plot, may lead to a cascade of subsequent changes. This domino effect is an important pillar of this session.

“We want students to use fairy tales as a vehicle for understanding story and for writing fiction.”

You’ll especially encourage children to take note of the types of changes authors make to traditional tales as they adapt them. Authors of adaptations may aim to make a tale more modern, more inclusive, or more socially just. You’ll lead children to resist making cosmetic or surface changes, such as simply changing the name of a character. Instead, you’ll rally your class of writers to make purposeful changes, ones that improve the original tale or make it more modern.

As children think about the adaptations that other authors have made, they will also think about their own. In this session, children will write plans for their stories, not only planning how they will adapt a traditional fairy tale, but how they will tell a good story. This session is filled to the brim with reminders of the work of strong fiction writing—rehearsing plotlines, creating character traits, imagining story setting. At the end of workshop today, children will move from writing story plans to planning and storytelling scenes. Scenes may feel new to your children but you’ll show them how one scene is like one small moment, a familiar structure children learned in the beginning of the year. This unit allows children to come full circle, ending the year with a unit that recycles and elevates the narrative writing with which they began their third-grade year.
MINILESSON

Writing Story Adaptations that Hold Together

CONNECTION

Channel students to think about the underlying ideas about adaptations that they’d discussed in the previous session, especially highlighting the way one adaptation creates a cascade of others.

“Let’s start today by thinking about yesterday’s realizations. When writers adapt fairy tales, what do they change? And more importantly, Why do they make those changes? We noticed two big changes authors tend to make—they change the characters and they change the events. Hmm, . . . will you look over your notes, and think to yourself about why the author made the adaptations he or she made?” I turned to my notes and began rereading them with rapt attention, knowing that my doing so would channel students to do likewise.

After a moment, I said, “Turn and tell your partner some of the reasons why you think an author might alter an original fairy tale, making an adaptation of it. Go.”

As children talked, I listened to one, then another. Realizing that children weren’t drawing on the chart from the preceding day, I called out, “Writers, the charts in our room are meant to be references. When you need something to jog your memory, check a chart.”

After a minute, I reconvened the class. “Writers, many of you are talking about the fact that when a writer makes one change—say, changing Cinderella from a girl to a boy—that one change changes other things, right? What were some examples, I’m trying to remember?”

Jasmine said, “Yes, ’cause changing the Cinderella losing her glass slipper to Prince Cinders losing his pants made a whole lot of other changes!” Soon the class recalled that this one change, changing a glass slipper to pants, meant that the princess would write a proclamation to find the man with the lost trousers, which would lead every prince trying to fit the trousers, which would lead to Prince Cinders finally trying on and fitting into the pair of pants.

“So, am I right that you are saying the first big change the author makes—say, turning Cinderella into a boy—is like a domino that falls over and pushes other things to change?” I asked, adding, “So, what if we decided that too often the main characters in fairy tales are farm animals, and for children everywhere to enjoy fairy tales it would be better
Session 2: Writing Story Adaptations that Hold Together

You will want to emphasize imagining the implications of any one of those decisions. You could, of course, go an entirely different way than thinking about hamsters. If one child suggests they all explore the possibility of the three little Pigs being renamed the three little Dogs, then you will want to help students wonder whether the villain should still be a hungry wolf. Might it be an eager dog catcher? Would the story still be set in the country, or might it be in a city? If the children decided that their adaptation of the three Billy goats gruff involved turning the goats into raccoons, will the raccoons trip-trap over a bridge to get to the meadow? Will they skitter across the bridge? Or will the author invent a different route to their destination? If their destination is a brimful garbage can in the alley, are the raccoons crossing a porch instead of a bridge?

The reason that we ask children to get their story in mind is that this means they may listen to the work with Cinderella while beginning to do similar work adapting their own story. You’ll notice fairly often throughout the series that we shoehorn topic choice into the connection of a minilesson for just this reason.

How to Write a Fairy Tale Adaptation

- Know the classic story and tell it often.
- Decide on a change to improve the story.
- Make the change lead to other changes so the whole story fits together.

TEACHING

Recruit children to join you in thinking about a purposeful adaptation of a fairy tale and how that one change could lead to a domino effect, creating the need for other changes.

“I know yesterday you did some thinking and talking about which fairy tale—Little Red Riding Hood or The Three Billy Goats Gruff—you’ll choose to adapt. If you haven’t chosen your tale yet, take a minute now to decide.” I paused.

“Thumbs up if you have decided.” I scanned the room, making sure most thumbs were up. “I’m going to be writing an adaptation of Cinderella—and hoping you help with that.”
“Before a person can think about a possible adaptation, it helps to have the original well in mind. So I’m going to list in my mind the main things that happen in Cinderella; will you meanwhile do the same for your story?” I was quiet in front of the class, touching one finger, then another, as I silently recalled the main events in Cinderella.

Then I resumed talking to the class. “Now comes the hard part. We need to think—what is an important way in which we could change the elements of this story to make it better? I usually start by thinking, ‘Is there a part or an aspect of the story that I don’t really agree with, the way it is now? Is there a reason to change the story?’ Will you join me in doing this work first with Cinderella, because it is hard work and I’d love your help, and then with your fairy tale? Okay, let’s recall the main events in Cinderella and as we do, think, ‘Is there a reason that we don’t love the message in this story, or the way it goes?’ Let’s review the plot of the story.” Then, referring to my fingers as I proceeded through the plot outline, I said:

- Cinderella is mistreated by her stepmother and her stepsisters. She has to do all the work.
- An invitation comes to a ball at the palace; they tell Cinderella she has to get them ready for the ball and then to stay home, cleaning the ashes out of the fireplace.
- A fairy godmother gives Cinderella a fancy dress and a fancy pumpkin carriage so she looks like a fancy princess. The magic will go away at midnight.
- Cinderella goes to the ball and dances with the prince.
- At the stroke of midnight, she runs out, leaving a glass slipper, which the prince finds.
- The prince searches for the owner, finds Cinderella. They get married and live happily ever after.

“So let’s think about a big reason to change this story. Hmm, . . . what do you think?” I left a long stretch of silence while I thought. Musing to myself I said, quietly, “It’s about this girl, who wants the fancy dress and fancy car so she can get the fancy prince . . . .”

“Tell the person beside you what might not be so great about this story, what you might change.”

After listening as the children talked, I reconvened the class. “You have really got me thinking. I agree that it isn’t that great to have a story where the one and only thing the girl wants is to go to the ball and marry the right man. She isn’t really the sort of powerful girl that many of us want in our stories—all she does is go to a dance and look fancy.”

Sam was on his knees with excitement. “And who cares if she has the fanciest dress or goes in the fanciest car, I mean, the fanciest pumpkin? The story is like teaching bad values, it is practically saying ‘go spend money,’ ‘go get stuff,’ and that’s not right.”

You needn’t muse, “It is about a girl who wants the fancy dress . . . .” if you do not think your children need this scaffold. Your job is to modulate the amount of scaffolding you provide so that students are left to do some important and challenging work. This last bit of thinking aloud may provide too much scaffolding for your students. Be conscious when you provide support that lowers the cognitive demands you place on kids, but also realize that it takes a lot of depth-of-knowledge level 1 work for students to be able to handle depth-of-knowledge level 4 work.

In this instance, chances are good that you were the first one to object to the materialistic bent to the story. But you needn’t tell that to the kids. Resist the instinct to say, ‘I thought of that first,’ and instead, if a child says this, support this idea!
“So . . . are we all saying that we want to change what Cinderella wants, what she wishes for? Maybe instead of wishing to go to the ball and marry the handsome prince, maybe she wants . . . hmm . . . what? We’ll have to think what better or a bigger goal we’d want to give her. Maybe she wants something that will make the world a better place, not just to marry the right guy. Like she wants to save the dolphins . . .”

“Or to open a library!”

“Or give homes to the homeless!”

I nodded. “And if we decided, for example, that the invitation would be to go to a meeting to plan a new library, not a ball, then we’d need to decide if Cinderella’s job was to get the mean stepsisters ready for that meeting about the library, or maybe they wouldn’t even want to go. And we’d need to decide if she needed a fancy car and dress—what do you think?” Children called out that maybe she’d just need a bike.

Debrief in ways that highlight the fact that the class is making a significant change in the fairy tale and a change that will cascade like dominoes throughout the story, affecting a lot of other things.

“So, do you see that first you think about a way to improve the original story? Someone could decide to change a fairy tale because they thought that the fairy tales too often are set in the country, so they might decide to write a city version. Or . . . what else?”

Children suggested that a person might decide that authors might change something in a story from being really rich and fancy to something more regular, that everyone could relate to—like our Cinderella’s bike! Sierra mentioned that for our class adaptation of Cinderella, we wanted to change it so Cinderella didn’t just want fancy things and riches (for example, money and power), she wanted to do something good in the world. I highlighted the idea that another big thing that authors change is motivations, doing so in such a way that Sierra thought she’d had the idea herself. I asked Harry to add that as another category before the bullet. Our list, “Ways Authors Adapt Fairy Tales,” now looked like this:

**Ways Authors Adapt Fairy Tales**

- **Changing the character:**
  - from a girl to a boy
  - from a fancy godmother to a less fancy one (a dirty one)

- **Changing the events:**
  - from something old-fashioned to something modern
  - from something rich and fancy to something more people can relate to

- **Changing the motivations:**
  - from wanting more money and power to wanting to do good in the world
Then I said, “The other thing you realized is that one change makes other changes, right? The fact that Cinderella is going to a meeting, not a ball, changes what the fairy godmother will give her, right? The one change—turning her from a girl who wants to marry the right guy and needs a fancy dress to a girl who wants to help work on a new library for the town—ends up meaning that the story has other changes too.”

**ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT**

*Channel students to go through the same process, this time thinking about their intended adaptations.*

“So think about your story with your partner and ask those important and hard questions. What don’t you love about your fairy tale, if anything? How might you change it? You probably will come to different ideas. Turn and talk.”

As children worked, I crouched alongside one group after another. I tried to steer children toward more consequential adaptations, noticing that many were making inconsequential changes at first. For example, Sam was saying he hated trolls and goats, so he planned to make his version of *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* about a parrot and a dirty pony. “Why a dirty pony?” I questioned, nudging for meaning or purpose. Sam shrugged, “I dunno. Well, a rhino then,” he said.

“Hmm, . . .” I said, realizing that Sam and his partners might be making random changes instead of ones for bigger reasons. “Remember, Sam, and all of you—it’s really important to make sure the changes you make are meaningful ones that lead to other important changes. One way is to keep story elements in mind as you’re thinking about what changes to make. For instance, what does the parrot want? What’s in its way? Answering these questions might help.” After some thinking out loud, Sam decided that his parrot lives in a zoo and wants his freedom—so the troll became the security guard that stood in his way—a more consequential change that would lead to other consequential changes in the story.

**LINK**

*Channel students to get started writing plans for their own adaptation of a story. Remind them that the change should be significant, making it a better story.*

“Writers, may I stop you? Oh my gosh, I am floored. You are not coming up with silly little adaptations like changing the wolf to a tiger, but with big ones. Shelly wants to make the story more current and changes the goats into people, and the bridge will be a busy, city bridge with cars and trains going over it. The poor troll has a lot to deal with! And Simone changed the goats to moles—which means the setting is totally different and the problems are totally different, because they live underground—can you guess what she changed the troll into? A hedgehog!”

The active engagement is a time to assess how the strategy is working in action, a time to get your fingers on the pulse of your entire classroom. It’s okay if you stumble across a partnership that is struggling, not yet grasping the essence of the strategy. Embrace this struggle as a teachable moment, giving students a tad more coaching so that they will feel supported in trying the strategy successfully. This is an important collaborative moment before they move into the independent part of the workshop.

When you send kids off to work, it is best if you have a clear idea of the range of options that you have in mind for what they’ll be doing. Usually your minilessons cumulate options and you end the minilesson by reminding kids of all the choices before them. But right now, you are trying to move all to start drafting and revising adaptations of a fairy tale. So for this session, you are expecting them all to write a page or so in their notebooks, and to be detailing how their proposed story could go. You’ll expect them to try more than one option, to especially think about the opening scene (you’ll teach into that later).
“So, here is my suggestion for today. Get your plans down in your writer’s notebook. Don’t write plans as a story—don’t start it, ‘Once upon a time . . . ’ and try to tell everything in a bit-by-bit story way, but do write a lot of the details for how things will go, and write in paragraphs. It might sound like this, ‘In my story, there will still be a character named . . . and like in the classic story, she will still . . . When the story starts I am thinking she will be. . . .’

“My other suggestion is to be hard on yourself. After you write a bit, pull back and think over your plan, draw a line, and try a different plan until you get one that feels great.”

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**FIG. 2–1** Ella’s notebook entry

**FIG. 2–2** Jackson’s notebook entry

**FIG. 2–3** Cora’s notebook entry
Conferring and Small-Group Work

Wrestling with Cohesion and Story Structure

During the first few days of the unit, you’ll want to touch base with a majority of your writers, making sure that they are really thinking through their adaptations and not just changing the story at the surface level. You may find that some writers become overwhelmed by all of the possibilities for change and have a hard time focusing in on making changes that are consequential. If you find that a group of students is in this boat, you might reel them in with some guided practice using a mentor text (in this case, The Three Billy Goats Gruff) and a simple flowchart that might look something like this:

Character → Setting → Motivation/Trouble → Resolution

You might explain the logic behind the flowchart by saying something like, “If I change something about the character, then other changes will follow—just like one domino knocking into the next. For example, if we change the billy goats to house cats, then the setting will change as well; they’ll probably live in a house.” Pointing to the chart as you go, you might continue, “and they’ll probably want big, juicy mice instead of sweet, tender grass. And probably the humans will get in their way! The resolution would need to change, too. Let’s try another version: If the billy goats become wolves, then they might live in a deep, dark forest in Alaska, and they might want rabbits to eat, and a hunter might stand in their way.”

You might ask students to use the chart, with your support, to come up with other potential adaptations for The Three Billy Goats Gruff, making sure to guide them toward changes that will cascade across the whole story. You’ll find, as I did, that understanding this crucial element of writing fairy tale adaptations will increase students’ motivation exponentially. In fact, after this small-group work, Sam asked, “Can we take our notebooks home tonight to write?”

Mid-Workshop Teaching  Checking Adaptation Plans

“Writers, may I stop all of you? Tomorrow you will begin actually writing the story, so I want to remind you to check that the adaptation you’re planning is a consequential one that will improve on the story in big ways. Let’s say that someone was adapting Cinderella and they decided to give her a magic leprechaun instead of a fairy godmother, and he hopped in instead of flew in. Would that change be consequential? To answer that, think if it would affect a bunch of other things in the story and think whether it seems to be a significant, important change or a sort of silly—trivial—one. What do you think?”

The students, in unison, chimed in that it would be trivial.

“Let’s say someone was changing Cinderella and they decided that too many fairy tales are about brothers and sisters who are jealous of each other, and that in real life it is more usual for classmates to be jealous of each other. If the writer decided to change this to a story of competing classmates who wanted not a royal prince but something that they might get at school, would that be a change that changed other things—like changed the setting, changed the people, changed the actions?”

The students agreed that yes, that would be a significant, consequential change.

“So will you tell your partner the adaptations you are thinking of making, and help each other think whether those adaptations are significant, and if they are not, help each other come up with a different plan?”

After children did this, I said to them, “Writers, I have one more tip that I want to tell you. When you write your story tomorrow, you need to make sure that your adaptation doesn’t miss some of the super important parts of a good story. So right now, will you get in your mind how your adaptation is probably going to go? List, across your fingers, your plan for how your adapted fairy tale
You may encounter other students who need support reconstructing a coherent story line after their adaptations essentially deconstruct the original plot. We’ve found that sometimes it helps a child to try to summarize his story by using this thinking template:

Once upon a time there was ___. Every day, ___. One day ___. Because of that, ___. Because of that, ___. Until finally ___.

For example, Jackson’s consequential changes to his story led him to follow so many tangents that he lost his story line. He used the template to come up with this plan:

“Once upon a time there were three dogs who lived in the city. Every day, they loved eating bones. One day there was a mean garden gnome blocking their way. He wanted to take them as pets to his master. Because of that, they couldn’t get to the bones. Because of that, the two biggest ones made excuses to get by and the little one tricked him. Until finally all three dogs got the bones.”

As you work with children, keep in mind that the goal of this unit is not so much that they learn all about the genre of fairy tales, but that their work with fairy tales helps them grasp the extremely powerful concept that stories often follow a predictable structure. This means that in your conferences and small-group work, you’ll want to be assessing which of your children seem to be aware of the fundamentals of story and which still need help with that. You will probably need to explicitly point out to some students that in all fairy tales, and indeed in any story, there is a character who has wants, who has motivations, and who runs into trouble meeting those wants. This is not a new concept for your children, but actually applying this idea to a new adaptation of a fairy tale may be challenging. Again, there is a thought template that may help remind children that they may use the key words to help them construct a story line.

Somebody wants something because . . . but . . . so . . .
Teach children to organize their story-planning notes into a few scenes, or Small Moment stories.

“Writers, may I stop you? It’s going to be time to get started on your first scene soon. So I want to help you a bit with that right now.

“Before you can write anything, you need to realize that a short story—and a fairy tale is a short story—is actually made up of two or three Small Moment stories. So we can look back at our plans for our Cinderella adaptation and we can think about the two or three Small Moment stories, or scenes, we’ll use to carry the whole of the plot. During today’s minilesson, you helped me think about the plot for the class Cinderella adaptation. Here are some notes that detail one plan for this story.” I showed a sheet of paper with my jotted notes.

- Cinderella is still the stepsister who is treated like a servant. She loves reading.
- A letter comes inviting them all to a fund-raiser to save the town library.
- The stepmother and stepsisters throw the letter away because they hate the library.
- Cinderella cries and her fairy godmother arrives.
- The fairy godmother grants Cinderella’s wishes so Cinderella may go to the fund-raiser.
- Cinderella saves the library.

“Will you and your partner look at that plan and see if you can box off two or three scenes we can write that would allow us to capture the whole story? You’ll see some of these points on the timeline can all be smushed into one flowing scene, and that is often the case.”

Rally children to plan with you the first scene of the class text.

Soon I asked, “What will our first scene, our first Small Moment story be?” The children agreed that Cinderella would be doing some kind of work and then an invitation would come in the mail about the event to save the library. I said, “So you are saying we can write that whole part of the story like it is one scene? Then we will jump ahead to a scene that comes later in the story—and we haven’t figured that one out yet. We’ll work on that more later.”
Ask students to plan the first scenes of their own fairy tale adaptations and to practice storytelling that scene by writing in the air, making sure to get into the action.

“Right now, will you think of what the first scene, or Small Moment story, in your fairy tale will be? Doing this remembering you only get to write about two or three scenes, so the first scene usually needs to be right where a lot of action is happening.” I left a pool of silence. “Give me a thumbs up if you have thought of what the first Small Moment story, the first scene, might be.

“In a fairy tale, that scene usually starts, ‘One . . . ,’ and then there is a time, like ‘one day, one morning, one evening.’ Then the main character usually does or says something important. These stories are short so they don’t waste a lot of time about things that don’t relate to the story. Partner 2, turn and try to write in the air how your story will start. Begin with, ‘One . . . Go!”

His finger swirling elaborately in the air, Sam said, “One day, the parrot was resting in the zoo and the security guard was pacing up and down. The parrot began to peck at the door with his red beak. . . .”

Jackson shared, “One afternoon, Little Green Cleats was heading to soccer practice. He took a shortcut through the woods so that he would be first on the field.”

“Remember that the beginning of a story sets the stage for what’s to come. It should get right into the action because fairy tales are short—no words are wasted! Tonight, as you plan possible opening scenes, ask yourself, ‘Is there enough action? Does my main character do or say something important right away—something that sets the story rolling?’ I’ll add this to our chart.”

### How to Write a Fairy Tale Adaptation

- **Know the classic story and tell it often.**
- **Decide on a change to improve the story.**
- **Make the change lead to other changes so the whole story fits together.**
- **Make a character with traits and wants who runs into trouble.**
- **Tell the story in two or three scenes (Small Moment stories).**