

Guide for preparing the class to work with stories

Creating a positive listening environment

Approaching Greek myths via the spoken rather than the written word provides rich opportunities to develop children's listening skills. In most classes, children's experience of listening to the spoken word will vary widely, so we've compiled some simple suggestions for creating the right listening environment and limiting potential distractions:

- ensure the children are sitting comfortably at their table, or in a carpeted area without disturbing others.
- clear tables of paper, pens etc.
- identify possible sources of interruption, either from within the class or by outside visitors, and make plans to minimise potential disruption, for example:
 - children who may need to leave the room can sit closer to the door, so as to slip out without a fuss.
 - advise adjoining classes that you will not be able to lend scissors, glue, books, etc. for a short period of time.
 - warn other visitors by putting a polite notice on the classroom door, telling them that you are listening to a story and should be disturbed only in an emergency.
- give the children the responsibility for some of this preparation to heighten anticipation and excitement.

You might find that drawing up 'rules of engagement' for the classroom can also help. These 'rules' might include:

- We listen carefully.
- We do not interrupt the story. Teachers can, of course, pause it.
- We think about what we hear.
- If we do not understand something, we ask.

Equivalent rules for speaking in class can also encourage the right listening environment. For example:

- We share our ideas.
- We talk one at a time.
- We respect each other's opinions.
- We give reasons to explain our ideas.
- If we disagree, we ask 'Why?'
- We try to reach agreement.

For more on spoken language in the classroom, take a look at the "Thinking Together Project" here: <https://thinkingtogether.educ.cam.ac.uk/>.

Listening to the stories

Establishing a routine for storytelling can be very effective, and can minimise distractions and maximise the children's concentration on the events and language of the story. This can help the children imagine the plot more clearly and devise personal interpretations from the narrative.

Giving the children some context before listening to the story can be helpful. You might try the **starting-points** we suggest in the first tab of every week to spark the children's interest and help them make sense of what they hear. When the story introduces unfamiliar characters, you could put their names up on the whiteboard beforehand, but the less you explain about them the better; the children can learn about these characters as the story unfolds.

Before the first story, you might want to explain to the children that many of the stories have a short silence at the beginning or after the title. These silences can be used to focus the children's anticipation.

Pause-points can help the class to follow the story. We've suggested some **pause-points** that occur at key moments in the narrative which you could use to check the class' understanding; of course, feel free to stop the story at any point that makes sense to you!

We've also created **questions for discussion** on the story pages, which can help you explore character, motive, action and themes after the children have listened to the narrative. Creating a democratic forum for discussion can help the children reflect on what they have heard, encourage them to develop their own responses, and give them the confidence to describe their reactions to the rest of the class. A key means of promoting productive dialogue and discussion is effective questioning, which is characterised by Robin Alexander in his booklet *Towards Dialogic Teaching* (Dialogos; 4th edition 2008) as:

- being anchored in the context and content of the lesson;
- building on previous knowledge;
- eliciting evidence of children's understanding;
- appropriately combining invitations for closed/narrow and open/discursive/speculative responses;
- combining the routine and the probing;
- prompting and challenging thinking and reasoning;
- balancing open-endedness with guidance and structure in order to reduce the possibility for error