

**A GUIDE TO
WRITING FABLES**

by

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Fables from the Garden
Fables from the Sea
Fables from the Deep
Fables Beneath the Rainbow
A Fishy Alphabet in Hawai`i
Celebrating Holidays in Hawai`i
Baby Dino's First Lu`au
Aloha `Oe
His Majesty's Goldfish

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Introduction

Why teach fables? The answer lies in the origin and nature of this story genre. Fables span time and space. They date back many centuries and can be found in all cultures. Along with folktales, legends, proverbs, and Beast-Tales, fables constitute the earliest forms of storytelling.

Origin

It is believed that fables originated in India, were then carried into Persia and from there spread into Greece and the rest of the world. Among the well-known fables are those attributed to Aesop, a Greek slave, who lived around 550 B.C. Many are familiar with his stories such as “The Hare and the Tortoise,” “The Lion and The Mouse” or “The Crow and the Pitcher” which illustrate lessons of humility, kindness and perseverance.

Characteristics

Fables are short stories featuring animals, plants and forces of nature. These natural elements are then given human qualities which is known as *anthropomorphism*. Fables differ from myths and legends which explain particular natural phenomena such as the occurrence of seasons or why the sun rises in the east. They also differ from parables and allegories which are longer stories usually involving humans facing conflict.

Handed down from generation to generation, the purpose of a fable is to teach a particular lesson, value, or to give sage advice. Fables also provide us with the opportunity to laugh at our foolishness or cry and comfort each other when faced with tragedy. In addition to the lesson and

the characters, the fable is also dominated by action and dialogue as opposed to description.

Fables provide us with an opportunity to observe nature and make connections to those human values which are paramount to a particular community. In short, fables result from the observations of ordinary people making a statement about the way we should conduct ourselves and about the values which are necessary for us to live together. Thus, fables are taught because they are fundamental to every culture.

Although different cultures may prize certain values, if we were to analyze fables through the centuries and across the waters, we would find many universal values. Thus, not only do fables allow us to connect to nature and other cultures, but ultimately they define what makes us human.

Writing the fable

How to teach children to write their own fables? Here are three different ways to start: observe nature, create the lesson or do research. Regardless of which way you begin, these are the steps necessary to complete the fable:

- Observe nature.
- Choose a value.
- Expand the value into a lesson.
- Research and choose characters.
- Craft the plot.
- Use natural dialogue.
- Choose a setting.
- Refine the moral.
- Write the first draft.
- Edit! Edit! Edit!

Observe nature.

The world is an open book, just waiting to share its lessons. For people who live close to the land, nature is synonymous with food, strength, and spirituality. By touching flowers and flowing water, we realize all living things are connected. For life to continue, every individual must be responsible to everyone else. Hence values of cooperation, loyalty, and harmony take precedent over individual desires or needs.

Go outside. Turn over leaves on the ground. Look up in the trees. Insects, birds, animals, flowers and trees all have stories to share. When writing *Fables from the Garden*, I found many ideas in my own garden. In my backyard grows a tall mango tree. When the fruit ripens, mynah birds descend, squawking and raising a racket. From that commotion came the idea for “The Fighting Mynahs.” One day I placed an orchid plant in a pot next to the roses my mother had planted. How incredibly different they were! The roses danced gracefully in the breeze while the orchid hardly moved at all. Then I noticed what the two had in common. I connected that image to people of different ethnic backgrounds, sowing the seeds for “The Orchid and the Roses” in which “friends respect, appreciate and even celebrate each other’s differences.”

Plant your own vegetable garden for ideas. On a small side yard, my older son, Justin, and I watered tomatoes, watermelons, beans and cantaloupe. Sometimes we had great success; other times we were disappointed at how quickly the sprouts turned brown and died. One cucumber plant produced over twelve cucumbers! That made me wonder what would happen if a cucumber plant refused to grow, resulting in “The Stubborn Cucumber.”

Beyond our gardens, lies the ocean and all that it has to offer. Scrambling over rocks on

Sunday afternoons, my sons and I tugged at blue-gray `opihi, clinging steadfast to the rocks when the tide had gone out. That experience gave rise to “The `Opihi’s Strength.” During a visit to the Waikiki Aquarium, I noticed a little red and white shrimp sitting on top of a moray eel. Filled with sharp teeth, the eel’s mouth opened and closed continually. And yet the shrimp showed no sign of fear. Intrigued, I knew I wanted to write a story about this pairing.

Magazines, books, newspapers, television, movies and of course, the internet can provide ideas. When writing *Fables from the Deep*, it wasn’t possible to go into the deep ocean, deep caves, or deep space. Instead I relied heavily on books, videos and television programs to explore these different environments. I thought life was scarce in the deep but then I discovered geothermal vents teeming with life. Thousands of ghostly white crabs, six foot long tubeworms and clams the size of dinner plates live in these hot water communities. And that led to the story of crabs racing around these vents. When one crab decides to take a short cut, well, that seemed like the perfect time to say, “Winning doesn’t always mean finishing first.”

The very first megamouth shark was discovered off the island of O`ahu. In fact the specimen is preserved at the Bishop Museum in a huge tub of formaldehyde which I was able to view. Students are simply fascinating by these facts.

In writing *Fables Beneath the Rainbow*, I wanted to share the fact that Hawai`i is one of the most geographically diverse places on earth. Species that started in one area migrated to the sea and to the mountains, creating enormous adaptations like the wolf spider that lives on top of the land and its cousin, the blind wolf spider, that lives in deep caves. Thousands of species have not yet been discovered. Unfortunately with all of the destruction of these various habitats, Hawai`i is also considered the Endangered Species capitol of the world. It seemed fitting to

dedicate these stories to our future generations so that they may become good stewards in protecting our environment.

Choose a value.

What values are important? What do we want our children to learn? Honesty, humility, responsibility, and cooperation are values we covet. Proverbs, inspirational sayings, and even advertising provide great sources.

Name calling, which children, and even adults do, resulted in “The Baby Cuttle.” In “The Sand Castle” we learn the importance of telling the truth and how even little lies can have large consequences. In “The Flower That Wanted to Fly,” the crown flower envies the monarch butterfly’s freedom. Then he realizes that by having provided nourishment and shelter for her, he is now part of her. Now as she takes wing, he too is flying, realizing “there are many ways for each of us to soar.” In “The Little Helper,” the grandmother fungus tells the story of giving and expecting nothing in return, allowing her grandson to learn how to let his love nourish others.

The Comet’s Promise emphasizes the importance of keeping one’s word in order to protect one’s reputation. In *The Climb*, a happy face spider helps a snout beetle climb above the storm clouds in order to gain a positive perspective on life. And as the beetle basks in the warm sunlight, he learns that “a bright attitude depends on the right altitude.” One of the native hibiscus species, koki`o, is being propagated as only five are known to exist. That gave me the idea of writing about an older brother helping his younger brother prepare for the annual blooming contest. When the older brother loses patience with his brother and starts criticizing his brother, making him cry, their mom intervenes and suggests the older brother encourage

rather than criticize. The older brother does and his brother produces the most spectacular blossoms winning the grand prize. That's when we learn, "with enough encouragement, we can all be glorious."

Research and choose characters.

The next step is to choose characters. Ask yourself, "Who will teach the lesson and who will learn the lesson?"

Squid are aggressive creatures and hence they became the logical choice as the bullies and name callers in "The Baby Cuttle." Peaceful by nature, the cuttle was the natural choice as the victim.

Flounders undergo an incredible transformation. The baby fish looks like any other upright fish with eyes on either side of its head; as time goes by, slowly, it turns on its side, flattens and sinks toward the bottom. One of its eyes then migrates to the other side. Now its eyes are on top of its head! This transformation provided a perfect way to illustrate the importance of different points of view.

Whether you start with an image, a lesson or facts, you're ready to proceed.

Craft the plot.

How will the lesson be learned? What is the event that will teach the lesson? This is the plot. In "Victory," an annual race among crab relay teams provided an opportunity to write about cheating to win. Great frigate birds wait until shearwaters and boobies catch their meal. Then they dive bomb, scaring the birds into letting go of their fish. Swooping down, the frigate birds grab the falling food. In "The 'Iwa's Theft," a young daughter asks her father why the others call them thieves. As her father flies off to think, he realizes that by "stealing from others,

we rob ourselves.”

Use natural dialogue.

Dialogue should be as close to natural conversation as possible. In “The Fighting Mynahs,” the dialogue between the two birds was originally as follows:

“The first mynah, an older bird who had seen his share of flashfloods and brushfires, moved toward the mango, claiming:

“Since I have lived longer and gained the wisdom of the years, I am entitled to eat this perfect fruit.”

“No, since I am stronger and will rule after you are gone, such a fruit is wasted on you. I’ll wager you will not live another season.”

The dialogue sounded stilted and cumbersome. The published manuscript reads as follows:

“The first mynah, an older bird who had survived many storms, moved toward the mango, cawing, “I’ve lived longer than you. I will eat this perfect fruit!”

Having never lost a fight, the second mynah answered, “I will rule after you’re gone so the mango should be mine!”

Choose a setting.

The next step is to choose a location. Where does the story take place. In a tree? Near the ocean’s edge? In the dark reaches of space? On an icy mountain top?

Setting also creates the tone for the story’s development. Here are examples of stories that start with a location. “Far below, where the sea is cloaked in night, lived a young megamouth shark.” “Deep in an old lava cave where time and weather come to a stop, a grandmother fungus tended to her young grandson.” In “The Little Frog and the Old Bird” the story begins as follows:

“Sitting on the edge of a fountain, the little frog sighed contentedly. White clouds drifted across the deep blue sky. A gentle breeze wove itself in and out of the branches of the spreading yellow shower tree. Birds chirped and flowers bloomed

under the warm sun. It was another beautiful day, like all the other days she had known.”

Refine the moral.

The finished moral should be a polished pearl. It might even sound like a proverb. In “The Excuse Bug,” a young Chinese rose beetle tells his mother all the reasons why he can’t do something. Finally she tells him to stop giving her excuses and to say instead that he can accomplish the task. Soon he is chanting all the reasons why he is capable and he does indeed complete the job. “Excuses are like clouds; they carry no weight.”

The young crab doesn’t listen to his mother when she explains how to find a new home in “The Impolite Hermit Crab.” The young crab is supposed to knock to make sure the shell is empty. Instead he simply backs into the first shell he finds and gets stuck to a mollusk. As his mother pulls him out, the young crab learns, “If you’re polite, you’ll avoid sticky situations.”

In “The Freeloader,” a male anglerfish wants someone to take care of him so he attaches himself to a female angler who will provide all his meals. Later his friends invite him to see the great treasures they have found. Unable to swim away, he discovers that “a free ride in life costs plenty.”

A mother snail plans to take her children to visit their great aunt. Before they go, the mother snail reminds them about good manners such as complimenting the hostess, offering to help and doing something thoughtful. “Be a good guest, not a bad pest.”

In *The Bat Who Flunked*, we meet a bat who doesn’t want to do his homework and rushes through it in order to play with his friends. The next day at school, the teacher gives a surprise test and that’s when he learns, “failing to study is studying to fail.”

Write the first draft.

Now that you have characters, a setting and the advice, it's time to write the first draft. Don't worry if everything doesn't fit smoothly at first. That will be taken care of in the editing process described below.

Edit! Edit! Edit!

Editing is extremely important in writing. In fact, some writers claim they never write, they only edit. But what does it mean to edit?

Nine Editing Principles

Editing is the opportunity to revise your work. Here are nine editing principles I use: **clarity, “show, don't tell,” active voice, avoid repetition, variety, dialogue, delete unnecessary words, rhythm, and follow the conventions.**

Clarity. Are your ideas clear? Does the sequence of events make sense? Is there something you left out that will help the reader? As the creators, we know why certain things happen, but to the reader who can read only the words we've written and not our minds, there may be gaps.

“Show, don't tell.” In an early version of “The Gorgeous Chameleon”:

“The chameleon was so taken by his reflection that he did not notice a large mynah bird sitting quietly in the tree above him, watching. *That chameleon could be my lunch*, the bird thought, waiting patiently.

While the chameleon was busy admiring his reflection, the mynah bird swooped down to grab the chameleon. At the last second, the chameleon saw the bird out of the corner of his eye and scuttled beneath the ledge of a nearby rock!

As soon as the bird had flown off, the chameleon scrambled hastily back over the fence. He had come very close to losing his life and all because he had been so busy admiring his own reflection! And from that moment on, the chameleon vowed never to be vain again.”

What's missing? Any child knows the answer: action. The reader couldn't experience the hawk's attack and the chameleon's narrow escape. Editing easily fixed the problem.

The published manuscript reads as follows:

Busy admiring his reflection, the chameleon did not notice a hawk perched quietly above in a large koa tree. *That chameleon could be my lunch*, thought the hawk. Waiting patiently, she watched as the chameleon continued to gaze at his reflection.

Suddenly the hawk swooped down, her talons outstretched! Seeing the hawk's image looming in the water, the chameleon quickly scuttled beneath a nearby ledge.

He felt a great *swoosh* from the hawk's wings as they brushed against the rock!

The chameleon's heart pounded and his body trembled. "That was very close," he thought to himself, afraid to move. "I think I'll stay here for the rest of the day," he added, vowing over and over again never to boast about his looks.

Use the active voice. Passive voice slows the reader down. Here are a few examples of passive voice edited to active voice. Original version: "After his guest had left, the chameleon climbed the garden fence." Edited version: "After the toad hopped away, the chameleon climbed the garden fence." Original version: "The chameleon was so taken by his reflection..." Edited version: "Admiring his reflection..." Look for "was" and "had." Another easy way to find and edit passive voice is to rewrite passages in present tense and then revise to past tense.

Avoid repetition. Watch for repeated words. Count the number of times particular words appear. Then use a thesaurus to find alternatives.

Variety. Vary the length of your sentences keeping in mind that short sentences build excitement. Begin sentences with nouns or prepositions. Paragraphs too can be varied in length.

Dialogue. Dialogue advances the story. "The Excuse Bug" is essentially dialogue

between the mother beetle and her son. If the character is excited, convey that by using such words as “exclaimed,” “hollered,” or “shouted.” In “The Complaining Cowry,” four friends gather for lunch. The first three cowries are cheerful. The fourth one “grumbles” and “mutters” as he complains about the food.

Delete unnecessary words. Some people write like they speak. While listening, we tend to disregard words that aren’t necessary. However, when we write, each word has to be important or it should be deleted.

Rhythm. Finally, listen to the rhythm of your writing. Do the paragraphs, sentences and words flow smoothly? Alliteration (words which start with the same letter) helps to create rhythm. “Barren of life, breath, and beauty” is a phrase I used to describe the edge of the galaxy in “Starlight.”

Follow the conventions. Is your spelling, grammar and punctuation correct? To catch punctuation errors, I proof read starting from the end. It is important to adhere to the fundamental conventions of punctuation.

Which technique works best?

What’s the best way to edit? I read my writing aloud; this enables me to hear when words don’t flow. Sometimes I have trouble with the sequence of sentences in a particular paragraph or the order of the paragraphs. So I rearrange sentences and paragraphs until ideas flow smoothly. Other people work best by writing each draft in long hand.

Editing is a constant process. One day I’ll focus on the content, another time I’ll check to make sure I’ve used the proper conventions, then I’ll work on the rhythm of the story. For me, editing continues until I’m satisfied the work “sings.”

The most important thing is to find the editing techniques that work for you. Editing is the key to fabulous writing!

Conclusion

Fables provide a wonderful springboard to other forms of writing. The lesson becomes the theme in a short story or novel; how the lesson is taught becomes the plot in longer stories. A variety of characters can be developed to create voice, dialogue, point of view and subplots. By adding layers of different conflicts and lessons and developing characters, a novel is born.

Happy writing!

About the Fables Series

During first grade at Wahiawa Elementary School, I became friends with Kathleen Wong. One day she drew a picture of a girl on a swing. That's when I told her I was going to write the stories and she was going to be the illustrator.

Many years later, we published our first book, *Fables from the Garden*. It won the Excellence in Illustration and the Award of Merit in Children's Literature at the 1999 Hawaii Book Publishers Ka Palapala Po'okele Awards. Stories from *Fables from the Garden* were selected for a statewide assessment test administered to Hawai'i's elementary school students.

Two years later, *Fables from the Sea* also won two Po'okele Awards for excellence in illustration. *Fables from the Deep* (deep sea, deep caves and deep space) was published in October 2002. *Fables Beneath the Rainbow* features Hawai'i's endangered species and was published in 2005. You can find out more about our books on our website, including how to arrange author visits: leslieahayashi.com or e-mail Leslie.A.Hayashi@gmail.com.