

SAMPLE STORY A

What follows is an attempt to narrate the thought processes in the mind of the instructor that go into the building of a successful story. Sample Story A provides a *template* from which the novice teacher can create a TPRS lesson.

In this story, a TPRS session lasting over two hours emerged from a single expression in a recent class of motivated adult beginners in French at Arapahoe Community College in Denver.

The story was based on Blaine Ray's *Mini-stories and Extended Readings for Look, I Can Talk More!* However, any scripted story will do, as long as it suggests three locations, with a problem needing to be solved in the first, a failed attempt to solve it in the second, and a resolution of the problem in the third.

In this class I was working from Chapter Two, *La Fille Sociable*, Lesson 1 mini-story on page 35 of the *Mini-stories and Extended Readings* text. With this solid framework in front of me, all I had to do was read the story quickly before class and then change it depending on what the class came up with. The scripted story was like the canvas on which my students and I painted our own story.

This example, therefore, follows a scripted plot very closely, with informational and factual changes only. Note that this is not necessarily the 'right' way to do a story, as there are as many ways of telling a story as there are teachers. Some stories generate a wave of their own and are quickly unrecognizable. They become highly personalized and bizarre, and are often truly outstanding.

It is suggested, however, that for the novice it is best to stay close to a scripted story. This permits maximum practice with the skills in a secure and steady text which is within arm's reach of the instructor throughout the creation of the story.

A few minutes before class, I chose to read only the first of the three paragraphs of the story to myself. There was no need to memorize the story as I was planning on referring to it throughout the class anyway. Here is what I read:

There is a girl who lives in Kahalui, Maui. She smiles a lot. She smiles every day. She smiles at a Chinese cat, but the cat does not smile at her. The cat throws a rat at the girl. The girl cries for 20 days and 38 seconds.

I determined that my students already knew 'there is' and 'lives in' but not 'smiles'. So on the board I wrote the word 'smiled' in French, since I wanted to ask this story in the past tense. Thus, I established meaning:

a souri – smiled

I had no intention of teaching any other structures at that time. This one word was enough for me at that point. If I needed more structures, I knew where to find them.

Besides, by the end of the class I will have added a lot of new words, but all within the context of the story and *all fully comprehensible* to the student.

I explained that *a* means ‘has’ and that *souri* means ‘smiled’. Then I explained that the present tense version of that structure, which we would need later when doing the readings, is *sourit*. I also explained how the word came from the French word *sous*, which means ‘under’, and *rire*, which means ‘to laugh’, so that a smile is really an ‘under-laugh’.

In less than two minutes I had established the meaning of *a souri*. I did not over-explain the structure. Most of my students have no desire to become French teachers, and they didn’t want to hear any more explanations. They wanted to hear some French. So I moved on to PQA.

I always do the PQA part of class in the present tense, because PQA involves real time. When things move into the past tense later, the similarity in sound between *a souri* and *sourit* causes no problems in comprehension.

When I begin PQA with my students, they know that I am going to be talking about them for a while now, and I use *sourit* – smiles – in a variety of ways *with them as the center of the discussion*. I have no preconceived ideas here:

Elizabeth is smiling, class! (Ohh!) Yes, she is smiling. Is she smiling? Yes, she is smiling. Is Elizabeth smiling or is Simon smiling? Elizabeth is smiling. Is Simon smiling? No, Simon is not smiling. (Simon frowns as he gets into the act) Is Robert smiling? No, class, Robert is not smiling. Elizabeth is smiling. Class, who is smiling? That’s right class, Elizabeth is smiling.

All I did to start PQA was to say ‘Elizabeth is smiling’ and circle it. When I said that Simon was not smiling, since the idea of ‘not’ was new to this particular class, I wrote it on the board and pointed to it. Since this was PQA and not a story, I wrote in the present tense:

ne sourit pas – does *not* smile

and I explained that *ne* and *pas* around the verb mean *not*.

I then continued with PQA by making statements *and circling them* about everyone in the room. I decided to have all the women in the class smile and all the males not smile.

Then I decided it was time to extend the PQA. I did so by simply pointing to an imaginary dog in front of the class, writing the ‘dog’ on the board because it was new:

chien – dog

and I asked if the dog was smiling. I pulled a plastic chicken out of my backpack and asked if it was smiling. I circled that. I found a rubber duck in my backpack. I pulled that out and asked if it was smiling. It was not. Then I asked if the imaginary dog in

front of the room was smiling. Each new word – dog, chicken, duck, and cat – was written on the board at the time it occurred, with its translation. Those students who felt the need to write things down were able to do so.

The entire PQA and extended PQA process in this case lasted about 45 minutes, and I could have just continued on extending the PQA as long as it was working because my students were learning French and enjoying themselves.

I decided, however, to extend the PQA on into a story. I just felt like it. One of the great strengths of TPRS is that it gives the teacher the ability to respond to intuition. The teacher learns to monitor and choose a flow of the class that is best for everyone. No one class resembles another. There is no prescribed schedule of learning to bore the class. This natural flow is, in fact, exactly how people learn languages.

So far in the process I have just really enjoyed interacting with my students in a lighthearted way. We have determined that all the women and a dog and a cat in the room are smiling and that all the men plus a chicken and a duck are not smiling. The students have heard the word *sourit* many times in the present tense.

I am glad that I don't have a second expression to teach, which would have taken a lot more PQA time *although in another situation I may have wanted three or four hours on PQA* – it all depends on the situation. For me, it was now time to start the story. In fact, because of the banter around the word “smiles” the PQA was extended seamlessly into the image of the smiling dog and then on into the story as described below.

I glanced at the scripted story on page 35. I read that the girl in Kahalui, Maui smiles a lot and that she smiles every day. This material morphed into my story in the following way:

Remembering to change verb tenses into the past, I started to circle the first sentence *but remained alert and open to what was suggested here:*

Class, there was a girl. Was there a girl?

The class said ‘yes’ except for Staci. I looked at Staci and she suggested that there was a dog instead. I went with that. Staci was very happy when I told her how intelligent she was and that I accepted her suggestion.

Class, there was a dog. Was there a dog?

Simon suggested that this was not true, that there was a chicken. But since this was my story, and I had accepted Staci's suggestion, I said to Simon that this was my story, and we all had a laugh and I went on circling:

Class, there was a dog. Was there a dog? Yes, class, there was a dog. Was there a dog or a girl? That's correct, class, there was a dog. Was there a girl? No, class, that is absurd. There was not a girl. There was a dog. Class, was there a cat? No, class, there was not a cat, there was a girl.

Class, what was there? That's right, there was a dog.

The possibilities here are endless in circling, and the teacher must be careful to circle the right amount of information. This is dictated by the individual story as it develops.

Once the statement was circled to a reasonable extent, I referred back to Blaine's text. The next information was:

qui vit à Kahalui, à Maui – who lives in Kahalui, Maui

so I asked the class where the dog lived. *Notice how already our story was taking on facts generated by our own class but staying within the framework of the original scripted story.* Thus, the story was becoming personalized:

Class, where did the dog live? No, Simon, the dog did not live in Seattle. That is absurd! Where did the dog live? That's right, Robert! You are very intelligent! The dog lived in Rabbit Hatch, Kentucky! It is obvious! How intelligent you are, Robert! Class, did the dog live in Seattle or in Rabbit Hatch, Kentucky? That's correct, the dog lived in Rabbit Hatch, Kentucky. Did the dog live in Seattle? No, the dog did not live in Seattle. The dog lived in Rabbit Hatch, Kentucky. Class, did the dog live in Taiwan? No, class, the dog did not live in Taiwan. The dog lived in Rabbit Hatch, Kentucky. Class, who lived in Rabbit Hatch, Kentucky? That's right, the dog lived in Rabbit Hatch, Kentucky. Class, did the dog or a cat live in Rabbit Hatch? Correct, the dog lived in Rabbit Hatch. Did a cat live in Rabbit Hatch? No, class, that is absurd. A cat didn't live in Rabbit Hatch. A dog lived in Rabbit Hatch.

Now, having circled that, I glanced at my original scripted story again to see the next sentence:

Elle sourit beaucoup – She smiles a lot

So I wrote on the board:

beaucoup – a lot

and I asked the class if the dog in front of the class smiled a lot. The answer was 'yes'. So I circled that:

Class, did the dog smile a lot? Yes, he smiled a lot. Did he smile a lot or little?

Since 'little' was a new word, I wrote it on the board with its translation:

peu – a little bit

When I explained that 'peu' means 'a little bit', my mind went to how 'peu' is easily confused with 'petit'. But remembering that *grammar should be taught based on meaning, not on grammatical terms*, I did not use any grammatical terms. I did not even bring up the fact that it might be confused with 'petit'.

I especially did *not* say: “Peu is an adverb. It differs from the word petit which is an adjective and means little in the sense of small or short.” And if a student asked me out of the blue what the difference with petit was, I would have said: “Petit means ‘something is small’. Peu means ‘a little bit’, again *without using grammatical terms*.”

When teachers use such grammar terms they are being cavalier. Many kids do not really understand them, nor do they even care to understand them. They fake it.

The teachers often blame previous teachers in English for this bored response, or even the students themselves. It would be a healthy thing, however, if these grammar-oriented teachers asked themselves an honest question: “Is grammar really as easy to acquire as some teachers assume?” It behooves all *TPRS* instructors to *avoid grammar terms when doing pop-ups*. If students really want to learn it they can learn it later.

Next I returned to circling that sentence:

That’s right, class, he smiled a lot. Did he smile little? No, class, he did not smile little, he smiled a lot. Class, who smiled a lot? That’s right, the dog smiled a lot.

I did not ask where or when or why or any other question words at this point because I felt that the students understood the concept and it was time to move on. I was careful not to ‘over-circle’ the story, and my barometer, Gene, was doing well with everything.

Now at that point in the story I had been pointing to an imaginary dog in front of the class. The students knew that the dog smiled a lot. That invisible dog had become my actor, and my friend. So I did not need an actor because I had one in the invisible world. It was clear to everyone that there was a dog in front of the class because I had been pointing to it for at least five minutes.

In most stories, I need a physical actor. I call up the actor, and the story continues with my moving the actor around to three locations, etc. But in this case I felt comfortable with the imaginary dog and I went on. I had a focus for the story in the minds of all the students and that was all that was necessary. I glanced at the scripted story and saw the next sentence:

Elle sourit tous les jours – She smiles every day

I knew that ‘tous les jours’ was a new expression so I wrote it on the board with its translation:

tous les jours – every day

So Blaine’s story continued to morph into my own:

Class, did the dog smile a lot every day?

Elizabeth excitedly said yes to that and I said:

No, Elizabeth, that is absurd! The dog did not smile a lot every day!

At this point I could see that it was possible to go into a massive circling, so I began to circle all three parts of the sentence. But I did so to the extent that the class needed it. Once I knew that the class was comfortable with the expression, there was no need to circle it ‘into the ground’ as just stated, and I moved on.

It occurred to me at that point that the expression ‘tous les jours’ was a good opportunity to reinforce the days of the week. So:

Class, did the dog smile a lot on Monday? No, Jacqueline, that is absurd! The dog did not smile a lot on Monday! How ridiculous! What, Robert? You are saying that the dog smiled a lot on Tuesday? How ridiculous! Class, it’s obvious!... (pause to let the tension build)...The dog smiled a lot on *Wednesday!* (Ohh!)

At this point I had circled the first three sentences of the scripted story in front of me. I and my students had established our own details for the story so far. Instead of a girl who lives in Kahalui, Maui who smiles a lot every day, we had created a story about a dog who lived in Rabbit Hatch, Kentucky who smiled a lot on Wednesday.

At this point it was time to recycle the story. It is amazing how a lot of circling can be compressed into less than a minute of recycling. The students showed me via hand comprehension checks that the comprehensible input of the recycled story was near 100%. I knew then that I had recycled well and gone slowly enough.

Before continuing on with the story, I felt it was a good time to add some detail to the description of the dog using the Portrait Physique skill. This was important for many reasons. Details lend interest and humor to the story. My circling goal now was to create a freaky-looking creature with one *grossly exaggerated* physical characteristic.

So via the magic of the Portrait Physique, the dog in front of the classroom became not just any dog, but a red plastic dog with an extremely thin body whose large square head had in it two small round green eyes. Although it took a lot of circling and writing of new words on the board to establish such details, it was worth it because the class now had ownership in ‘their’ dog and the image becomes increasingly comical with each new detail.

Now with that strange looking dog in the room distracting me, I had lost track of where I was, as has, perhaps, the reader of this text. All I had to do was glance at the next sentence of the original scripted story:

Elle sourit à un chat chinois – She smiles at a Chinese cat

Continuing on while resisting the temptation to create an even funnier-looking dog (no time), I asked myself if there was anything here that my students didn’t know. The answer was ‘Chinese’ but I decided to forgo the teaching and circling of nationalities

(see skill 48) at that point in favor of moving the story forward and making it more personal. I did that because I knew that personalization would be one of the major keys to the success of my story. What I had so far was not personal enough.

I decided to personalize the story by having the weird-looking dog stare at Elizabeth. I wrote on the board:

a dévisagé – stared at

I explained the relationship between ‘dévisager’ and ‘visage’, which we had just used in our description of the dog. I added that this expression was used in a French film called *Rue des Cases Nègres*, or *Sugarcane Alley*, thus adding in some cultural information about Martinique in a kind of cultural pop-up. The phrase from the film was “On ne dévisage pas les grandes personnes!” and I wrote it on the board because I thought they could understand it.

Then I circled the subject:

Class, the dog was staring at Elizabeth! (Ohh!) Was the dog staring at Elizabeth or was *a cat* staring at Elizabeth? That’s right, class, *the dog* was staring at Elizabeth. Was *a cat* staring at Elizabeth? No, class, that is absurd, *a cat* was not staring at Elizabeth. *A dog* was staring at Elizabeth. Was *an elephant* staring at Elizabeth. No, class, *an elephant* was not staring at Elizabeth. *A dog* was staring at Elizabeth. Class, *who* was staring at Elizabeth? Yes, *the dog* was staring at Elizabeth.

Then it was time to circle the verb:

Class, was the dog *staring* at Elizabeth or was the dog *dancing* with Elizabeth? etc.

Then the object:

Was the dog staring at *Elizabeth* or was the dog staring at *Bill Clinton*? etc.

Now Elizabeth was personally involved in this story to a great degree. She was ‘into’ the story. With each sentence, her name was mentioned.

Remember that this story was being built “brick by brick” or “idea by idea” from page 35 of Blaine’s story. There was no need to be afraid of losing track of the story, as can occur without a scripted text in front of you. Nor was there a need to worry about creating a story that was not personalized enough – there was plenty of room to do so from the original.

This feeling of safety gave me a measure of confidence. The story flowed more easily, ironically, because of the structure the scripted story provided. The next words in the story on page 35 were:

mais le chat ne sourit pas – but the cat does not smile

I asked Elizabeth if she smiled at the dog. She said no. So I circled that, focusing on how absurd it would be if Elizabeth actually were to smile at the dog.

By now the dog was not only staring, but also smiling at Elizabeth. What a combination! A large square-headed red plastic dog with a very thin body was in my classroom staring and smiling at Elizabeth through small round green eyes! How bizarre! I was able to really communicate to the class my belief in the truth of this image by histrionically focusing on its actual existence in the room.

Note also that at this point a student in the room had become *the* focus of the story. Realizing that personalizing the story is the key to success in building a story, I brought another student into the story. The next sentence of the scripted story was:

Le chat lance un rat sur la fille – The cat throws a rat at the girl.

I took the plastic chicken from my backpack and said:

Class, Simon took a chicken.

I waited for the obligatory reaction – *Ohhh!* Simon was quite excited that the story was now turning to him. But I didn't give him the chicken yet. I had to teach the new word first. So I wrote on the board:

prendre – takes
a pris – took

And then I asked the class:

Class, how can we remember that 'prendre' means 'takes'?

After various suggestions, the best choice was that 'prendre' in French sounds like 'prong' in English, so that when we hear the sound 'prong' we can imagine little 'prongs' coming out from the ends of our fingers, 'taking' something.

Having established meaning for the new structure and after writing it down with its translation, *which must be done for all new expressions as they occur during a story*, I continued personalizing. I handed the chicken to Simon, being careful to *synchronize Simon's action of taking the chicken from me with my saying of the word 'prendre'* (skill 19).

Next, I automatically went back to circling, starting with the subject:

Class, *Simon* took the chicken. Did *Simon* take the chicken or did *Elizabeth* take the chicken? Correct, *Simon* took the chicken. Did *Elizabeth* take the chicken? No, class, *Elizabeth* didn't take the chicken. *Simon* took the chicken. Did *Gene* take the chicken? No, class, *Gene* did not take the chicken. *Simon* took the chicken. *Who* took the chicken? Yes, *Simon* took the chicken.

Notice the barometer check at the three-in-one point of the above circling. Had Gene not been on board with that sentence about him, I would have had to go back and reteach the material until he was on board.

Then, circling the verb:

Class, did Simon *take* the chicken or did Simon *eat* the chicken? That's correct, class, Simon *took* the chicken. Did Simon *eat* the chicken? No, that is stupid, class, Simon didn't *eat* the chicken, he *took* the chicken. Did Simon *hide* the chicken?

The class did not yet know *ate* or *did hide* so I wrote them on the board with their translations and then continued by circling the object:

Did Simon take the *chicken* or the *duck*? etc. etc.

At that point I was again in doubt about where I was in the story, so I just glanced back at Blaine's story. The sentence currently being worked on was:

Le chat lance un rat sur la fille – The cat throws a rat at the girl.

I got back on track with:

Class, Simon threw the chicken at the dog!

At this point I saw a golden opportunity for dialogue. I played the role of the dog since it was a new class, but a student could easily have done it:

Dog (said with anger in French): What is *that*?

Simon: (with anger): *That* is a chicken!

Dog: *Plastic* or *rubber*?

Since rubber was a new word, I wrote it on the board and explained it:

Simon: *Plastic*!

I knew at this point that extending that particular dialogue would cause unnecessary confusion. Instead, with the energy from the class very high, I asked for the same conversation but had the dog (me) speak with fear. If I had had a window box person in the room, I would have asked him or her to speak to the dog.

Then I divided the class into two parts and we chanted the first two lines in mock anger. It was fun. The creation of spontaneous and humorous dialogues is easy as long as the instructor is open to the right moments for them.

I returned to:

Class, Simon threw the chicken at the dog!

And after that was sufficiently circled, the next glance at the scripted story showed me that:

The girl cries for 20 days and 38 seconds.

This circling:

Class, how long did the dog cry? Did the dog cry for one week? (I wrote *une semaine* – one week on the board because it was new) No, class, the dog did not cry for one week. The dog cried for seventeen weeks. Did the dog cry for one week or for seventeen weeks? The dog cried for seventeen weeks. Did the dog cry for one week? No, class, the dog did not cry for one week. He cried for seventeen weeks. Did the dog cry for ten weeks? No, class, the dog did not cry for ten weeks. He cried for seventeen weeks. Who cried for seventeen weeks? That's right, class, the dog cried for seventeen weeks. Why did the dog cry for seventeen weeks? etc.

transformed the sentence from the story script into:

The dog cried for 17 weeks, 5 days, 30 minutes, and 7 seconds.

Stephen Krashen has made the point that children don't learn languages by memorizing lists of vocabulary, pointing instead to the role of comprehensible input in learning vocabulary. There is also an interesting phonetic reason for teaching words (like the time expressions above) within the context of stories:

In French the word *deux* (two) when linked with the word *heures* (hours) creates a *different, unexpected sound* from the individually pronounced words. Placing those two words together creates a new 'z' sound between the two words. Memorizing lists of words does not teach this, but circling does. As the nature of standardized tests becomes more and more auditory, this is an important point, one addressed by TPRS but not by other methods.

After circling that last sentence, it was time to bring the new story to closure via a complete re-tell, which took less than a minute with some very fast French at well over 90% comprehension by everybody, except the barometer, who came in at 70%, just fine with me.

Looking at the two stories side by side, here is what we ended up with:

There is a girl who lives in Kahalui, Maui. She smiles a lot. She smiles every day. She smiles at a Chinese cat, but the cat does not smile at her. The cat throws a rat at the girl. The girl cries for 20 days and 38 seconds.

There was a girl who lived in Rabbit Hatch, Kentucky. She smiled a lot. She smiled a lot on Wednesday! A dog was staring and smiling at Elizabeth. Simon threw a chicken at the dog. The dog cried for 17 weeks, 5 days, 30 minutes, and 7 seconds.

In this particular class, it had taken two hours and one expression on the board (*smiled*) to get to the end of the first of three paragraphs in the original scripted story. Six sentences had provided a two-hour story. There was no effort to leave the basic framework of the scripted story, thus guaranteeing the success of the reading class that was to follow this class.

Two of the three steps of TPRS were followed. The story began with establishing meaning for one single word and then moved into a highly repetitive period of personalized questions and answers about who was or was not smiling. Then the PQA was extended into a little imaginary scene involving a smiling dog. After that a lengthy and highly personalized story was created “brick by brick” from glances at the scripted story.

Many of the skills involved in creating a good story were used, yet I felt under no compulsion to use them or even think of them during class. Even if they hadn’t come up, the class still would have been a lot of fun because we were doing interesting and personalized comprehensible input.

Some of the fun skills just came up naturally, perhaps because by chance that week I was doing a Fluency Fast workshop, watching Jason Fritze teach for up to four hours a day, and the osmosis kicked in.

I circled all the time, never using a new word without first writing it and its translation on the board, thus staying in-bounds. I constantly pointed to almost every word in view. I was in constant eye contact with all students, especially the barometer student.

I went slowly with massive repetitions. Due to the fact that the dog was so real to me, it became real to them, which generated frequent emotional reactions from all of us. I avoided the trap of trying to tell the story and instead asked it. Thanks to so much circling, I got some great answers to my circled questions. Circling really does assure high levels of student input.

Other, more freewheeling TPRS teachers may disagree, but I personally felt that I was able to *ask* the story instead of *telling* it largely due to the aforementioned sense of safety and security provided by the original scripted text. I knew that if I became confused all I had to do was glance at it – I would find my story somewhere in it and, in fact, this happened many times. By staying close to the scripted story, I could thus fly into fantasy, knowing I had a rock to land on whenever I needed it.

Though this way of working with a story works for me, it may not work for others. TPRS represents such an ocean of potentialities that new things are always “swimming by” the attention of the teacher, and over the years an individual style develops.

Knowing that unexpected twists and details can really liven up a story, I was open to any information provided to me during the circling process. I knew that such

twists and details occur primarily *as a result of circling*, so I didn't try to force any twists into the story. I just listened for interesting information. For example, a basic twist occurred when I started to circle the first sentence

Class, there was a girl. Was there a girl? (yes)

and everybody said yes except for Staci, who shyly suggested that there was a dog, I went with that. The class had a little trouble with it but I told them it was my story and off we went with our dog. I was open to what was suggested here in circling. My decision to use the dog was intuitive, a prerogative, as mentioned earlier, of what Michael Thompson calls the individual teaching artist. The dog turned out to be a good choice.

In this story there were frequent recyclings, which required together a total of no more than three minutes. There were four or five good grammar pop-ups and even a culture pop-up. When Simon wanted to throw the chicken at the dog I made him wait until I synchronized his actions with my words. We had a good chant and good dialogue in the chicken scene. When I had approved of Elizabeth's suggestion at the beginning of the story that there was a dog, and Simon wanted a chicken, I lovingly but authoritatively told him that this was my story.

In only their second French class, these adults were able to understand and enjoy two hours of French in a relaxed environment filled with humor and good will. When they experienced Blaine's extended readings in their next (third) class, it was easy for them. With very little effort and without a dictionary, they enjoyed continuing on with their study of French via the supremely important third step of the TPRS method, reading.

Did a story spin out of the reading? In this class, yes! Even though it was "only" a reading class, we did more than read – we chose to make up a story that ended up being very similar to the original, though much shorter. However, on another day, we might have just read the text without any discussion, only translation.

One year, I was so enamored of the process of telling stories that I did very little reading with my students. I wish now that I hadn't. It was like I sent them out of the classroom at the end of the year with only one glove on.

So, with reading, the goal is to do the same thing we do in all our TPRS classes - *have fun with stories and reading in the target language*. Our goal is not to cover materials. It is to have fun!