

# **CREATING AND USING *KAMISHIBAI***

**BY**

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## **Background Notes:**

Visual storytelling props have been used in Asia for over two thousand years, ever since the times when Indian showmen showed them in markets and Buddhist monks shared tales using pictures of hell or of the Buddha's lifetimes. Large scrolls, temple hangings, and painted canvas – all have helped to hold audience attention in Asia from those days on, both for religious and secular tales.

Although the Indian sets of such picture cards, painted on stiff cloth, were first used to tell the great epic, Ramayana, they are rarely used now in India. In Japan, the heyday of related art form was from 1930-1950, when the roving kamishibai storyteller went on his bicycle, seeking listeners and sales. Today, although few traveling tellers perform in Japan, published and handmade sets are often used by teachers and librarians in Japan, Vietnam, Laos and the U.S.

## **What They Offer:**

- Through exposure to this high interest, non-threatening format, children develop:
- Skills of imaginations visualization, concentration
- Ability to sequence and edit
- Listening comprehension
- Storytelling and related oral language skills
- Understanding of story elements – plot, character, setting, conflict
- Self confidence as they create and tell tales
- Writing techniques reinforced through kamishibai visuals
- Use of close-up details and juxtaposition of story objects
- Attention to appropriate description and imagery
- Consideration of perspective and viewpoint

## **Making Kamishibai - Materials Needed:**

- A story to share
- Eight pieces of white cardboard or stiff drawing paper, all the same size.
- (At least 6" x 9" although larger is better.
- One large piece of newsprint
- Drawing implements – pencils, crayons, markers, etc.

## **Instructions for You As Both Storyteller and Teacher:**

1. Choose a story that interests you, with a clear plot and enough action/change to divide into at least eight scenes/cards. (I have had sixth graders make sets of up to 20 cards, while kindergarteners are often comfortable with three or four. Commercially published sets usually have 12 or 16 cards per story.)
2. Urge students to choose a story which they like and which is “right” for their audience as well: if they are to be telling to young children, the story can’t give nightmares!
3. Folktales work very well, as do true stories, original tales – any stories with memorable characters, vivid, images, a strong plot, elements of suspense, humor, pathos and/or drama.
4. Now plan out the sequence of cards. Choose important scenes to illustrate; decide how to draw the various scenes in different ways. Consider:
  - Long shots of the setting
  - Close-ups of characters and setting details
  - Showing just part of a character: a hand reaching, two huge feet...
  - A view from the top, side, back or front
  - One card sliding across another to reveal a surprise
  - Divided pictures
  - Unusual perspectives
  - Shadows to show objects
  - Borders that frame, borders that change
  - Use of visual variety, suspense and surprise
5. Play with these ideas and sketch out eight scenes on the newsprint. Have students fold paper into eight sections, drawing a very rough sketch of each scene on each of eight sections (the title card can be separate, or as is frequently done in Japan, can be written on the first scene of the story.)
6. Check student sketches, focusing on the two most common problems: lack of variety in sketches and size of drawings – illustrations should be big and bold enough to be seen by a whole class. When you are satisfied with the rough sketches, begin work on the cards. (Note: Some teachers like to begin directly on the cards without a rough sketch; this can also work, but have children use light pencil sketching so that mistakes can be caught and easily changed.)
7. Be careful to use the best medium for the cards: pastels tend to smear, water color is best for mood than detail, colored pencil drawing takes a lot of time. Remember too, that the tale will be told, so every story detail need not be drawn.
8. Number the cards on the front and the back so that the students can quickly order them before telling. Students will now begin practicing their telling. As they do, the image will help them remember the story. However, some teachers like to have students write the words down for each card at this point, if not earlier. To develop the best storytelling you may wish to wait until students have told the tale several times and thus practicing and refining their oral language. In this way, students get a sense of the sound of words and perhaps discover how a gesture, a tone of voice, or an eye movement can replace a whole line of written text. Too often, if students know the words are written on the back, they simply read them don’t attempt to tell the story. Use your judgment as to how much “written” support your students need, and when they can best use it.

9. If you want to add words, consider the use of several words/sentences as aids or reminders rather than the whole fixed text. Remind students that their words may change as they tell the story again and again. Oral stories often do transform over time.

When students want to add words, the easiest way is to write the words for each card on a separate index card, and then to paste each on the correct card. The words for the first card go on the back of the last card, the words for the second card go on the back of the first card and so on. For a lovely touch, make or find a suitable cover for kamishibai sets – big envelope, file folder, etc.

## SHAPING *KAMISHIBAI* TALES

\*Once all the cards are done, the storytelling practice begins. Children should first learn the story by repeating it simply, rather than memorizing it. Then, when they are comfortable with the skeleton of the story, the *Evaluation Criteria List* offers suggestions of how story can be shaped and shared. Go over the list with the whole class (perhaps changing questions into statements and simplifying as needed for your grade level).

\*Use a tape recorder if it's handy; small groups can take turns taping and listening back. Help students to play with the sounds of words – as a class or as individuals. Explore how the word “silent” sounds and feels different than “quiet” or why “interesting” might be a harder/awkward word to say in a story.

\*Bring in the use of metaphor, simile, alliteration, etc., if appropriate to the age level. Use partners, peer coaching and small groups with stronger tellers paired with weaker ones. Remember that storytelling is a talent, some of your students will be naturals, others won't, but everyone can have fun and improve!

\*If you have bilingual students, encourage them to use pieces of their first language in the telling. They can easily add such language in beginnings, endings or in the speech of certain characters.

\*If you have used true stories for kamishibai, certain hints may help students to flesh out the story. Try:

1. An interview technique where you or another student the teller about the who, what, where, etc. of the story to pull out further details.

2. Visualizing the story...I've even had students sculpt the setting of the story and start acting it out to help them remember details, feelings, etc.

3. Suggesting more dialogue to add interest, to move the tale along, to lengthen a short memory, to change the tone from simple “show and tell” to really telling the story.

4. Use of a repeated word, sound, phrase for emphasis, to build drama, to stretch out a scene, to add humor.

5. Poetic license. Too often, students telling true stories feel that they have to keep strictly to the facts. Encourage appropriate embroidery.

6. When the story feels ready, have trial runs holding the cards; they should be held out chest high, directly facing the audience. Make sure that the cards are held steadily and turned smoothly as the story continues and that the teller's eyes are on the audience, not the cards. The beauty of kamishibai telling is that it allows you to have such constant contact with your audience while also providing them a visual prop. Finish with some whole group sharing and gentle feedback.

## **Evaluation Criteria:**

Is the story plot clear? Does the teller know the tale and tell without hesitation?

How is the opening? Does it interest listeners? Is the closing strong enough and appropriate for the story?  
Is the story about the right length?

Is there descriptive language? Are there enough (but not too many) details to give listeners word pictures?

Is there a place for a pause, to create suspense or to quicken interest?

How is the timing and rhythm of the told story?

Does the student use sound effects? How about sound words or even a song?

Could the teller use character voices? If she/he does, are they clear and not mixed up?

Is dialogue used, with or without character voices? Should it be added?

How is voice used? Does it share feelings at times? Does it have interest - with changes in volume, texture, pitch inflection, etc.

Are gestures/expressions - of face, hands, and body used? Do they add or distract?

Is eye contact made with audience? Is teller sensitive to listeners' responses?

Is repetition used – in gesture, phrase, word and sound? Could it be added?

Is there any audience participation: a question asked, a song sung, a clap shared, etc. Such participation works especially well with younger children.

## **The following are a few of the usual problems seen with young tellers using kamishibai:**

- Too many fillers – “ums, ahs, you know..., “like a ....”
- Hands in the way of kamishibai pictures. Picture cards shaking back and forth or vibrating.
- Teller looking at kamishibai and not at audience.
- Too quiet a voice.
- A “show and tell” approach rather than storytelling: “This is when...”
- A need for editing length: i.e. a story that rambles on or whizzes by!

*For over two decades, Cathy Spagnoli has helped thousands of students (K - 12) and teachers to make and perform kamishibai in the U.S. and Asia. She gives programs throughout the US and Asia performing kamishibai from her extensive collection and then helping others to create their own sets. When the kamishibai stories are finished, Cathy shares storytelling tips for using kamishibai so that the cards truly come alive with the power of the storyteller's craft. See Cathy's website for more ideas and for contact information: [www.cathyspagnoli.com](http://www.cathyspagnoli.com)*