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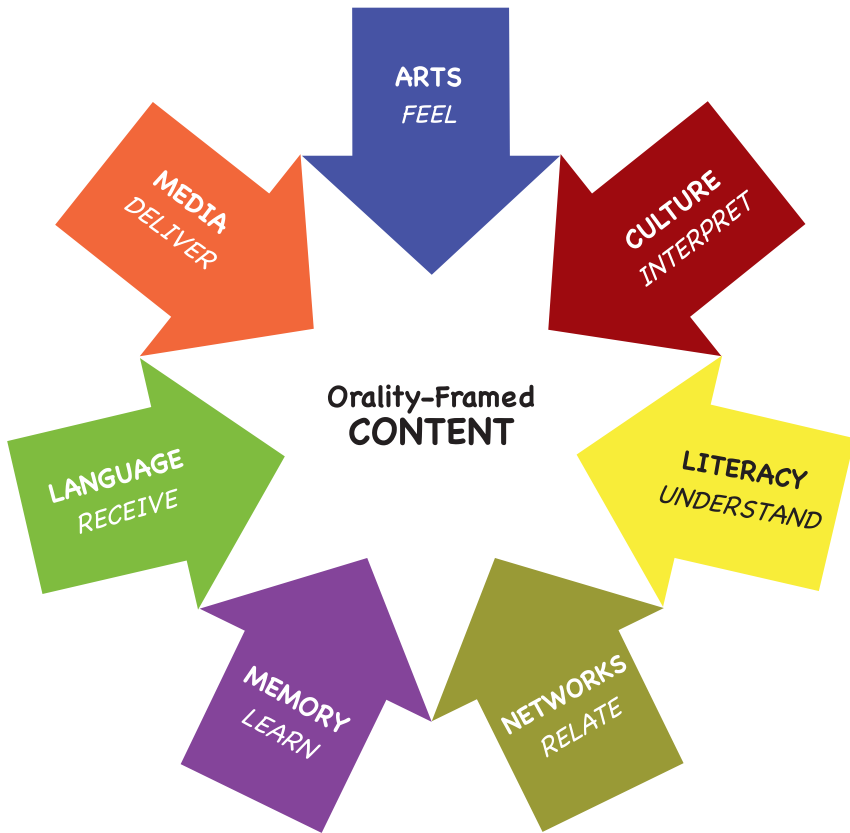
*The Word Became Fresh*



## The Seven Disciplines of Orality

Madinger • Snead • Gravelle • Moon • Getz  
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# SEVEN DISCIPLINES OF ORALITY: A Holistic Model



*Courtesy of Dr. Chuck Madinger who leads Global Impact Mission and serves on the International Orality Network's Leadership Team facilitating the Research Task Force.*

## Improving Memory for Bible Story Content by Using a Scene-Visualization Process

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Two people were walking down a road. They were so sad. As they talked, a man came up and walked along beside them. It was Jesus, but they were kept from recognizing him. In the ensuing conversation, the two explained to him about the events of the previous few days. They were confused about the report that Jesus of Nazareth, whom they had hoped would be the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, had been seen alive three days after his murder and burial. Jesus rebuked them for being slow to believe the message of the Jewish prophets that the Messiah was destined to suffer before entering his glory.

The following statement in this story summarizes their next few hours of conversation in a way that redefined Jewish history forever: “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:27).

The foundation of the biblical record is the historical storyline that culminates in the story of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. Many people would love to hear and understand this storyline if only someone would explain it to them. Besides this clear incentive to learn and tell the stories of the Bible, Jesus himself added further incentive when he charged his followers to communicate about himself in such a way that others would follow and obey him (Matt. 28:18-20).

Since the majority of the world prefers or needs on oral presentation of this material, an effective telling of the stories is important and strategic. Such an approach necessitates a simple and effective way for teachers to learn the stories. The purpose of this article is to consider how to best learn and relate a Bible story in a way that is reproducible and conducive to learning a large set of stories, one at a time.

The process outlined below is a collection of steps that were borrowed from many different biblical storytellers and after experimentation, knit together into a set of steps that seem to work well for many of the people who desire to tell Bible stories and learn this method. Feel free to pick and choose whatever steps work best for you and add them to your own personal learning process. But do hang on to other strategies that better fit your learning style.

The key steps in this process are summarized in the accompanying diagram and are detailed below. After I explain each step, I will give an example illustrating the step in italics.

***Pre-learning: Choose a Designated Learner and a Story***

Perhaps the most important step in learning a Bible story is to choose a designated listener (or audience) who wants to hear a story on a regular basis. This could be your children, grandchildren, a Sunday school class, a small group, nursing home residents, a friend, or an interested acquaintance. The discipline of learning typically only occurs on a regular basis if you are doing it for someone else. This step creates a sense

of obligation and a deadline—two elements crucial to ongoing learning.

Once the listener is chosen, it is time to start learning the Bible story. Although the stories can be taken straight from the Bible, it is usually easier to start with a story set that has been selected by experienced biblical storytellers. There are multiple resources that offer sample story sets from which to choose. An example of a focused story set can be found at [www.btstories.com](http://www.btstories.com) and a complete set can be found at [www.bibletelling.org](http://www.bibletelling.org). Whatever source you use, the principles for learning the story are the same.

For the purpose of illustration, let's look at the story of Jesus calming the storm from Mark 4:35-41; 5:1 and follow four steps.

**1. Read and summarize the story.** Read the text or listen to a recording of it, then summarize the story in one or two sentences. You can do this out loud to yourself or preferably with a partner who is also interested in learning the story. (This is a different role than the designated listener and should ideally be a different person.) This step forces an integration and verbalization



of the story in the learner's mind. Therefore, don't retell the story using a long run-on sentence. Rather, sum up the story in a couple short phrases.

*In our example, I would say out loud, "A terrible storm came up while Jesus and the disciples were crossing the lake. Jesus calmed the storm and the disciples were terrified."*

## **2. Scenify and picturize the story.**

Next, divide the story into scenes, or "scenify" the story. Changes in location or time are natural breaks. Ideally, there should be two to four scenes per story. Sketch the scenes on paper and add in any people or significant things that are present in the story. Sketch quickly. Do not take extra time to make a good drawing. The idea is to identify all the places, people, and things in the story. Now describe your drawing to your partner without retelling the detailed story.

*In our example, I picture three scenes on the Sea of Galilee. The first scene is on the west bank, where Jesus and the disciples get into boats. The second scene is in the middle of the lake during the storm. The story finishes on the east side of the lake.*

*In the first scene, I include stick figures of Jesus, the disciples, and the crowd. There are several boats on the west bank and the sun sets farther west. One speech bubble would be drawn pointing to Jesus.*

*The scene in the middle of the lake contains a boat being rocked by waves. There is a storm cloud overhead. In the boat are the disciples, and Jesus is lying in the back of the boat on a cushion. There are four speech bubbles here—two for the disciples separated by two for Jesus.*

*The final scene has the boat arriving with all passengers on board on the east side of the calm lake.*

## **3. Block and describe each scene.**

The next step is the most crucial to the learning process. It is called "blocking the scene" and is analogous to the process a movie director would undergo to move the script from the page onto the stage. Designate areas in the room for each scene and mentally picture the people and "props" in front of you. Walk around the imagined scene, looking and pointing to where you have mentally placed each item. Next, explain to your partner (or aloud to yourself) what is in each scene, pointing to where you see it, and describe what you "see" happening.

Do not give into the temptation to tell the story at this point. Rather, just describe what you see and explain what happens in a summary form. You are blocking the scene, just as the movie director would do when explaining how he or she wants the scene to look to his or her cast. Once you have done this, the elements and flow of the story will be embedded in your mind.

*In our example, I tend to block the geographic scenes as if I am standing in the north and looking toward the south. This places the lake in front of me with the west bank on stage right and the east bank on stage left. The storm occurs in front of me, in between myself and the person to whom I plan to tell the story. After placing the lake in the room, I walk from stage right to the middle and then finish on stage left, all the while pointing to the items as I picture and describe them.*

The dialogue and narration parts of the story are the most difficult to learn. There are many techniques to help with this, but the truth is, this part will take more time and effort. Knowing how many “dialogue bubbles” occur in each scene and being able to quickly

summarize the flow of conversation is a good first step.

Sometimes, the main ideas can be represented by objects in the mental picture of the story that are “picked up” and talked about by the character. Hand gestures are especially helpful at representing the components of the dialogue and tying the thought-flow together. Sometimes, that dialogue just needs to be memorized. Work on the hard parts of the story separately and repeatedly until they are easily recalled. They will then fit smoothly into the more easily visualized parts of the story.

*For the dialogue boxes in our story, in scene one, I picture Jesus pointing to the other side of the lake when he speaks and I point there myself when I say, “Let’s go over to the other side.” During the storm, I picture the disciples shaking Jesus, so I reach my hands down and shake Jesus when I say, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” Then, I raise my hands to the sky as Jesus rebukes the wind and says to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” My hands go palm up and then point to my heart as Jesus asks, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no*

*faith?” Then, the disciples point to Jesus, the sky, and the sea as they say, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!”*

#### **4. Read, tell, and repeat the story.**

Now that you are finally ready to learn to tell the story, go back and read or listen to the story again while “seeing” where the words fit into your mental picture of the story.

Once you are ready, set aside the text and walk through the scene once again, but this time, instead of describing the scene, actually tell the Bible story. After you have stumbled through the story once, go back and reread it to see what you left out or inadvertently added. Now tell it again in the same manner. Repeat the process until you have it. The content of the Bible story should now be locked into your memory.

#### **Post-learning: Tell the Story to Your Designated Listener**

Now, go and tell the story to your designated listener(s) and anyone else who is willing to hear your story. Once you have told the story correctly about five times, it will be unforgettable. Interestingly, it will be fairly easy for the listener to repeat the story back verbatim, since a told story transfers that mental image so effectively that the story that has

become unforgettable for you will now be unforgettable for them.

As you tell the story, keep the picture and flow of events vivid in your mind. Tell the story slowly so your listener has time to develop the picture in his or her mind. If you forget a part of the story while telling it and remember it later in the telling, don’t get flustered. Just pause and say something like, “Now what I didn’t tell you was that Jesus had previously gone to the back of the boat and fallen asleep on a cushion.”

Any new process is difficult at first. Attempting to tell a Bible story is no different. However, those who walk through this process typically react with the statement, “I can do this!” Working with mental pictures first rather than just memorizing words may initially seem like an unnecessary extra step. However, once the process is learned, it usually speeds up learning and significantly improves long-term retention and recall. It also helps when translating the story to a different language or adjusting the story for time constraints. A commitment to learn and tell the stories of the Bible requires determination and effort, but hopefully these steps can make this goal more easily achievable.

