

Native American Tales



National Mississippi River Museum & Aquarium
History Education Curriculum

Target Grades:	4 th – 6 th grade
Key Words:	Native Americans
Subject Areas:	Native Americans, storytelling
Duration:	45 minutes - 1 hour

Title: *Native American Tales*

Summary:

Have you ever wondered why the fawn has spots or why some trees are always green? Native American cultures provide a treasure of stories of plants and animals, and the earth on which they thrive. Let's gather together to enjoy some of these traditional tales and create new ones along the way.

Objectives:

To explore the Native American storytelling culture and prompt the students to use language skills and creativity to write their own short stories.

Group Size: from 5 to roughly 30 maximum students

Background for Educators:

See *Keepers of the Night*, by Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac for background discussion:

Very few Native American tribes had written history. Instead, they had oral history told as stories. Stories were/are powerful tools used to teach and discipline in Native American cultures. Among many Native American cultures there were certain stories that were usually told at specific times of the year.

The way one would learn the stories was by listening to them over and over. For this activity you should try to practice the stories so you can tell them from memory to help bring the story to life. Do not to change the ending or combine stories together. The elements of a story create a whole, living being unto itself. Stories to many Native Americans are life; they help maintain the cultural integrity of the people and to keep the world in balance.

Once a storyteller is able to "see" a story and feel comfortable with its telling, you may find it helpful to have a way of recalling the story. The Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) storyteller or

Hage'ota carried a bag of items that acted as mnemonic devices-each represented a story. The Hage'ota or perhaps a child for the audience would pull an item out of the bag, the item would be shown to the people and the story would begin.

In many Native American cultures, everyone was allowed to have a say and people listened with patience. People would sit in a circle during the time of storytelling because in a circle no person is at the head.

A good story cannot exist without a good listener. There are certain things which you, as a reader or teller, can do to help your listeners be more effective and involved. One device is the use of "response words." Tell the listeners that whenever you say "Ho?" they are to respond with "Hey!" can also be used as pacing elements in the story or to make the listeners feel themselves entering the tale.

Materials Needed:

- Native American stories found in books, or photocopies, or potentially from memory
- Paper
- Pencils
- Mammal Furs, including but not limited to: beaver, deer, red fox, raccoon, coyote, skunk, otter, etc.
- turtle shells

Procedure:

Read and/or tell Native American stories intermingled with passing around visual aids. Successful pairing of stories with animal furs, turtle shells, teeth, claws, etc. brings the stories to life.

For students to have a part in telling the story, use the following approach: type up the story in a large, readable font, and in numbered fragments, such as sentence by sentence, to reach the desired number of students (give or take a few, as you can always help tell the tale and/or put teachers and chaperones to work too!). Cut the fragmented story into slips and distribute the slips in some way to the students, challenging them to arrange themselves in the proper order to them tell the story successfully. It works well to have this done with students in a circle, then scatter the slips on the floor in the middle of the circle and have each student grab one and use the numbered fragments to rearrange the circle for the story. When it is time for each student to contribute to the story's development, they should step into the middle of the circle, read his/her fragment, and then return to the circle to be active listeners.

If time allows, have students create their own Native American tales. This can be done individually or in pairs, and with their own story ideas or by developing themes/titles you provide. This activity can also be a take-home or often one to take back to the classroom. If time does not allow, this creative portion can be done as a group brainstorm with some impromptu storytelling on the student's behalf. In some cases, even getting up front and acting out a theme was a very successful part of this program.

Stories most often utilized include:

How the Fawn got its Spots

Turtle Races with Beaver

How Turtle Flew South for the Winter

Otter Gets Tricked

Why Some Trees are Always Green

The Coming of Corn

Evaluation:

Stories the students write on their own are collected and sent back to school with the teachers, who often read them and discuss as a follow-up to the program.

Additional resources:

Stories can be obtained from many sources, but the 'Keepers' series of books, by Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac, are excellent sources.

Extensions:

American Indians of the Upper Mississippi River

Credits:

Amber Majerus, National Mississippi River Museum & Aquarium; Dubuque, Iowa.
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