

Gossip and the truth

As fascinating as it is to listen to, we should all recognize that gossip is almost always greatly distorted, if not completely false. As a story gets told and retold, it changes: some things are added, others are dropped, and still others are distorted — often beyond recognition.

By the time the story is retold for the third time, it will have been changed in many ways. Things will have been added, others will have been lost, and still others will have been completely distorted.

In this activity, the way stories change as they are retold is made the basis of an activity. However, unlike gossip, this activity involves not just speaking and listening but reading and writing as well.

Make sure that all the students understand the potentially difficult words in the story. At the very least, it is necessary that the students all know what a town square is, what a riot is, what rioters are, what a crowd is, and what silence is.

By the way, you would be surprised how many classes have no idea what silence is.

Then, send four of your better students (Student A, Student B, Student C, and Student D) out of the room for about fifteen minutes.

Of course, sending students outside the class for 15 minutes — with nothing at all to do — is just asking for trouble. Perhaps you might give them something to do or something to read.

Read the story to the students remaining in the room. For a very advanced group, dictate the whole story to them. To make it a little easier, write the 15 words found at the top of Student Worksheet 1 on the board to help them.

For a less advanced group, give them each a copy of Student Worksheet 1, which has most of the story already filled in. What the students have to do is listen carefully and fill in the missing words. The more difficult missing words — but not all of the missing words — are found at the top of Student Worksheet 1.

For this activity to work well, make sure that the students understand all the words in the story.

First, bring back Student A, who was sent out of the class earlier. Of course, Student A, who was waiting outside, does not know the story.

Have a student from the class read Student A the story. After the story has been read to the Student A, Student A can ask just two questions about the story.

Now, the fun begins. Hand out Student Worksheet 2. Or, as an alternative, simply write the categories up on the board for the students to copy down. If you write the categories on the board, erase them before Student B is called back into the room.

Bring back Student B. Have Student A tell the story to Student B! Student B can also ask Student A two questions.

Student A is now done. Give Student A a copy of the worksheet and have him sit down.

Now, repeat the same process but with Student B telling the story to Student C.

That is, bring back Student C into the classroom. Have Student B tell the story to Student C! Of course, Student C can also ask Student B two questions.

Finally, repeat the process with Student D.

By the time the story is retold for the third time, it will have been changed in many ways. Things will have been added, others will have been lost, and still others will have been completely distorted.

To conclude the exercise, put the three categories on the board and ask volunteers to say what was added, left out, or changed.

Student Worksheet 1

Listen to the story and fill-in the missing words. Here are some words to help you, but remember that not all of the missing words are in this list.

riot	burn	soldier	rioter	orders	honest
captain	hurt	raise	square	break	stood
crowd	windows	street			

“The captain and the rioters”

A long time ago in Barcelona, there was a _____. The _____ were full of people. They _____ in the town square. They were angry. They _____ shop _____. They _____ down houses.

Into the town square _____ a _____ and his _____. The captain wanted to _____ the rioting but he did not want to _____ anybody.

The _____ had a plan. He _____ on a wall. His _____ their guns. There was silence.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” he shouted to the _____. “I have _____ to shoot the rioters, but I can see many good, honest people. I want all the good, _____ people to leave the _____, because I only want to shoot rioters.”

In less than two minutes, the square was completely empty.

Student Worksheet 2

This story will be told three times. Student A will tell it to Student B. Student B will tell it to Student C. And, Student C will tell it to Student D.

However, each time it is told some things will probably get changed. Each time the story is told, listen carefully and take notes about how the story gets changed from the original. Use these three categories for your notes:

Student A telling Student B:

Things added	Things left out	Things changed
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Student B telling Student C:

Things added	Things left out	Things changed
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Student C telling Student D:

Things added	Things left out	Things changed
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____