Activities

Pourquoi Tales

Grades: PreK–K, 1–2, 3–5, 6–8

Overview
Pourquoi tales are old legends told to explain how things came to be. First, stories offer explanations for classic questions---why is there day and night? This Lesson Plan encourages children to explore the reasoning in a legend, probing with questions like "What happened next?" and create original pourquoi tales or act out one as a group or link to other subject areas like math or geography.

Introduction
Why do chameleons change color? Why is the ocean blue? Children are naturally curious about the wonders of nature. To feed this interest in the natural world — as well as inspire great imaginative writing — you can use pourquoi tales! Pourquoi [por-kwa] means "why" in French. Pourquoi
are old legends told to explain why certain events happened. These tales often start in the past, e.g. A long, long time ago . . . and end when the explanation is complete. Pourquoi tales are most often concerned with animals and the natural world. As you begin to read pourquoi tales together, encourage your students to discover similarities and differences in the various stories. Keep a large class chart labeled "What We Discovered About Pourquoi Tales." As you talk about each story, record the class's new discoveries on your list.

HOW THE LEOPARD GOT ITS SPOTS
A Read-Aloud Retelling
A long, long time ago, Leopard was the plain, solid brown-yellow color of the desert. He was so plain he was almost invisible against the brown-yellow desert. When he headed out to hunt, Giraffe and Zebra and the other animals didn't know which way to jump. To escape Leopard's appetite, Giraffe and Zebra headed into the great shadowy forest. When Leopard tried to follow them, he stood out like a bright-yellow sunflower against a dark fence. He could not hunt at all. Giraffe and Zebra saw yellow Leopard right away, and ran off deeper into the forest. Leopard had to do something. He asked his human friend to help him. So the Man carefully dipped his five fingertips in black ink and painted spots all over Leopard's fur. Now Leopard could blend into the shadows, and once again he became a great and powerful hunter!

Exploring the Tale
Talk with the children about the story of Leopard and his spots. Ask them to consider the story from Leopard's point of view and from Zebra's. Is it good that Leopard was able to get his spots and hunt again? As part of their exploration of the story, take a vote to decide whether leopard should have gotten his spots. Your class might want to try dramatizing the story.

Camouflage Counting
After you've enjoyed "How the Leopard Got Its Spots," try this counting-by-fives activity. In the fable, a human paints spots on the leopard using his five fingertips held closely together. Give each child two sheets of yellow construction paper. One piece serves as the body of the leopard. The children use the second sheet to draw and cut out the head and legs. After they paste their leopard together, ask
students to dip the tips of their fingers and thumb in brown paint to print 100 spots on their leopards. When the leopards are finished, count their spots by fives and by tens up to one hundred!

WHY THE SUN AND THE MOON LIVE IN THE SKY
(Southeastern Nigeria)
A Read-Aloud Retelling
A long time ago, when the world was new, the Sun married the Moon and they lived happy as can be in a little cottage near the Ocean. One day, Sun and Moon invited Ocean over to their house for a visit. Ocean liked it so much he wanted to stay. Sun and Moon liked Ocean, and hoped the cottage would be big enough for all three of them. So Sun and Moon invited Ocean to stay with them. In came Ocean with all his friends: the whales, the fish, the porpoises, and all the creatures that live in the sea. The water rose higher and higher in the cottage. Soon there was no more room for Sun and Moon, so they rose up into the sky where they have lived ever since!

WHY THE SUN AND THE MOON LIVE IN THE SKY
(A Zuni Legend of New Mexico)
A Read-Aloud Retelling
A long time ago, there was no day. It was always dark and always summer. This was because the Kachina, a very powerful people, had stolen the Sun and the Moon and locked them away in a box. In the dim light, Coyote and Eagle, two friends, wandered the desert. Coyote and Eagle had always hunted together, but Coyote could not hunt anymore because he could not see at night. Coyote suggested that they go to find the Sun and Moon and make them light up the world. Eagle was worried. He reminded Coyote that the Sun and Moon were very strong, and it was dangerous to try to trick them. In the end, Eagle agreed to help Coyote. While the Kachina were sleeping, Coyote and Eagle crept into their village, stole the Sun and Moon, and headed into the hills. Coyote told Eagle that he wanted to open the box containing the Sun and the Moon. Eagle said no. They must wait until after their travels and open it with their eyes closed. Coyote grumbled. He couldn't wait to see what was in that box. Finally he grew so curious that he threw it open. The light of the Sun was so bright it blinded Coyote's eyes. The Sun and Moon laughed and flew far away, up into the sky where they are today.

Exploring the Tale
Talk with the children about these two tales of the origin of the sun and moon. How are they different? Do the children like one explanation better than the other? In the Nigerian tale, Sun and Moon are forced up into the sky. Why does this happen? Is it fair? Ask the children to think about the character of Ocean in this story. How is he like the real ocean? In the Zuni tale, the Sun and Moon are stolen and Coyote decides to steal them back. Talk to the children about the meaning of this story: Why did Coyote do what he did? Was Coyote right? Encourage the children to argue both sides. Finally, use this story as a writing prompt. Ask the children to write about night. What would the world be like if one morning the sun forgot to rise?

**Sun, Moon, and Ocean Poems**
As you read these tales, it's a good time to work on imaginative language. Ask the children to write poems that describe the sun, the ocean, or another natural feature of the Earth. Begin with the stories. What descriptive words can students find? Adjectives that might describe the Sun in the Nigerian tale are *generous* and *happy*. Other "Sun-ny" adjectives are *fiery* and *enormous*. Ask each child to come up with twelve adjectives, and then choose the best six for his or her poem.

**Learning About the Sun and Moon**
Gather children in a circle and invite several children to act out each of the sun and moon fables. Then, help the class to understand the scientific knowledge we have about the Sun and Earth. Here's an easy way to demonstrate the relationship between two. Stick a sharpened pencil into an orange to make a simple model "Earth." Ask a child to act as the Earth and hold it lollipop-style. Put a lamp without its shade in the middle of the circle. This represents the Sun. Explain to children that both the Sun and Earth rotate on their own axes, and the Earth revolves around the Sun. With the room darkened, have the child holding the Earth model circle the lamp, while slowly turning the pencil holding the orange. The children will see the way the light and shadow fall upon the model, simulating night and day.

**WHY MOSQUITOES BUZZ IN PEOPLE'S EARS**
**A Read-Aloud Retelling**
A long, long time ago, Mosquitoes didn't buzz, they talked. And talked and talked and talked. One day, Mosquito was talking to Iguana, telling him about his vacation, about every minute of his vacation.
Mosquito would not let Iguana say one word. Iguana was so annoyed that he walked away, leaving Mosquito still talking. Iguana grumbled and waved her tail. She was still grumbling when she passed her friend Snake, and forgot all about saying hello. Snake's feelings were hurt. He felt so sad that he slithered down a rabbit hole. "Help," yelled Rabbit as she scurried out of the hole, terrified of Snake. "What's wrong?" cawed Crow as he saw Rabbit racing. Danger must be near. "Run for your lives!" cawed Crow. Monkey heard Crow's warning and took off through the treetops, leaping branch to branch. When monkey landed on Owl's branch, high up in a leafy tree, Owl's nest tipped off the branch and fell to the ground, breaking Owl's eggs. Owl was heartbroken, so much that she didn't hoot for the sun to come up. The whole jungle was in darkness. Everyone was mad at Mosquito. Finally Owl hooted for the sun to come up and when it did, Mosquito lost his voice. All he could do was buzz in everyone's ears: "Zzzzzz! Is everyone still mad at me?"

**Exploring the Tale**

Brainstorm with the children about the mosquito who talked too much. Ask: Is Mosquito to blame for everything that happened? Did he deserve to be punished? This is a good story with which to explore cause and effect, action and consequence. Next, encourage children to explore their own feelings. If only one person is talking, is it a conversation? Why is it important to listen? Then ask: How would they feel if someone broke something of theirs, as Monkey broke Owl's eggs? What if it was an accident? After your discussion, ask the children to write short letters from the characters: For example, Iguana could write a friendly letter to Snake.

**And Then What Happened?**

In *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears*, one thing after another goes wrong in the jungle! On large index cards, have children illustrate each event, and write a sentence summarizing the picture. Then mix up the cards and have children try to put them back in order. The children will enjoy the mixed-up story and learn important sequencing skills as they reorder the events.

**Mosquitoes and Iguanas**

Use this fable as an opportunity to explore the difference between fact and fiction. Learn the facts about mosquitoes, iguanas, owls, and the other animals mentioned in the story. In small groups, have your students record the creature's factual characteristics and those according to the fable.
Write Your Own Animal Pourquoi Tales
Encourage your students to learn about the animal world by writing their own pourquoi tales. After reading a series of pourquoi tales with your class, talk about the many elements they contain. Ask your student to choose animals for their stories that arouse their curiosity, from alligators to yaks. Encourage them to learn about their animals using the Internet and the library. Next, have children start to write using a story frame: Begin with "Long ago...," and end with "...and that's why (example: the whale has a spout!)" When the stories are finished, have the children illustrate them and bind them into a book titled "The World According to (name of teacher)’s Class."

Resource Books
- Why the Possum’s Tale Is Bare, and Other North American Indian Nature Tales, edited by James E. Connolly (Stemmer House, 1992).

Web Sites
- www.ilhawaii.net/~stony/loreindx.html
- www.ocbtracker.com/ladypixel/legend.html