



Successful Narration

by Sheila Carroll

“Narrating is an art, like poetry-making or painting, because it is there in every child’s mind, waiting to be discovered, and is not the process of disciplinary education.” —Charlotte Mason, Home Education

Are you wondering if you’re doing the “narration thing” correctly? Are you frustrated with your attempts at including narration in your homeschool? Do you wonder how to assess your child’s learning if you are using **living books** and not workbooks? If you are, then I welcome you to the club. Many teaching parents have at least a certain amount of difficulty getting going with narration. I know I did. I would like to share with you what I learned along the way to seeing my child successfully narrate.

Narration is a simple but powerful tool of learning. Charlotte Mason was not the first to use this method, but she was the first to use it as *the* tool of learning. Most children enjoy telling you what they know about a subject. It delights them to tell about an incident, however small it may seem to us. Charlotte Mason believed that this love of telling could be used as a foundation for self-education.

Narration is a natural way to demonstrate and organize information. Charlotte Mason’s idea of narration as a tool for education and assessment was far broader in intent than mere “parroting back” information. It involves really knowing the thing read.

In order for narration to be an effective form of self-education, the children must be read aloud to from the very first and with the best literature available. Contained within great books is nourishment for the child’s mind in the form of ideas. As Charlotte Mason has said: as the child’s body needs nourishment to grow, so too the child’s mind needs nourishment in the form of ideas in order to grow.

Narration, then, provides an effective way for those ideas to be made specifically the child’s own. Narration, if done consistently and correctly, gives the child:

- Beauty of expression
- Recall of material
- Increased mental facility
- A means of evaluating what is understood

The Basics of Narration

When you are ready, sit with the child (this also works with more than one child) and say gently with a smile, “I am going to read (give the title) one time to you. I want you to listen carefully. Then tell me in your own words all you remember of the story.” After you have read the story, pause a moment to let it settle in, then say, “Tell me all you remember about the story.” At this point listen without comment until the child is done.

If there is more than one child you can let one start and the other add. Or, alternately, you can have the first child narrate and then ask the second (or third), “Is there anything you would like to add?” Taking turns narrating while others listen builds the habit of attention in children.

One: Start Small

Start with a small, interesting paragraph when beginning narration with your child. The best time to begin is when the child is about six years old. If your child is younger than six and is narrating spontaneously, listen intently and with interest. Show your approval with smiles and nods, but don't require it of the child. After age six, or when you begin formal schooling, start with simple stories of a high quality. Aesop's Fables is the best literature to use. These contain a minimum of characters (usually only two) and a minimum of action (usually only one-two events).

As the child matures, you should be adding increasingly complex material. The progression should be from short paragraph to brief passage, single page to gradually several pages. Most children in the upper elementary grades should be able to narrate several pages if they have been given regular practice in narration.

Two: Choose Material That Is Appropriate

In the early years, after Aesop's Fables, I found folk tales the best subject for narration. Children are able to follow the “what happens next” and reconstruct it in their minds. Stories are stories because the images and events are linked together in some logical way. In “Goldilocks and the Three Bears”, for example, there are three bowls, three chairs and three beds of graduated size. There are also three distinct parts to the story, like acts in a play. This is a logical progression that the child can understand easily. By allowing children ample opportunity to narrate back these pleasurable stories, their expressive language will grow by leaps and bounds. Suggested age ranges and appropriate material:

6-8 years—folk tales (read no more than three to five minutes) experiences (such as a visit to grandma's or a field trip), events in nature (such as the flow of the seasons, the cycle of a butterfly from pupa to chrysalis to butterfly)

9-12 years—more complex folk tales, add biographies, well-written non-fiction, fiction (a rule of thumb is 10-15 minutes)

12 and up—continue as in nine to eleven years with increasingly complex literature. Begin work writing summaries (outlining first is an option), creating products as a response to the literature (play, mural, puppet, letter recommending the book)

Three: Listen Without Comment

This step is by far the most difficult for us as our child's teacher. But, be silent we must. If the child suspects that you will offer “helpful

questions,” then he knows he does not have to do all the work himself. Do not interrupt! Doing this is critical to your child’s budding skill. It is also part of respecting the child—expecting that he can and will do his own work. This is assuming that you have given the child material that is appropriate to his age and development.

Four: Be Consistent

Several years ago my daughter, Bridget, was becoming more and more resistant to narration. So, I did what I shouldn’t have—I made her do it. Finally, one day she wailed, “I hate narration!” I was appalled at the state of affairs. So, I did another thing I shouldn’t have—I quit requiring it of her. A whole school year went by with no narration. Really. Then, I had the summer to think things over. I realized that too often I had chosen material inappropriate for her, and I did not use narration consistently, only as it occurred to me. At the start of the next school year, I sat down with her and explained that we would begin again and we would use narration every day. Charlotte Mason has written that when forming a new habit to watch over the formation of it with care and consistency. This I did. Little by little Bridget began to regain confidence and skill. Today she narrates long passages with ease, and making books of her narrations is a special pleasure.

Five: Use Many Forms of Narration

Be creative in your use of different forms of narration. Frequent verbal narration is to be encouraged because it builds expressive language and clear thinking. However, many children enjoy other forms of narration. Here are a few below:

- Record narration on cassette tape, then replay it so child can hear
- Transcribe child’s narration word for word. Read it back to the child for any additions (remember, no helping)
- Create a poster with characters and setting, then have child retell
- Make a story streamer (cut a sheet of paper 5”X25”, then fold in equal sections according to number of parts of the story. Have child draw pictures from the story in sequence—older ones can add text—then retell the story from the pictures)
- Act out part or the entire story with your child
- Make a timeline, then retell
- Research geography of story and have child tell about it
- Make a diorama