

Pourquoi Stories: Creating Tales of Why and  
Discovering Answers to Why Questions

By Leslie Garcia

Pourquoi is French for “why,” and so a Pourquoi Tale is a story that tells how or why something exists. Pourquoi stories come to us from many different cultures. Rudyard Kipling’s’ Just So Stories have made this genre famous.

### Overview

In this lesson, students will be introduced to pourquoi stories and their cultures of origin. Students will learn to recognize and discuss the style and elements of pourquoi stories. Final production will be creation of an illustrated diorama which features the problem, block/change, and outcome of stories studied. Finally, in a compare/contrast exercise, students will research a factual topic and write a paragraph to explain why or how this event or phenomenon in nature occurs. These will be presented through the Author’s Chair or paired-sharing reports.

## Objective

Asking “why” is developmentally appropriate for young children and is the “seed” to begin critical thinking. It is through evaluation of the answers to why questions that one begins to weigh validity. Through use of mentor text and inquiry-based learning, the student will be able to discriminate fact from fiction as evidenced by explaining why or how a phenomenon occurs. Comparison will be sustained by writing a pourquoi tale and a factual report.

## Instructional Plan

1. Gather and familiarize yourself with pourquoi stories. Use both school and public libraries. Search for books online. There are also numerous Native American lore websites.
2. Choose several read-alouds and gather information about the cultures from which the stories came.

## Possible Selections:

Just So Stories by Rudyard Kipling

How the Camel Got Its Hump -Kipling

How the Leopard Got His Spots -Kipling

How the Elephant Became -Kipling

How the Rhinoceros Got His Skin -Kipling

How the Whale Got Its Throat-Kipling

How the Ostrich Got Its Long Neck -Kipling

Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears

How Chipmunk Got His Stripes

How the Guinea Fowl Got Her Spots

Armadillo Tattletale

How the Rooster Got His Crown

The Beginning of the Armadillos -Kipling

Native American Lore:

How Bear Lost His Tail

How Rabbit Brought Fire to the People

How the Milky Way Came to Be

Resources for Factual Explanations of Why:

The Children's Book of Questions and Answers – Anthony Addison

The Answer Book – Mary Elting

## Non-Fiction Children's' Books

### Web Searches

3. Post the following in the classroom. After reading selected read alouds, identify these elements in the story.

Key elements of a pourquoi story include:

- The story explains why something exists
  - It is often about a natural occurrence
  - The main characters can be animals or humans
  - The story has a distinctive “storytelling” voice
  - The story tells something about the people from which it came and what they believe
4. Assign a story to each student. Use a worksheet or individual conferences to identify these elements in the story. Students will also write one sentence for each of the following: describe the problem, block/change, and outcome of the story. Students will create a four-sided illustrated diorama with one side being a “title page” and each of the remaining sides for the respective three sentences. Creation and performance of a skit by small group study of the tales is an alternative or additional response to the reading.

5. Discussion of writing to identify what is fact and fiction in each student's pourquoi story and points made in the factual report will be the final activity. Charts to compare and contrast would be a helpful visual.

## Outcome

It is hoped that this lesson will foster skill in information evaluation and critical thinking. Use of Josh Waitzkin's learning principle, Making Smaller Circles, is the lens utilized to facilitate students' greater understanding, appreciation, and discovery of cultures and themselves. The study of pourquoi tales provides a rich tradition from which to make connections. The principle of Making Smaller Circles will reinforce a new way of viewing the world.

Note: Elements of the Pourquoi Tale are taken from various sources including ReadWriteThink and other teaching guides.