

Felt Stories in Storytimes

Why do we use flannel board stories during storytime?

- Encouraging enjoyment of language – felt stories provide a more intriguing vehicle for sharing a rhyme or short story. They can help toddlers who show no interest in books to get some enjoyment out of storytime.
- Flannel boards aid in the teaching of visual literacy – learning to look and construct meaning from objects. Children use personal connections to enable the decoding of visual representations of their experiences. They will recognize a picture of a cat, drawn by different illustrators as a “symbol” for a cat, and know that it is *not* a cat, but represents one. Later they learn that letters represent ideas when assembled into words.
- More information on using flannel board activities to teach the early literacy skills will be provided by Serena Butch.

Board Basics

- Search library or preschool education supply catalogs and websites for flannel board options. They can range from 16” x 24” small self-supporting easel flannel boards for \$26.95 to multi-functional two-sided boards mounted to stands for \$179.00.
- You can purchase boards that are attached to stands. These should ideally be higher than children’s heads so a story can be seen over an audience, but often are lower if designed for preschool circle time. Using a higher board makes it harder for toddlers to wander up and remove pieces during a story. These boards often come with a magnetic white board on the back, making them useful for draw and tells as well. Unfortunately, these multi-purpose boards are too heavy to use for outreach programs.
- Boards that do not have their own stands require a sturdy easel in the storytime room. Parents should be cautioned to keep toddlers from playing under the easel or pulling on it.
- Considerations during purchase or construction: surface should be large enough for your largest flannel story pieces. You will want a board that is light-weight, with a non-skid edge (for times that you need to prop your board on a chair) and has a handle for portability if you carry the board to outreach sites.
- Board surface should be covered loosely with flannel or fleece. If the surface material is glued down, this reduces the static action too much.
- Your board should sit at an angle for the pieces to grip well, so wall-mounted or magnet-mounted to a straight surface is not ideal. Large pieces will constantly fall to the floor.

- Light blue is the most commonly used background color, although black is nice to have for night scenes and to provide high contrast for baby audiences. Keep a large piece of black felt for pinning or clipping onto the board occasionally.
- My quick and easy board has a large piece of flat cardboard as a base, a piece of light blue fleece from the remnant rack at JoAnn's, a handle cut from an old belt, all attached with duct tape. I ran a zig-zag line of puffy paint along the bottom and one side to prevent it from skidding if propped on a chair. It cost about \$5.00 to make, or maybe a little more if you don't already have puffy paint or duct tape. To prevent skidding you could also just bring along a piece of anti-skid rug mat and put it between chair and board. Double-wall cardboard, mat board or foam core would make an even sturdier base.
- An idea for the small felt boards that came from the book **Book Tales** is to glue a mitt to the back and use it as a hand-held board for "5 Little" rhymes. Add a pocket to the back to hold a card with the words to your rhyme.

Purchasing Flannel Board Story Sets

- There are many companies and independent representatives that sell commercially printed flannel board story sets, but I have found only two large manufacturers of these sets: Little Folk Visuals and Story Time Felts. The Little Folk Visuals sets are widely available through Amazon and preschool education companies. The Story Time Felts are sold by independent consultants from home-based businesses. You can see examples of both here today. You may want to order some of the classic fairy tales like Little Red Riding Hood. The Little Folk Visuals set for that tale comes with a background and interior, and 13 story figures. The pieces range from 2 ½ inches to 10 ½ inches high. The set comes with a lesson guide and coloring pages, with pieces precut for \$19.95 or uncut for \$14.95. The color and detail in these sets cannot be beat, but the individual pieces are on the small side. I think they are fine for smaller groups of preschoolers, or lower elementary but not ideal for use with babies and toddlers. Here is a Story Time Felts set for "Nap Time" an interpretation of **The Napping House**. There are eleven figures included for \$11.99 uncut or \$13.99 precut.
- There are a growing number of small Internet businesses selling handcrafted felt sets through websites and Ebay auctions. Genesisarts seems to have nice quality to their sets to accompany popular children's books such as Bear Snores On (12 piece set for \$11.99). Some sets appear to be printed on felt, while others seem to be homemade, like we'll be working on today. Another example of a family owned felt story business is Glitterful Felt Stories. Sets such as An Old Lady Who Swallowed a Bat have 9 pieces, with

the old lady measuring 12” x 7” for \$12.00, and are made for you after payment is received, using felt, glitter fabric glue and google eyes.

Choosing a book, rhyme, or song to adapt to flannelboard

- First and foremost, choose a story, rhyme or song that is developmentally appropriate for the age of your storytime group.
- Make a flannel from a book that has a good storyline and an appropriate theme, but is too physically small for showing to a group at storytime. Example: **The Ghost’s Dinner, The Naked Mole Rat Gets Dressed, Love and Kisses** by Wilson
- If a book fits a desired theme, but has too many sentences on the page for your group, pages that are too cluttered for toddlers, or is too long, make a flannel that covers the same storyline in a simplified way. Example: **Ten Red Apples** by Hutchins
- You can make a story interactive by sharing the flannel pieces with your audience – let preschool children add colored felt spots to Dog while you describe his adventure. Example: **Dog’s Colorful Day**
- A cumulative story can be successfully adapted to flannel if the scene at the base of the tale is static. Example: more toys fall out of bed in “Crib Critters” poem
- Create flannel pictures that will make the words of a song more concrete to little ones. Example: (*I’m Gonna Eat*) *On Thanksgiving Day* from Whaddaya Think of That? CD by Laurie Berkner, *In the Autumn Air* from Makin’ Music: Boogie to the Beat CD
- For songs, poems or games that include children guessing an object from clues, make a flannel picture that shows the answer to reward the correct guessers and inform others (and English-language learners). Example: Bug in a Rug or Where is Mouse?
- For rhymes and songs that are repetitive, but change subjects in succeeding verses, flannel pictures will help the audience know which verse you are on. Example: Old MacDonald or I’ll Drive a Dump Truck
- Make “5 Little” flannels to accompany your fingerplays. You can count them together as they are put on the board, show each one disappearing, and recount the ones that are left before the next line of the fingerplay. Helps toddlers make the connection that their fingers are representing 5 ducks, snowmen, etc.
- If you use any songs where things are added to the main character, you can make a flannel to add the features onto. Example: Teddy Wore His Red Shirt
- It is fun to use flannel pieces to reveal objects that are hidden.

Example: Little Boy Blue or **Mouse's First Fall** by Thompson – make a mouse and some leaves to hide him

Presentation Tips

- Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse – and hang the words on the side of your easel for times when you draw a blank anyway!
- Have your pieces stacked up in order of appearance – out of reach of the little ones.
- After placing pieces, turn and speak to your audience, not the board.
- Make multiple flannel shapes to allow children to participate in a rhyme or activity. Example: flannel leaves can be dropped on the children while sharing a falling leaves rhyme, then they can put them up on the flannel board to “rake them into a pile.” For older children, have them bring up their leaves one color at a time.
- Use puppets to interact with the flannel pieces on the board when the story makes that possible. Example: Use the wolf puppet with a 3 Little Pigs flannel, or use animal puppets to eat up apples in 5 Red Apples
- Be careful about teaching babies and toddlers to take items OFF of the flannelboard – they will repeat that action EVERY time you use the board! You may want to use the smaller board that you received today for flannel interactions. You can carry it to your audience members for them to add pieces to, or remove them.

Supplies for making flannel story pieces

- Felt: can be bought as single 8 ½ x 11 sheets in solid colors, heathered, patterned, glittered, or embossed. Felt is also sold by the yard in fabric stores. Fleece can also be used to make big shapes that don't require a lot of detail drawn onto them.
- Sticky-backed felt is essential for laminated pieces. If you have small laminated pieces you could also use those little felt pads that you get for chair legs or lamp bases. Stick-on Velcro dots (the hook side) can also be used.
- Fabric and vinyl pieces can be used to create interesting story pieces. Think about using a small calico print for a lady's dress, fake fur for a teddy bear or gray wrinkly vinyl for an elephant. The remainder bin at the fabric store is a good place to look for inspiration. Your sticky-back felt will make the pieces stay on the board.
- Fusible webbing (like Wonder Under) is used with an iron to glue any fabric to plain felt. You cannot use it with vinyl though.

- Elmer's School Gel Glue can actually glue felt to felt without the stiff lumps that you get from hot glue! In case you didn't know, Elmer's white glue just soaks into felt and the pieces come apart. Alene's tacky glue sometimes works for me, but not as well as the gel glue.
- Need to layer some flannel pieces in a hurry? Reach for the double stick tape! Also useful for attaching your pattern to dark colored felt before cutting, since you can't easily trace onto dark colors.
- Glue dots are little dots of super sticky glue that come on a paper backing. Use them when adding google eyes or small embellishments to your figures – no more one-eyed characters when you are telling a story!
- Trims – rickrack, tiny pompoms, lace are fun to add – use glue dots.
- Sharpie permanent markers or puffy paints can be used to add details.
- Scissors – paper-cutting scissors for cutting out the patterns and separate fabric scissors. Cutting paper dulls scissors and makes cutting fabric difficult.
- Die-cut machine and dies – can be used to make story pieces from any die that you own or can borrow. Layer felt against the rubber side of the die and tape it in place. Cover the felt with a piece of scrap paper to help the felt slide smoothly over the cutting plate without getting snagged. Load this “sandwich” through the die-cut machine as usual. Save the paper die-cut that you get also, if you need to make a clothing pattern for the figure.
- Interfacing – can be used like tracing paper to make cloth-like story pieces that you can color in with markers.
- Fusible Interfacing – can be used the same as interfacing, but can then be ironed onto a white felt background for more stability.
- Computer, Internet connection and color printer – some rhymes and songs are best enhanced with color photographs of the real object, especially if you need food or vehicles. Search Google Images or Bing Images for a photograph or clear graphic, save it, enlarge it if necessary with Microsoft Publisher or even in Microsoft Word, then send it to the color printer.
- Scanner or color copier – can be used to make scenes from a selected book large enough to share with big storytime crowds of older children. Scan key scenes into your computer, save them, then enlarge with a publishing program. Print the scenes out in color. If you have a color copier, scan pages on it, then enlarge to desired size and print in color.
- Laminating machine – if you color or print your own paper story pieces, they will last much longer if you can laminate them. A piece of Sticky-back felt will keep the piece on your flannel board. Use magnet tape if you want to place the figure on a magnet board.

- Colored copy paper – if you want to make 5 pigs from a pattern book, why not print them directly onto pink paper?
- Sandpaper – can be glued onto the back of story pieces to make them stay on the felt board.
- Clear packaging material or scraps from laminated pieces can be used for fun accessories, like drinking glasses, or astronaut helmet visors.
- Old books – before discarding books with worn bindings, see if you can make the illustrations into a story for the flannel board. You may have to color copy the back sides of some pages.
- Coloring books or online coloring pages – can be used as paper patterns
- Quilt appliqué patterns can also be used to make felt story pieces, so check your library's 746.46 area.
- Check author websites for coloring pictures of characters that you would like to use.

Techniques for creating felt story pieces

- If you are using a paper pattern, cut out the whole outline from the paper first. Trace it onto felt the color of the largest portion of the character or object. This will give you the base onto which details will be attached. After tracing you can cut off or cut out details like the chicken's feet, beak, crest and wing line. Use the pattern piece that you cut from to guide placement of the features. Sticky-back felt, 2-sided tape, glue dots or gel glue can be used to attach details to the base felt. Some lines can be drawn with black marker.
 - To make a pattern from a favorite book, find the clearest, most useful illustration of the character you would like to use. Make one copy at 100% and put the book away. Measure to see how much larger you want the character to be, 200%? Enlarge the character on your copier. You may have to move the original around on the glass to enlarge different edges of it. Tape the copies together to make a whole character. Enlarge again if the character needs to be bigger. Cut out your paper pattern of the character and attach it to the base color felt with double-stick tape. If the character will have a bold outline like Dog or Wilbur, trace around the outside of pattern with black permanent marker. To place inner lines, cut into the paper pattern, cutting out the line to make a stencil. Fold paper a pinch to reach interior lines that don't connect to an outer border. Tape pattern back in outline on the base felt and stencil the lines in with a marker. If you do not want tracing lines to be visible, trace the pattern on the back of the felt with pencil or ink pen. When doing the tracing this way, you also need to flip your paper pattern front side down. Cut out your

character with fabric scissors. If your base felt is a dark color, tape the pattern down well with double-stick tape and cut without tracing the outline first.

- If your character will need clothing, place it on your copier, and copy a few times at 100%. While you were tracing outside your paper pattern, the character probably got a little bigger.
- To make an outfit pattern, like for the naked mole rat, cut the head off of the paper character. Cut around his body and feet leaving a little space on all sides except the neck. This will ensure that his outfit will cover his body easily when you are telling the story. Use sticky-back felt to hold an outfit together. Place the paper pattern, front side up onto the shiny backing and trace it using a pen. Draw a waistline across the paper pattern, and cut it in half. Pick a shirt fabric, turn it right side down and trace around with the pattern right side down also. Cut out the shirt. Repeat for pants and shoes. Peel off shiny backing from felt and carefully place pieces where they belong. Add tiny buttons or pompoms with glue dots. Overlay rat's arm in matching fabric, add a pink felt hand with gel glue. Draw in leg lines. Let the fabric that you have on hand suggest outfits for Wilbur. If you don't have sticky-back felt, try iron-on fusible webbing or gel glue to attach fabric to felt backing.

Storing your flannel story pieces

- After your hard work creating them, make sure to store your flannel pieces flat so they don't crease
- Manilla envelopes with name of story written at top
- Hanging bags with a shelf-rod in storyhour storage area
- Ziploc bags in a notebook
- List on outside of which pieces should be inside, especially if you share flannel stories among staff members, or use two or more at a time
- Number of pieces inside, if they are to be passed to the audience
- Copy of rhyme, song, or story words that go with the pieces
- Archival copy of any music that you use with this flannel set

Resources:

Diamant-Cohen, Betsy **Mother Goose on the Loose** c2006.

Machado, Jeanne M. **Early Childhood Experiences in Language Arts: Emerging Literacy** 9th ed. C1995.

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