

Mark Twain: How to Tell a Story

by Mark Twain

This is the beginning of Mark Twain's essay "How to Tell a Story."

I do not claim that I can tell a story as it ought to be told. I only claim to know how a story ought to be told, for I have been almost daily in the company of the most expert story-tellers for many years.

There are several kinds of stories, but only one difficult kind—the humorous. I will talk mainly about that one. The humorous story is American, the comic story is English, the witty story is French. The humorous story depends for its effect upon the manner of the telling; the comic story and the witty story upon the matter.

The humorous story may be spun out to great length, and may wander around as much as it pleases, and arrive nowhere in particular; but the comic and witty stories must be brief and end with a point. The humorous story bubbles gently along, the others burst.

The humorous story is strictly a work of art—high and delicate art—and only an artist can tell it; but no art is necessary in telling the comic and the witty story; anybody can do it. The art of telling a humorous story—understand, I mean by word of mouth, not print—was created in America, and has remained at home.

The humorous story is told gravely; the teller does his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there is anything funny about it; but the teller of the comic story tells you beforehand that it is one of the funniest things he has ever heard, then tells it with eager delight, and is the first person to laugh when he gets through. And sometimes, if he has had good success, he is so glad and happy that he will repeat the “nub” of it and glance around from face to face, collecting applause, and then repeat it again. It is a pathetic thing to see.

Questions

1. To what country does Twain say the witty story belongs?
2. What type of story must be long?
3. In which type of story does the teller repeat the end, or “nub”?
4. Is Twain talking about stories told out loud, printed stories, or both?

Vocabulary List

Each of the vocabulary words below are used in the reading passage. As you read the passage, pay attention to context clues that suggest the word's meaning.

1. witty
2. gravely
3. conceal
4. nub
5. pathetic

Context Clues

Using context clues from the sentences in the passage, underline the correct meaning of the word in boldface.

1) “The humorous story is American, the comic story is English, the **witty** story is French”

- a. clever; amusing b. longest or lengthy c. shortest or briefest d. poetic; lyrical

2) “The humorous story is told **gravely**”

- a. quickly; in a rush b. roughly or harshly c. energetically; lively d. seriously or solemnly

3) “the teller does his best to **conceal** the fact”

- a. express; illustrate b. exaggerate; inflate c. hide or keep secret d. accept or recognize

4) “he will repeat the '**nub**' of it”

- a. name; title b. list of characters c. core; central point d. opening line

5) “It is a **pathetic** thing to see”

- a. wondrous; amazing b. pitiful or heartbreaking c. funny or amusing d. sick or diseased