

**Once Upon a Time in the Academic Library: Storytelling Skills for Librarians, edited by Maria R. Barefoot, Sara Parme, and Elin Woods**

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Volume 9, 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1098752ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu.v9.38232>

[See table of contents](#)

**Publisher(s)**

Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians / Association  
Canadienne des Bibliothécaires en Enseignement Supérieur

**ISSN**

2369-937X (digital)

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**Cite this review**

Gordon, I. (2023). Review of [Once Upon a Time in the Academic Library: Storytelling Skills for Librarians, edited by Maria R. Barefoot, Sara Parme, and Elin Woods]. *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship / Revue canadienne de bibliothéconomie universitaire*, 9, 1–3.  
<https://doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu.v9.38232>

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## **Book Review: *Once Upon a Time in the Academic Library: Storytelling Skills for Librarians***

Barefoot, Maria, Sara Parme, and Elin Woods, eds. *Once upon a Time in the Academic Library: Storytelling Skills for Librarians*. Chicago: ACRL, 2022, 161pp, \$56.00.

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**Keywords:** *academic libraries · information literacy · storytelling*

Well-told stories have the capacity to break down walls, build trust, engage, inspire, inform, entertain, and influence others. Although storytelling may not be the sole purview of libraries, academic librarians are increasingly considering the use of narration to enhance instruction, engage participants, and give voice to lived experiences. The editors of the ACRL-book titled *Once upon a Time in the Academic Library: Storytelling Skills for Librarians* draw upon the experiences of instruction librarians serving in academic libraries to provide an eclectic mix of storytelling case studies used to advance information literacy.

The editors provide an introductory chapter titled “The Roots of Storytelling in History, Theory, and Librarianship” complete with extensive endnotes and bibliography that outlines the mechanics, applications, and approaches of storytelling within academic libraries. This introductory chapter comments on the elements of storytelling as a pedagogical tool that draws upon stories from a wide variety of sources including primary texts, research journals, infographics, case studies and student narratives. Librarians instructing in seminars intentionally share a story orally or in written form with students followed by a series of questions. These questions help students to examine the story text as a narrative rather than a collection of facts.

Faculty questions in these types of seminars are usually constructed to help elicit group discussion on values, social justice issues, sociocultural problems and lived experiences. Alternately, academic librarians following this type of instruction ask questions that pertain to information literacy themes “...as a method of sharing,



Gordon, Ian D. 2023. Review of *Once Upon a Time in the Academic Library: Storytelling Skills for Librarians*, edited by Maria Barefoot, Sara Parme, and Elin Woods. *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship* 9: 1-3. <https://doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu.v9.38232> © Ian D. Gordon, CC BY-NC 4.0.

retaining, and using information within the established curriculum” (p.3). Students reflecting on literacy elements of stories are positioned and encouraged to share personal narratives, discuss decision-making, problem solving, and build common understanding. The editors eloquently capture the essence of storytelling in information literacy instruction as they write, “In order to use storytelling effectively, librarians must be able to apply the art behind it, understand the educational theories that support it, and communicate these stories clearly to a variety of audiences” (p.5).

The remainder of this book includes ten case studies provided by former and current academic librarians. Case studies range from problem-based literacy learning in English using newsprint editorials (Chapter 1), storytelling to first-year experience students (Chapter 3), discussing scholarly timelines in historical sources (Chapter 5), oral histories in archives and special collections (Chapter 8), and using Harry Potter-inspired stories to introduce students to basic research skills (Chapter 10).

Storytelling can be difficult: it takes practice to do well and is not a strategy for everyone. There are a plethora of books, videos, and manuals that provide tips and practical advice on how to tell a good story. This book of edited case studies may help librarians to re-think the power of storytelling in non-traditional subject areas, teaching within targeted audiences, and loosen up instruction to encourage unpredictable learning outcomes. To be a storyteller is an incredible opportunity to influence students. Storytelling at its best is planned, authentic, and draws on life experiences.

Admittedly, information literacy *can* be a little dry. Case studies within this book can help guide instructors spice up or creatively adjust their style of instruction. Integrating storytelling into information literacy workshops whether introducing topics, constructing lesson plans, or inserting entertainment into a seemingly less-than-spectacular session are great ways to connect with students. Storytelling can also be an effective way to break down barriers, develop rapport, create synergies, and encourage interplay between students and scholarly resources. There is no limit to the type and format of scholarly and archival resources to draw upon using pictures, maps, primary materials, scholarly articles, streaming or digital media. Librarians working with students using storytelling-teaching methods provide a framework and a capacity to create new stories together.

Some case studies—although entertaining—are less convincing when attempting to initiate information instruction in larger, first year and general classes. Introducing story telling with astronomy headlines (Chapter 2) would be hard to sell to faculty and even students within this teaching paradigm. Speaking to themes related to collection development (Chapter 7) and web accessibility (Chapter 9) are risky at best and may not be suitable in all academic settings. Readers would have

valued a great range of information literacy stories pulled from a wider range of hard-to-instruct disciplines, especially STEM areas. Academic librarians would also have valued the incorporation of case studies that spoke to all literacy frameworks, core ideas and educational theories within their own knowledge domain. Further commentary and discussion on how best to collaborate more extensively with faculty, assimilating stories into new cohesive and interdisciplinary curriculums, and how best to market and sell literacy storytelling would have been very much appreciated.

Every academic library has thousands of stories to tell. Stories can allow new frameworks to share ideas, discuss what is possible, and help librarians engage with students in different ways to enhance understanding. Storytelling also helps build empathy, connections, and create interesting discussions on scholarship, research and information literacy when desiring to move away from a one-size-fits-all approach to instruction. This book can be used as a resource for librarians as instructors, performers and creators of stories. This book could also be used as an impetus for group discussion on scenario-based learning, seeking opportunities to work as teams, and to improve information literacy instruction.