

“Y” as a Vowel Stories

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Facts About Frogs and Toads

(Story word: warts)

In reality, toads are a kind of frog, but there are many things that are different between frogs and toads.

The skin of a frog is wet, smooth, slick, and slimy, and frogs stay close to the water. A toad's skin is dry and bumpy. Toads look like they have warts, and some people used to say that people got warts from handling toads, but this is not the case. If you are hiking on a dry path or walking on pavement and you spy something hopping, you are likely seeing a toad and not a frog.

Toads stay on the ground and have shorter legs. Frogs have longer legs, and they can hop from tree to tree.

Frogs and toads eat similar things: spiders, slugs, insects, and flies. And both frogs and toads mate by laying eggs in

or near water. The tadpoles of toads will be plain black, but the tadpoles of frogs will be lighter and have gold flecks.

A group of frogs is called an army of frogs, and a group of toads is called a knot or nest of toads.

Walter's Job

(Story words: busboy, restaurant, bread, college, learned)

Walter supported himself while in college with a job in a restaurant. The restaurant was a formal spot where people came for fine dining. He was a busboy or assistant server. He was not the main waiter, so he did not greet the customers or describe items on the menu.

He was available to help with other things. Often a customer asked for something, like more water or bread, and he would get that. If the customer had more complicated questions, Walter would say, "Let me get your server for you."

One thing that Walter learned from working in a restaurant is that it is not always possible to make everyone happy. For example, people at one table, located by an open door, might ask, "Could you please close that

door? It is very breezy, and we are feeling chilly here.” If Walter closed the door for them, people at another table might wave him over and say, “Excuse me, but could you please open that door? We feel very hot here.”

Walter understood that the job of a waiter and busboy was to be very polite to the customers who were there to dine and relax. For many customers, this night out was a big treat that they had saved for. They wanted to have a good memory of their evening out. But sometimes customers could not get exactly what they wanted.

Fly Fishing

(Story words: caught, catching)

We mostly think of fishing as dropping some live bait deep under the water and hoping a fish will bite the bait and get caught. Fly fishing is a different method of catching fish.

Fly fishers, or anglers, often wade into a stream with big rubber boots. They use a fishing rod with fake flies, not live bait. These flies are made to resemble water insects, such as mayflies and stoneflies, that trout feed on. These insects live on the top of the water, and so the angler wants his flies to float on top of the stream to fool the fish. Some anglers collect many, many flies, and some anglers make their own flies.

The fishing line that the angler uses is coated with plastic. This gives the line a heft and bulk needed so that the angler can throw the line to a particular spot. Anglers look at a stream and try to predict where the trout are most

likely to be. Trout is not the only fish that anglers catch. They also catch pike, bass, panfish, and carp.

Casting the line is the tricky part. When the angler throws his rod, the reel spins and makes a whirring sound. If an angler finds a good spot, he can catch dozens of fish in just a few hours.

On a camping trip, the angler is sometimes the hero when he brings back trout for a fresh fish dinner. Anglers say that there is nothing more relaxing than being at a stream or river casting for fish.

A Class Party at South Middle School (Part 1)

(Story words: head, halls)

The big science test was on Thursday, and the students in Mr. Wheeler's second period class presented him with an idea on Tuesday. They proposed that they have a party on Friday because the class had been studying so hard for the exam.

Mr. Wheeler was in his first year of teaching at South Middle School. He was a bit overwhelmed this first year, teaching five big groups of seventh graders, but he loved science and loved being with kids.

The class passed around a list of who would bring snacks, cups, and drinks for the party. Then, Ralph said, "Let's make it a costume party just for our class. We'll all dress up in crazy costumes—it will be so fun."

If Mr. Wheeler had not been in his first year of teaching, he would have known that he was about to become the victim

of a middle school prank. But his second period class was his favorite class. He was gullible enough to agree.

Ralph had come up with this devilish plot on his own, but he got others in the class to help him fool Mr. Wheeler by chatting about their costume ideas for Friday.

On Friday, Mr. Wheeler arrived at school all dressed up. He had flippers on his feet and a diving mask on his head. His pants were silk spotted clown pants. He made quite a stir as he flip-flopped down the halls to his room.

Did he detect that the seventh graders in his first period class were smirking when he explained that he was dressed up for the second period's class party? The entire seventh grade, of course, knew all about Ralph's prank to trick Mr. Wheeler into being the only person in costume that day.

It was a horrible long day. Mr. Wheeler had a pair of sneakers, but he spent the whole day teaching in spotted

clown pants. “My second period class played a prank on me,” he said at the beginning of each class, before gloomily starting his lesson.

A Class Party at South Middle School (Part 2)

At least it is Friday, Mr. Wheeler said to himself when the day ended, and I do not have to see those kids for two more days. He couldn't wait to be home, and yet he was moving around his classroom slowly in a daze.

Ms. Ko stopped by Mr. Wheeler's room before she left for the day. Ms. Ko was Mr. Wheeler's mentor. She knocked on the door and saw Mr. Wheeler dejected and staring at his desk. "I heard about your day with our darling seventh graders," she said.

"I bet the whole school is talking about nothing else," Mr. Wheeler said.

"Well, that is how middle schoolers are," said Ms. Ko.

"They must hate me," Mr. Wheeler said, "to plan such a cruel joke."

“No,” said Ms. Ko. “They do not hate you, but middle schoolers can be mean sometimes. They spend so much of their day feeling insecure and embarrassed themselves that ganging up on a gullible teacher is sometimes impossible for them to resist. When you come back to class on Monday and show them this horrible day has not gotten you down, they will be glad. Many kids in your class, more than you know, will be rooting for you. But no more class parties, for any reason!”

Ms. Ko waited for Mr. Wheeler to pack his bag with all the papers he needed to grade. They walked out to the parking lot and found their cars. “I expect you to have a good and relaxing weekend,” Ms. Ko said firmly.

Driving home, Ms. Ko remembered her first year of teaching almost twenty years ago. She had once found her purse in the trash bin. She would have to tell Mr. Wheeler a story or two from that first year on Monday.

Still, Ms. Ko would never have been gullible enough to come to school in clown pants and flippers, with no back-up outfit in the car! Mr. Wheeler had a way to go in terms of understanding what a middle schooler is capable of, particularly a charming prankster like Ralph. Hopefully, he was on his way.

Marcus's Job in Sales

(Story word: install, environment)

Marcus had a surprise on Monday. His boss called him in and said, "I have been looking at records of our sales. This year you have made the most sales of anyone in the company!"

Marcus had been working for Statewide Solar for three years. His job was to meet with customers and explain how solar panels would help them save money on powering their home while also helping the environment.

Some customers hoped that they could install solar panels and not have to be connected to a regular power company. Marcus explained that this was not possible. On cloudy days or at night, the panels would not be gathering any electric power, and so at those times the house would need power from the regular power grid.

The power collected from the panels during sunny times of the day would be credited to their account and lower their bills. It was sort of like having a bank account for power.

Some customers wanted the panels to be installed on a particular part of the roof, so that their house would not look different from the street. Marcus had to explain to these customers that the panels had to be put where they would absorb the most sunlight; otherwise they would gather too little power to be effective.

The customers liked the fact that Statewide owned and maintained the panels. The homeowner would not have to pay for the panels or fix them—but would rent the panels from Statewide. Thus, they could install solar panels without a big outlay of money.

Some customers would say, “I bet this sounds silly. But I’m wondering how the panels will look on our house. Can we drive by some examples of houses you have done?”

Marcus would tell them that this did not seem like a silly question to him at all, and that he also cared about the curb appeal of his property. Marcus liked people and liked answering their questions, and that is why he liked having a job in sales.

Eagles, Flying High at the Top of the Food Chain

(Story words: species, prey, learn, research)

Frank had to create an oral report for his science class which was studying the food chain. Mr. Fernandez divided the class into three groups by having the students draw popsicle sticks. One group had to present on a species at the top of the food chain. One group had to present on a species in the middle. And one group had to present on a species at the bottom. Frank was glad that he drew the top of the food chain, and he chose to study eagles.

Eagles are expert predators and are very fast. For example, the golden eagle, which lives in North America, from Mexico to Alaska, can fly 200 miles per hour. As well as having amazing speed, eagles have incredible eyesight. An eagle can spy something as small as a rabbit that is three miles away. The nickname “king of the birds” makes more sense the more you learn about eagles.

Depending upon where they live, eagles hunt for fish, snakes, mammals, and birds. An eagle does not need to land in order to grab its prey. While still in flight, the eagle uses its sharp talons to grasp its prey. The eagle then takes its prey to a high perch before using its sharp, hooked beak to rip it apart.

Learning about how eagles hunt was a bit gruesome. But, the facts Frank learned about the birth of new eagles was even more grisly.

Eagle moms typically lay two eggs in their nests. The stronger, dominant chick will kill and eat the other chick, while the parents look on and do nothing. Mr. Fernandez told the students to try to find some memorable details to include in their reports. Frank predicted that this detail would be one that his classmates would find memorable.

Thinking about the baby eagles was really creepy. Frank concluded that eagles do not learn to become predators but are born predators.

After doing his research, Frank was confident that he would have enough things to tell his classmates about eagles.

Desmond Finds the Right Plant

Valentine's Day was coming up, and Desmond wanted to get a house plant for his wife, Trish.

Trish loved the look of house plants, but she did not have the best track record of keeping plants alive, and nor did Desmond. So, when Desmond went to American Plant, he made up his mind to find a good looking plant, but, more importantly, a hardy one.

A friendly woman with gray hair and glasses spotted Desmond looking at the plants. "Would you like some help choosing a plant?"

Desmond told the woman that he and his wife had the opposite of green thumbs. "We remember to water our plants, but that is about the most we can do."

The woman's name was Greta. Greta steered him to a green plant with large leaves. It reminded Desmond of a

vine. “This is a Philodendron,” she said. “If you have cats or dogs, you might want to put the plant in a spot where they won’t try to eat it. Philodendrons can be mildly toxic to cats and dogs. But aside from that, you will not find an easier plant to take care of.”

Desmond had never considered that a house plant could be toxic, and he told Greta that he and Trish had no pets.

“Some house plants are so toxic that I cannot recommend them to families who have pets or toddlers, but Philodendrons are just mildly toxic. And, they are so easy to care for. Give them indirect light and water them only when they become dry, and this plant will be happy for years. It can even be moved outside in the spring.”

The Philodendron had a bright green color, but frankly looked rather plain next to some of the more exotic plants.

Greta could see Desmond hesitate and gaze at some beautiful, colorful plants that were more tricky to care for.

She said, “I think a pot like this one brings out the vibrant color of the Philodendron’s leaves.” She put the plant in a clay pot with a blue-green glaze. Some of the leaves draped over the pot.

Desmond thought the plant looked a lot less humble now. He thought he now had the perfect Valentine’s Day gift.

Sweet and Salty

(Story words: salt, salty, refrigerator, sugar, slices, sliced)

Margo was feeling that her eating habits were in a rut. When she was stressed and had a lot to do, it was so easy to open a bag of chips or crackers and munch on snacks that were not the best for her and not even very tasty.

Margo knew that she loved things with a lot of taste—salty things, sweet things, and things that were both sweet and salty. She remembered when she used to make her own pickles and how good they were.

The pickles that are sold in the supermarket have been fermented and sealed in jars so that they can be shelf stable for years. Margo's pickles were not that type. They were called "refrigerator pickles." The method was simple. She would make a brine in a pot on the stove by combining salt, vinegar, and water. Then, she would pour

the brine over thin slices of cucumbers, radishes, carrots, or whatever she wanted to pickle. Sometimes, she made a sweet brine with sugar rather than salt. She liked a sweet brine when she pickled beets and radishes and a salty brine when she pickled cucumbers.

This afternoon Margo wanted to make pickled beets in a sweet brine, so she stopped at the store to get supplies. The formula for a sweet brine was easy for her to remember. After cooking the beets in water for about thirty minutes, she took the beets out of the pot to cool. She saved one cup of the water—which was now a deep reddish purple. The brine was one part sugar, two parts vinegar, and three parts water. Thus, she would put one-third cup of sugar, two-thirds cup of vinegar, and one whole cup of beet water into a pot to simmer.

Then, she peeled and sliced the beets and put them in a big wide mouth jar. She poured the brine over them and put them in the refrigerator for a day or two to absorb the taste. They would stay fresh in her refrigerator for weeks.

Margo liked to grind salt on her beets just before eating them. She loved that sweet, tangy, salty taste.

Walking Lucky

(Story words: professional, loyal, worry)

Ben had a job walking an elderly lady's dog after school. Mrs. Payton was now in her eighties, and she needed help walking Lucky.

Lucky was a very friendly dog who always seemed happy to see Ben. Ben was supposed to walk Lucky for at least forty-five minutes, as this was Lucky's big opportunity to get a long walk. Mrs. Payton could take him on the leash for short walks, as long as the streets were dry and not slippery.

At times, Ben would find it hard to keep Lucky walking. Lucky would pull on his leash and look back at the street where Mrs. Payton lived. It was as if Lucky were saying, "We need to get back now." It wasn't very satisfying to walk a lazy dog who always wanted to go home.

One day, Ben met a professional dog walker who walked lots of dogs—sometimes five or six at a time. When Ben complained about Lucky wanting to go home, Allison, the dog walker, asked, “Does Lucky want to go home even when his owner is not home?”

Ben thought about this. He realized Lucky was happy to walk longer if Mrs. Payton was out shopping or doing something else.

Allison said, “Some of my dogs are like this. They are so loyal to their owners that they worry their owners need them. Making friends with some of the other dogs distracts them, and it becomes less of a problem.”

Allison’s perspective helped Ben to be more sympathetic. When Lucky wanted to go home, Ben still had to coax him to go farther. This time he said, “Come on, Lucky, Mrs. Payton is fine, and she will be happy to see you in just a few minutes.”

When he dropped Lucky off, Mrs. Payton typically would be at the door to welcome them. Today, she opened the door just as Ben and Lucky were climbing the steps. “Did you have a good walk?”

Ben answered, “Yes, we did, but Lucky sure is happy to be back with you.”

The Myth of Sisyphus

(Story words: Zeus, Hades, roll, rolling, boulder)

Jack's sixth grade English class was studying Greek myths. For the final project, Jack had to make a poster which illustrated a common theme in Greek myths.

The class had talked a lot about how the Greek gods loved to devise punishments for humans who had the nerve to try to compete with them. Jack needed a statement for his theme, and he came up with this one: In Greek myths, the gods always have the last laugh.

Sisyphus was a crafty king who thought he was just as clever as the gods. He got into a conflict with Zeus, the king of the gods. Zeus had a secret—he had been hiding the river god's daughter. Sisyphus was stupid enough to tattle on the king of the gods.

When Sisyphus was sent to the underworld, he then played a trick or two on Hades, the god of the underworld. Now, rather than one powerful enemy, Sisyphus had two gods angry at him.

Jack's poster depicted the horrible punishment Zeus and Hades devised for Sisyphus. Sisyphus had to spend eternity rolling an enormous boulder up a hill in the underworld. When the boulder reached the top of the hill, it would roll right back down, and Sisyphus would have to roll it back up again. Jack drew Sisyphus at the bottom, middle, and top of the hill.

Jack had a good idea of how to finish the poster. He drew Zeus and Hades, looking down on Sisyphus. They were smiling and giving each other a high-five.