



## Educators' Guide: We Are Water

### Overview:

Water connects. Our relationship with water helps define us and is part of our water story. These lessons build upon participant experiences related to the *We Are Water MN* component of the *Water/Ways* exhibit. The exhibit includes stories from people reflecting on the meaning and experience of water in the State of Minnesota, stories from people local to the host site communities, and space for others to share their own stories and images. They can also be used as stand-alone activities for developing and sharing water stories.

### Objectives:

Students will be able to:

1. Identify factors that contribute to point-of-view and how they affect human stories
2. Create their own water story
3. Apply their understanding of point of view and absent narrative to collect and communicate a community water story
4. Interview another person and write their water story

**Subjects:** Language Arts, Reading, Writing

**Time Required:** 45 minutes for individual activities – multiple class periods

**Grade Level:** Upper elementary through middle school; younger and older with modest modifications

**Materials:** Well-known storybook, materials for different methods of storytelling, paper and pencils

### Background:

Stories share information, connect events, connect people, and create meaning. They are the context for sharing information. Stories are shared through different methods that include, but are not limited to, books, plays, oral tradition, cartoons, music, and plays. Point of view is critical to storytelling and is affected by cultural backgrounds and personal experiences. When a collective or community story is told, non-dominant points of view are often left out. The stories that are left out are referred to as *absent narratives*. Water is essential for life on our planet. Its abundance and scarcity influences all things. Cultural background and individual experiences are just two of many factors that affect a person's relationship and responsibilities towards the resource. That relationship contributes to a person's water story. Everyone has a water story. It may include a spiritual connection, happy memories of family and sunshine, fear, scarcity, food, or freedom. Our water stories are our past, our present, and our future.

**"Thousands have lived without love, not one without water."**

**—W.H. Auden, Curator, poet**



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## Procedures:

### **Once upon a time...**

Select a story that is common to most students. Find two versions of the story to share with students (for example, stories like *Cinderella* and *The Three Little Pigs* have all been retold recently from different perspectives (*Cinderella* has been told from different cultural viewpoints; *The Three Little Pigs* has been retold from the perspective of the wolf.) Read the book or an excerpt from the book. Remind students that you are telling them a story. Work with your students to develop a definition of “story.” The exact definition will depend upon the age of the students, but should include an account or tale of something that happened. Stories can be true or imaginary. They share information while connecting events and creating meaning. Stories connect people to each other. The stories we tell also tell us who WE are and what we do.

Introduce the concept of *point of view* by asking, “Who is telling the story?” When we read a story we see it from the perspective, or point of view, of the narrator, who may also be a character in the story. One of the easiest ways to define point of view is as someone’s attitude or way of thinking about something. People’s points of view are tied to their cultural backgrounds and personal experiences, and ultimately affect how they tell *their* stories. Read a version of the same story told earlier from a different point of view. Discuss how the story changed when it was told from a different point of view. Encourage the class to brainstorm a list of other ways that this (or any) story could be told. In addition to changing the point of view of the storytelling, examples may include picture books, chapter books, oral storytelling, a play, poetry, movies or television shows, comic strips, pictures, puppets, songs, and even dance. Reinforce this concept by sharing some examples of ways one story has been told in different mediums.

### **More Practice in Storytelling**

Allow students to practice different methods of storytelling. Students can work in small groups or individually. Provide students with multiple short books to choose from (children’s picture books work well when time is limited). Students select or are assigned one of the methods of storytelling from the brainstorming list and create a re-telling of that story in a different way or from a different point of view. Allow students to share their stories.

### **The Whole Story**

Ask the students if they have ever been in the following situation. “Two of your friends are in an argument, and they both tell you what happened. Are their stories the same?” In most cases, no. Remind students that the biggest factor affecting a story is who is telling it.

Review the concept of *point of view*. One of the easiest ways to define point of view is as someone’s way of understanding something. People’s points of view and perceptions are tied to their cultural background and personal experiences and ultimately affect how they tell *their* stories.

As a class, create a list of things that might affect a person’s point of view or perspective about water. The list could include where they live, their age, education, their family, cultural background, and personal experiences. Nearly everything affects a person’s point of view. Lead the students in a discussion about points of view related to water. Water is essential to life; however, our decisions about water, our experiences with water, and our other water perceptions are greatly discussed and debated.

Read (or listen online) to two of the personal narratives collected for the *We Are Water MN* exhibit. Reflect and discuss the stories.

1. How do the stories depict the relationship between water and humans?
2. How have cultural background and experiences influenced how the stories are shared?
3. How does each storyteller feel about Minnesota’s water, and how is that reflected in the narratives?
4. What, if any, are the common themes in the two narratives?

Divide students into small discussion groups. Instruct them to think about what they think and know about water—specifically water in our state of Minnesota. Ask students to define “good water.” There is no single, correct definition for this term. Have students consider how their perspectives affected their definition. Have students reflect on how the *We Are Water MN* exhibit or participation in water activities has changed their perspective.

For additional discussion your class would like additional discussion on water points of view, consider the following questions:

- Is water abundant in our state?
- Is “clean water” abundant?
- Is “clean water” a right or a privilege?
- Who or what should have “clean water?”
- Where is the best water?
- Do you view water as simply a resource (here for our use) or as a relative (a give-and-take relationship)?

For more context, the concept of water as a relative is discussed in the lesson titled, ***Water Journeys***.

### **Extended Discussion:**

Have students share (in small groups or as a class) how their points of view and perspectives, or what they know and think, about water affect their behavior and use of water.

### **What Is Your Water Story?**

Everyone has a water story. It may include a spiritual connection, happy memories of family and sunshine, fear, love, and more. Tell students that they will now write their own authentic water story. As students prepare, remind them to reflect on their own perspectives and experiences with water.

Ask students how they want to tell their own water story. Select the method of storytelling that students will use or allow them to select one of the methods explored earlier in this activity.

Present these essential questions for students to reflect upon:

- **What does water mean to you?**
- **What role does water play in your free time, your family, your work, your town, your neighborhood, and your worldview?**
- **Is there a specific experience or collection of experiences that have directly affected your water story?**
- **What do you want to share about your water story?**

Provide students with time to create their water stories. The storytelling method selected will determine the amount of time this lesson will require. (If time is a factor, it may be necessary to select a storytelling method for the students, such as a short story piece.)

The following are the essential questions used by the Smithsonian and their partners in Minnesota when collecting water stories:

*What does water mean to you?  
What role does water play in your work, your town, your neighborhood, and your worldview?*

*What would you lose if you did not have water?*

*What do you “think” about water?*

*How is water important to you and your culture?*

*What are the ways you and your community put water to work?*

*Consider your own hometown. Is it on or near water? Is it defined by a lack of water? Would your community be the same without water?*

*How does the availability of water affect your decisions each day?  
What are the ways that water forms connections and divisions in your community?*

*We carry in our heads and our hearts notions about what our water means to us. What are your personal water/ways?*

*How are people working to restore your local water resources?*

These questions can be used for a deeper dive into water stories.

Share the students' water stories with the *Water/Ways* project. Stories can be uploaded to the **Smithsonian Stories from Main Street** website: <http://www.storiesfrommainstreet.org/pages/addyourstory.html>. Stories uploaded to this site will also be shared with the Minnesota Humanities Center.

### **We Are Water**

Ask students to consider what happens when stories, including history, are told from only one person or group's perspective. Ask students if they have ever heard the term "absent narrative." Share with students that this is when the stories of a community or history are only told from one group's point of view and that other people's perspectives are absent. Native Americans, African Americans, veterans, children, and other non-dominant perspectives are often left out of a community's official story.

Tell students that they are going to create a community water story by interviewing others for their water stories. (The "community" may include other classes in their grade, the entire school, the neighborhood, or town.) In small groups or with the class as a whole, develop a list of possible strategies to get "the whole story" or how to avoid "absent narratives" in their community stories. Diversity is the key; people of all ages, races, ethnic backgrounds, and economic backgrounds. What strategies will you use to ensure that you do not have *absent narratives*?

Have students create a list of potential people or types of people that could be interviewed. Using the recommendations for interviewing, have students prepare for and conduct their interviews. Students should develop open-ended interview questions based on the essential questions used for development of their own water stories: What does water mean to you? What role does water play in your free time, your family, your work, your town, your neighborhood, and your worldview? Is there a specific experience or collection of experiences that have directly affected your water story? What do you want to share about your water story? Have students write a water story for the individual they interviewed. The interviewees should be given the opportunity to review the story that was written prior to it being shared, displayed, or published. Consider sharing these water stories, along with the students' personal water stories, at a community event or with the *Water/Ways* project.

### **Additional Learning:**

#### **Bdote Map**

Bdote is a Dakota word that expresses "where two waters come together." The Dakota and Ojibwe people have names for Minnesota's places and waterways; many of the places, rivers, and waters all Minnesotans know have names born in the languages of the Dakota and Ojibwe. Even the name "Minnesota" is shared with us by the Dakota and their word "Mni Sota" which means *waters that reflect the sky*. Students should be allowed to explore this site to hear water stories and learn more about the Dakota people's relationship to water and Minnesota. More on bdote is in the lesson titled, **Water Journeys**. <http://bdotememorymap.org/>

#### **The Danger of a Single Story**

When talking about stories, reflecting absent narratives, learning about other cultures, or simply "trying to make sense" of the world, there is the *danger of a single story*. This is a term used by Chimamanda Adichie and the topic of her 2009 TED Talk. She roughly defines this phrase as a **limited viewpoint**. It is when a point of view or definition of an entire group or culture is limited or based upon a single person (or small group), experience, or story.

Watch Chimamanda Adichie's TED talk and discuss its relevance to *Water/Ways*.  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en)