

## Mark Twain: How to Tell a Story

While Mark Twain wrote many fictional works, he also wrote non-fiction. Among his non-fiction works are his essays. Below is the beginning of his essay “How to Tell a Story” published in 1897.

### 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. Who can tell a humorous story?
4. In which type of story does the teller repeat the end, or “nub”?
5. Is Twain talking about stories told out loud, printed stories, or both?

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### Questions

**Student's answers will vary; examples of correct answers:**

1. To what country does Twain say the witty story belongs?

**France**

2. What type of story must be long?

**The humorous story**

3. Who can tell a humorous story?

**Only an artist**

4. In which type of story does the teller repeat the end, or “nub”?

**The comic story**

5. Is Twain talking about stories told out loud, printed stories, or both?

**Stories told out loud**