



Cuentos: Telling a Family Story

In this essay, you will tell someone else's story, but this is not just any story. Your job in this story is to be something of an oral history researcher; for this story, your goal is to find the oldest (or one of the oldest) members of your family. Then, you will speak with them about their life, or about the lives of your ancestors that they remember. (For instance, your mother telling you a story she had heard from her grandmother--your great-grandmother).

From this conversation, you will discover a "cuento." What is a "cuento?" A "cuento" is the story of some treasured memory, the story of some significant event in this person's life or the lives of someone they remember. Simply because it is remembered and retold means that it is this kind of treasured memory, so particularly listen for those stories that are retold out loud. My guess is that you may be familiar with some of these stories already exactly because they are retold.

Step 1: Finding a Cuento--the Interview

For this project, you will need to speak with your family member and "interview" them to find a cuento. Below are some hints about doing this interview:

- you can speak with them by phone, but it is best done in person (and even better, at their home)
- "Interview" sounds really formal and intimidating. DON'T tell your storyteller you want to "interview" them; instead, say you want their help on a school project telling old family stories. You want to "talk" with them or "speak" with them. Avoid using the word "interview."
- Be prepared! Come to your interview armed with something to take notes, a recording device if you have one, and a digital camera to take pictures (use your phone if necessary)
- start by simply asking them about what it was like when they grew up and continue to ask about their lives. This may wander into the lives of other family members. OR you can be direct and ask them what they think is the most memorable or significant story from their family
- LISTEN! Enjoy!
- Search for ONE story that seems to stand out somehow (you may have heard ten by this point)
- Ask them to retell this one story and as they retell it ask for more details and information (record or take notes as they are telling)
- Ask them if they have any "things" (artifacts) related to this story, and see if they will pull these artifacts out. This may involve pulling out an old photograph, or digging in a box for the copy of some paper or other record. Photograph these things.
- Be sure to take their picture to.
- ASK their permission to include these photographs with your story (tell them we are only using them for class, but that they might be involved with the larger Cuentos Project where these family stories are celebrated at the Public Library).
- You may need to speak with them a couple of times during this process

What to do if finding a older family member is not a good option for you

If family is not a good or comfortable option for you, that is OK. Instead, seek out some other elderly person. This could be the grandmother of a friend, or someone older from your church, or someone else who is older who you have some acquaintance with. There are also nursing homes where you could visit and speak with someone. If you visit an old folks home (like San Pedro Manor), be sure to contact their office ahead of time and tell them about your project. Offer to volunteer by reading to them or something like that to gain access. Follow the above suggestions for your interview, except you may or may not visit them in their home. You will need to carefully and clearly explain the project you are working on and how they can help you.

Step 2: Zeroing in on your Cuento

In all likelihood, your "cuento" may be a bundle of a bunch of stories. You will need to sort all these little stories out and zero in on the true heart of the story.

To do this zeroing in

- get a separate sheet of paper
- list every single "thing" that happens or "episode"
- skip a line or two after each episode and scratch information about each episode following the SIX JOURNALISTIC QUESTIONS: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?
- Once you have the entire list, look it over. What seems to be THE most important episode and which other episodes seem to connect to it the most? What episodes don't seem as connected to this important episode?
- Focus on the episodes most closely circling around the main episode; trim out the others

Step 3: Retelling the Cuento

Now you are ready to tell this story on your own. As you retell this story, be sure to "set the scene" by providing any needed background on the person whose story it is or this time period. Tell the story using as much description as you can. You may have to use your imagination to fill in details. That's ok. Let your reader know that this view is as you see it in your mind. You can even do some research about that time period to further fill in some details. Don't be afraid to use dialogue! Let us actually "hear" this speaker.

These resources may help you with your storytelling:

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| <p><u>The Power of Description</u> <u>Description</u> <u>PowerPoint</u> <u>Description</u> <u>Examples</u></p> | <p><u>Other Family Story Examples</u> <u>Revising the Family Story</u> (These are not exactly "cuentos" but still narratives that may offer guidance for you)</p> |
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