Exploring Oral Texts

Forms of Oral Texts
In this first lesson, we explore different forms of oral texts, including storytelling, oral poetry and praise singing. We look at the historical context and origins of these forms of communication and how they are used today.

Lesson Outcomes
By the end of this lesson, you should be able to:
- recognise these three different forms of performance of the spoken word
- explain the historical context of storytelling, oral poetry and praise singing and how they are used in modern contexts

Lesson Notes
We speak in order to put across our thoughts, opinions and feelings to other people. In other words, we speak to communicate. We do this all the time in our everyday lives, but we can also communicate with an audience in oral performances. These can include storytelling, praise singing and oral poetry.

A storyteller is someone who gives an account of an event or a series of events. Storytelling has existed all over the world for as long as people have been able to speak. Historically, the storyteller played an important role as the teacher of a tribe’s history and customs.

Gcina Mhlope is one of South Africa’s best known storytellers.

Praise singing involves reciting a person’s family history, sharing their great deeds, describing their personality and sometimes criticising what they have done.

Here is a well known praise singer, Zolani.

Oral poetry is poetry which is recited to an audience.

What do storytelling, praise singing and oral poetry have in common?
- Storytelling, praise singing and oral poetry are all performed live to an audience.
- In each of these forms of oral communication, the speaker is communicating with a group of listeners, building a relationship with the audience through the use of voice and eye contact and, in some cases, through interaction by means of audience participation.
- Storytelling, praise singing and oral poetry all have a tradition dating back many centuries. Often the person who remembered, preserved and shared the history and traditions of a group of people would be an historian, a teacher and an entertainer all rolled into one.

How do these forms of communication differ from ordinary communication?
- Oral performers use their voice and their whole body when they communicate with an audience. They change the speed with which they speak (pace), as well as the volume (loud/soft), and they use the different high and low levels of their voice (pitch).
- Spoken communication is also different from written texts. When we speak to each other or communicate orally with an audience, we engage with people, we look at their faces and respond to their expressions. When we write or read we do not have that personal element.
- Modern storytellers still play an important role in society by teaching and entertaining. In South Africa, we still have the custom of singing people’s praises at public events and ceremonies. Oral poets today express what we are feeling and they also make us think about modern issues.

Task
For this task you will first need to work on your own, and then with a partner.

Think about the story of your own name:
- What does it mean?
- How did you come to be given that name?
- Tell the story to your partner.
- Listen to the story of your partner’s name.

Curriculum Links
LO 1: Listening and Speaking
- demonstrate knowledge of different forms of oral communication for social purposes