



## About the Setting

### Liberia, West Africa

“The Talking Goat” is based on an African folk tale recounted by John Acree, a Peace Corps Volunteer who served in Liberia. Located on the tropical coast of West Africa between Sierra Leone and Cote d’Ivoire, Liberia is home to many indigenous tribes that have been through a recent civil war and still are enduring economic hardships and political strife. According to Acree, who served in Liberia as a fisheries Volunteer, it was during a village meeting that the village chief told the tale of “The Talking Goat.” Acree notes that the chief was trying to explain to his people that “although they had waited a long time for a health clinic to be built they would soon be rewarded. They must be patient.”

# THE TALKING GOAT

*By John Acree,  
Returned Peace Corps  
Volunteer, Liberia*

Once there was a rich man named Tugba who dressed in fine and fashionable robes. Every day he strolled through the village, arm-in-arm with his elegant wife. The villagers held their breath as the two passed: Never before had they seen such a handsome couple.

But Tugba wasn't admired only for his good looks and pretty wife. Farmers would travel many miles to Tugba's village just to catch a glimpse of his fields. Tugba's corn was more golden, his tomatoes more plump, and his cassava more abundant than any other in the land. His animals, too, were fat and strong. He had two cows, five chickens, two roosters, three donkeys, and four goats.

Now Tugba's fortune wasn't just a matter of luck. He was a good and hardworking man who always remembered to thank the seeds for growing and the sky for raining. And Tugba took extra care to ensure that his animals were well fed and content. He kept his eye on one goat in particular, and always brought a special bundle of hay for her to chew on. This goat was Tugba's favorite. He had found her when she was just a kid, lost and wounded in the forest.

One year, little rain fell. Throughout the land, crops wilted and animals died of thirst. Tugba's fields alone remained fertile. But Tugba no longer strolled through the village each day, since the villagers now rushed upon him, begging for food. Although Tugba always gave the villagers whatever cassava or corn he could spare, his wife was not so generous. Angered by his inability to say "no" to the villagers' pleas, she left Tugba, taking with her all the gold she could carry.

Meanwhile the hungry villagers devoured Tugba's crops and, one by one, they ate his animals, too.

Except for his favorite goat. Tugba refused to let the villagers eat the goat that he had found in the forest many years before.

One day, when his fields were completely wasted and his stockroom empty, Tugba threw a cloak across his shoulders and walked out of his house. With only his favorite goat as a companion, Tugba left the village and journeyed into the forest.

After traveling many miles, Tugba and the goat found a home for themselves inside a cave. During the day, Tugba gathered berries and nuts for the two to eat; at nightfall, he would lie beside a mountain stream, staring up at the sky to admire the stars.

Seven years passed. From time to time, Tugba would remember the life he had known in the village. Once he wore elegant robes; now he wore a rotting sheepskin. Once he slept each night with his beautiful wife at his side; now his only companion was a goat. Once he harvested the most delicious

crops in the land; now he survived on little more than nuts. Still Tugba remained a good and hardworking man, who always made sure that his favorite goat had the choicest leaves to chew on.

One day, as Tugba was gathering nuts, the goat spoke. “Thank you for saving me, Tugba,” said the goat in a clear, deep voice. “You are a good man.”

Tugba turned around in surprise. Even in the forest, goats didn’t talk. “Did you just say something?” Tugba asked the goat.

“I said that you are a good man,” the goat repeated. “And I thanked you for saving me.”

“But a goat ... talking?” Tugba asked incredulously.

“It is so,” the goat replied calmly. “Again, thank you.” With this, the goat turned her attention to a pile of leaves.

Tugba could not contain his excitement. “My luck is changing!” he shouted as he danced through the forest. “A talking goat!” he laughed.

Sitting down next to a tree, he sketched out a plan. “If I take the goat to the village, I will be rich again,” he reasoned. “The villagers will certainly pay to hear my goat talk. Soon I will have enough money to buy a house and field once more.”

The next morning, Tugba tied the talking goat to a tree and hastened to the village that he had left behind seven years before.

When Tugba arrived in the village square, he discovered that all of the villagers he had once known had died in the drought. A different tribe had settled there—none of whom remembered hearing any stories about a rich man named Tugba. Although disappointed that no memory of him had survived, Tugba remained in good humor and asked to speak with the village chief and elders.

Within the hour, the chief and elders, dressed in richly textured ceremonial robes, entered the village square to greet the stranger. Overlooking the rotted sheepskin draped across his waist, the elders offered Tugba a cool drink of water. As soon as Tugba finished the water, he joyfully announced, “My goat can talk!”

The chief and the village elders listened carefully as Tugba told them of his talking goat, and his seven years in the forest. When Tugba finished, the chief deliberated with the elders for a few moments. Then, he stood up to deliver his verdict.

“If your story is true, this is a great fortune,” said the chief. “But if it is not true, you have wasted our time and have made us fools for listening to you.” The village elders nodded in agreement.

“If your goat can talk,” the chief continued, “we will give you half of everything in the village. If your story is false, we will arrest you, tie you, and beat you until you are dead.” Looking Tugba in the eyes, the chief announced, “Bring your goat to the square!”

Tugba promptly returned to the forest and, as quickly as he could, ran back to the village center, carrying the talking goat in his arms. The entire village was waiting for him.

“Speak to them, sweet goat,” Tugba urged. But the goat was silent. The chief and elders raised their brows skeptically.

“Please, goat, speak!” Tugba asked again. The goat, however, was busy chewing on the chief’s robe.

Tearing his robe from the goat’s teeth, the chief roared, “You have made us all fools for listening to your story. Now you must die.”

Immediately, the elders tied Tugba’s arms and feet, and beat him with a whip. They then dragged his body up a mountain where a large tree grew. Along the way, everyone who saw him spit at him and threw stones. But just before they were about to tie a lasso around Tugba’s head and hang him from the tree, the goat ran up the mountain and, at the foot of the tree, said in a loud and clear voice, “You must not kill him. Let him go.”

The villagers were stunned. It was true! The goat could talk.

The elders released Tugba, and carried him back to the village center. There, the chief lay a carpet on the ground for Tugba to rest on, and ordered the women to attend to Tugba’s bloody wounds.

“Gather up half the goods in the village,” the chief further declared, “and bring them here as an offering to Tugba.”

As Tugba lay on a carpet, he fell into a dazed sleep. When he finally opened his eyes, the goat was standing beside him, watching him.

“How could you act that way?” Tugba said to the goat as he slowly rose to his feet. “Look at me. They beat me. They almost killed me. What took you so long to speak?”

“What you do not suffer for,” the goat replied, “you do not enjoy.”



# READING AND RESPONDING TO *THE TALKING GOAT*

## Overview

We've designed this lesson plan to help you and your students explore the meaning of the African folk tale "The Talking Goat." This folk tale was told to returned Peace Corps Volunteer John Acree, who then gave it to us for use on the Coverdell World Wise Schools website ([www.peacecorps.gov/wws/folktales](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/folktales)). Acree served in the African nation of Liberia from 1983 to 1985. He notes:

*During a village meeting in rural Liberia, the chief of the village told the tale of the "The Talking Goat." He was trying to explain to villagers that, although they had waited a long time for a health clinic to be built, they would soon be rewarded. They must be patient.*

"The Talking Goat" is included as part of the theme *No Easy Answers* because it raises questions about justice and adversity that are not easily resolved. "The Talking Goat" should inspire lively discussions among the students in your classroom.

## About the Setting

Liberia, a country slightly larger than the state of Tennessee, is located along the Atlantic Ocean in the tropics of West Africa between Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire. Liberia is home to a number of indigenous tribes. According to 1999 World Bank statistics, less than half of Liberians over the age of 15 can read and write, and close to 55 percent of Liberians live in remote villages far from the modern conveniences and public services. Liberia was involved in a bitter civil war in the 1990s and is struggling today under political disarray and poverty.

## About Folk Tales

Folk tales begin as simple stories passed down from one person to the next by word of mouth in the oral tradition. Indigenous storytellers in cultures everywhere preserve such oral tales. Stories and folk tales began as an attempt to explain and understand the natural and spiritual world. One can imagine groups of people sitting around a campfire on a starry night weaving stories that not only entertained but also helped make sense of their world. These stories were passed on from one generation to the next, with changes or embellishments created by each storyteller. Gradually folk tales began to appear in written form. They exist today in every culture.

The telling of stories is a cultural universal, common to traditional and modern societies alike. Folk tales often reflect the values and customs of the culture from which they come. Because folk tale plots are generally concerned with life's universal themes, they often transcend their culture of origin and reveal the commonality of human experience. The structure of folk tales is often similar from culture to culture. They contain colorful people, talking animals, humorous events, suspense, action, and a definite conclusion. The conclusion normally teaches a lesson—often in the form of a moral or admonition. Or sometimes a folk tale will end simply with the well-known phrase “and they lived happily ever after.”

Folk tales can be divided into separate parts. First, the introduction lets you know the leading characters (including animals), the time and place of the story, and the problem or conflict to be faced. Following the introduction is the development of the tale. Here the action mounts quickly and steadily until it reaches the next stage, the climax. Here the problem or conflict is confronted and resolved. Typically, the hero or heroine faces many obstacles and is sometimes reduced to helplessness before the climax. The last stage is the conclusion, where all is resolved, the just obtain their reward, and a moral is offered. Most folk tales have happy endings. At the same time, some, like “The Talking Goat,” raise questions that have no easy answers.

### Suggested Instructional Sequence

This lesson plan provides many ideas for reading and responding to the folk tale “The Talking Goat.” In particular, it distinguishes instructional activities for using “The Talking Goat” with younger or less able readers and with older, more sophisticated and skillful readers. The suggested lesson sequence is a flexible springboard for tailoring instruction to the needs of your students—and to your state or local curriculum standards.

We've also developed this lesson plan to address specific language arts and social studies standards using the *Understanding by Design* curriculum framework (Wiggins and McTighe, 1998). The framework, based on “enduring understandings” and “essential questions,” is described in detail in Appendix A. You can find the enduring understandings and essential questions that we suggest for this story in the margin on the next page.

## STANDARDS

### National Council of Teachers of English/International Reading Association

- *Standard 1:* Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world.
- *Standard 2:* Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions of human experience.
- *Standard 3:* Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts.
- *Standard 5:* Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

### National Council for the Social Studies

- *Theme 1: Culture.* Social studies programs should provide for the study of culture and cultural diversity so that the learner can explain how information and experiences may be interpreted by people from diverse cultural perspectives and frames of reference.

**DAY ONE**

**Purpose:**

- To introduce students to the folk tale genre.
- To engage students in the content of “The Talking Goat.”

**Enduring Understandings:**

- Folk tales occur in all cultures and teach important life lessons.
- Folk tales contain universal themes that transcend their culture of origin.
- In folk tales and in life, people deal with setbacks and adversity in many different ways.

**Essential Questions:**

- What life lessons can we learn from folk tales?
- When facing adversity, how patient should one be?
- What does this folk tale teach me about the world, myself, and others?

**Grade Levels:**

This lesson plan can be adapted for use with students in grades 6-12.

**Assessments:**

Group discussions, oral presentations, journal entries, extended writing assignments.

1. Prior to this lesson, photocopy the folk tale in two sections. The first section represents the majority of the story and ends with the chief’s words “Looking Tugba in the eyes, the chief announced, ‘Bring your goat to the square!’” The second section is the rest of the story.
2. Provide students with information from the overview, setting, and background (see page 144). Show them a map of Africa and point out Liberia.
3. Explain to students the basic elements of a folk tale (pages 144 and 145) or go directly into the story. (With struggling or younger readers, you can use one of the reading comprehension strategies used earlier in this collection: visual imagery, graphic organizers, story frames, or highlighting.)
4. Tell students that you will be giving them only the first section of the folk tale to begin with. Ask them to think about these questions as they read:
  - How generous should we be?
  - How patient should we be?
5. When they’ve finished reading the section, have students form groups of four to discuss their thoughts about the questions in #4. Then ask each group to predict how they think the folk tale will end.
6. Now give students the second half of the folk tale and have them read it. When they have finished, ask them to respond in their Reading Journals to the following prompts:
  - How do you feel about the way “The Talking Goat” ended? Why?
  - Which did you like better: your group’s predicted ending or the actual ending? Why?

7. Have students react to the ending in a class discussion.
8. For homework, ask students to reread the folk tale and respond in their journals to the following prompts:
  - Which lines and sentences held the most meaning and power for you? Why?
  - What thoughts does this folk tale bring to mind about how generous one should be? About how patient one should be?
  - What other questions does this folk tale raise in your mind?

**Purpose:****DAY TWO**

To have students probe the deeper meanings of the folk tale.

1. Have students share their journal responses first with a partner and then conduct a class discussion about the questions the folk tale raises.
2. *Cooperative Learning Strategy:* “Carousel brainstorming.” Prior to class, post five sheets of chart paper around the room, with ample space between them. Number the questions as they appear on Worksheet #7 on page 148 and write the questions and their numbers at the top of each sheet of chart paper. Tape a felt-tipped pen next to each sheet of paper.
3. Ask students to number off from one to five. Have them move to the chart paper on which their number is written.
4. Have students discuss the question on their group’s sheet. Give the groups five minutes for discussion. Before the discussion begins, ask each group to select a recorder who will write the group’s responses on the chart paper using the felt-tipped marker.
5. Call time after five minutes. Then give recorders time, with their group members’ help, to summarize in writing their group’s responses.

**Worksheet #7**

**'The Talking Goat' Discussion Guide**



1. How did Tugba deal with adversity?  
How would you have handled your bad luck if you'd been in Tugba's position?

2. Why does misfortune befall good people? How much control do we have over the events in our lives?



3. When things are tough, how patient should we be? As patient as Tugba?

4. Do you agree with the statement: "What you do not suffer for, you do not enjoy"? Why or why not?

5. What questions does the folk tale raise that have no easy answers?



6. Now, ask each group of students to move to the next piece of chart paper. The process repeats, with five minutes for discussion and recording, until you once again call time. Groups again move to the next sheet of paper. Continue the process until all groups have discussed and responded to all questions—and the groups have arrived at their original question.
7. Each group should select a reporter to provide a summary of what the group thinks are the most interesting responses to their question, and to read the responses aloud. At the end of the summaries, ask the class why these are questions with no easy answers.
8. Conduct a class discussion on each of the five questions. For homework, ask students to respond in their Reading Journals to the following prompts:
  - As I think about the carousel brainstorming activity we just completed, here are some things that I came to realize about the folk tale’s meaning that I hadn’t thought of before:
  - Describe a time when you faced a question that had no easy answers.

**Purpose:**

- To help students find the patterns in a text.
  - To use the text of “The Talking Goat” to increase students’ skills in drawing analogies.
1. Have students open their journals to the page where they responded to the questions above. Ask them to do a “silent journal walk,” i.e., to circulate in the room and read their classmates’ journal responses. Provide about 10 minutes, then have students add to their own journal responses based on what they’ve read.
  2. Then tell students that you will show them a strategy they can use in many subject areas to help them find patterns and relationships in texts. Research (Marzano et al., 2001, pp. 16; 23–26) has shown that helping students learn to recognize the patterns in a text and identify analogies leads to higher levels of thinking and increased academic achievement. If this is the first time you are using this “pattern recognition” strategy with your

**DAY THREE**

*What is written without effort  
is read without pleasure.*

**Samuel Johnson**  
Author

students, plan to spend at least 15 minutes explaining and modeling the example provided in the worksheet opposite.

3. Begin by explaining that folk tales and stories often have an abstract pattern underlying their structure. Being able to uncover the abstract pattern can increase students' ability to think about and analyze the story at higher levels. Explain that there is an abstract pattern in "The Talking Goat" that has nothing to do with Tugba or goats. Tell the students that you will provide them with an example of this. Give each student a copy of Worksheet #8 and guide them through the example given.
4. As you are completing the rows in Column 2, it is often useful to provide students with the first few examples of the pattern, and then give them an opportunity to come up with the next one or two until the whole pattern is revealed. Remind students that each part of the pattern cannot mention Tugba, the talking goat, the village chief, or any other literal details of the story. Remind them that they are trying to uncover the abstract pattern in the folk tale.
5. Ask students if they can think of any other story or film that contains this pattern. If students can think of examples for even part of the pattern, this is the first step toward learning how to employ this strategy. If students get stuck, you can mention Cinderella and ask students to identify the similarities between the Cinderella story and the folk tale "The Talking Goat."
6. To ensure that students understand the difference between the literal story and the abstract pattern, work through the left-hand column of the chart on Worksheet #8. Use Worksheet #9 for your own reference. Explain that this column is meant to be used to record the literal elements of the folk tale "The Talking Goat" that correspond to the abstract pattern.
7. Note: Because abstracting allows students to see how two seemingly different things are connected, it is an effective tool for strengthening their thinking and analogical reasoning skills. Becoming skilled in the process of abstracting can help students create metaphors and analogies between the known and unknown in any content area. (For further information about the process of abstracting the patterns from a text see Marzano et al., *Dimensions of Learning*, ASCD, 1997, p. 130.)

## Worksheet #8

## The Abstract Pattern in 'The Talking Goat'

Literal Elements	Abstract Pattern	New Literal Elements
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Someone is leading a happy life.</li>   <li>• This person is generous and kind.</li>   <li>• Misfortune befalls him or her unexpectedly.</li>   <li>• He or she is reduced to helplessness for a long time.</li>   <li>• Suddenly, his or her luck changes.</li>   <li>• A magical creature appears.</li>   <li>• This creature has the potential to save him or her.</li>   <li>• At the critical moment, the creature <i>appears</i> to lose its magic.</li>   <li>• The person feels that all is lost.</li>   <li>• Suddenly the creature's magic returns.</li>   <li>• The person is saved and happy once again.</li> </ul>	

**Worksheet #9**

**The Literal Elements in 'The Talking Goat'**

Literal Elements	Abstract Pattern	New Literal Elements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> • Tugba and his wife are rich and happy.</li> <li>• Tugba cares for his animals and helps his neighbors.</li> <li>• A terrible drought comes over the land. Crops wilt and animals die.</li> <li>• Tugba leaves his ravaged property and brings with him only his favorite goat.</li> <li>• One day, Tugba discovers his goat can talk!</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> • Tugba makes a plan to take his goat to the village square. He will become rich again!</li> <li>• When Tugba takes his goat to the village square, the goat does not talk.</li> <li>• The angry villagers beat Tugba and prepare to kill him.</li> <li>• Suddenly, the goat says: "You must not kill him. Let him go."</li> <li>• Tugba receives many riches from the village chief.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Someone is leading a happy life.</li> <li>• This person is generous and kind.</li> <li>• Misfortune befalls him or her unexpectedly.</li> <li>• He or she is reduced to helplessness for a long time.</li> <li>• Suddenly, a magical creature appears.</li> <li>• This creature has the potential to save him or her.</li> <li>• At the critical moment, the creature <i>appears</i> to lose its magic.</li> <li>• The person feels that all is lost.</li> <li>• Suddenly the creature's magic returns.</li> <li>• The person is saved and happy once again.</li> </ul>	

8. Have students practice finding analogies between “The Talking Goat” and another folk tale or fairy tale, like Cinderella. To do this, have the students work with a partner to complete column 3 of Worksheet #9 by writing down the literal elements of the folk tale or fairy tale you (or they) select that correspond to the abstract pattern in “The Talking Goat.”
  
9. *Optional Extended Response to Literature:* Have students use the abstract pattern in “The Talking Goat” to write a folk tale of their own creation. Students can use Worksheet #9 as a graphic organizer to begin to brainstorm the literal elements of their own folk tale. Before students begin working on their folk tales, review with them the information on folk tales on pages 144 and 145. Remind students of the structural elements of folk tales: an introduction, a development, a climax, a conclusion, and a moral. As students are brainstorming the plot of their own folk tale, have them compare their initial notes with a partner prior to writing.
  
10. Conclude the lesson by asking students to respond in their journals to the following prompt: What has reading and discussing the folk tale “The Talking Goat” taught me about the world, myself, and others?

