

Telling and Reacting to a Story or Anecdote

(Seley)

I. Telling a personal story

Note on Verb Tenses and Storytelling:

When telling stories, we tend to mix different past tenses.

- At the beginning, to give background information, we sometimes use the “habitual past” (used to) to talk about usual routine or activities at the time of the story.
- *When I was little, my grandmother used to take me to the circus every spring*
- We often use the past perfect or past perfect continuous to give specific background information. *But that spring, my grandmother had been ill, so...*
- The main events are generally told using the simple past. *First we saw /went*
- For longer actions and descriptions, we tend to use the past continuous.

I was watching TV and relaxing when..(simple past). People were running everywhere.

Sometimes we tie the story to the present with the present perfect.

(I've often wondered what happened to her.)

II. Reacting

If you don't give any verbal reaction to an anecdote or story someone tells you, or you only say “Yes?” – which is not usually said in this context in English – the speaker will probably think that you are not interested in what he/she is saying. The following are common ways of reacting.

Showing initial surprise

Really??

You're kidding!!

You're joking!!

Uh-huh

(You /he, etc.) did??? (or (You) were?? if the main verb is be)

More specific or emotional reaction to good or bad news

How / That's + adjective!

Positive

How /that's (really) nice!

interesting!

exciting!

wonderful!

fantastic!

terrific!

fascinating!

sweet!

lucky!

funny!

Negative

How/that's awful!

terrible!

horrible!

sad!

annoying!

frustrating!

scary!

disgusting!
unfair!

What + noun (or adj. /noun)!

Referring to a situation

What (good/bad) luck!
 news!
What a shame /pity!
 mess!

Agreeing /Sympathizing

I can imagine!
Of course!

Referring to a person

What a nice guy /gal! (+)
What a character!
 an idiot /a fool /a pest !(-)
 a rat / a pig

Asking for more information

- What happened next?
- What did s/he say / do?