

## WTHeck is a Cumulative Tale?

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<http://greatstorybook.com/wtheck-cumulative-tale/>

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*You've most likely read or even sung a cumulative tale without knowing that it was one. This can be a fun way to structure a storybook – but what exactly are the rules? That's what I want to detail here.*

**A Cumulative Tale is one that builds its strength on repetition and theme. Here's how to do it.**

**A cumulative tale is typically scary, funny, or silly – but it can be anything you decide. It could be mysterious, sad or even romantic.**

### What I Love About These

Cumulative Tales are generally thought to be *classical kidlit*, or maybe even just *old fashioned folktales*. But they're still being written and read and loved - all over the world. This is one form of folktale writing that has really stood the test of time. What's more, it also transcends cultural borders.

If you're looking for a fun way to capture readers and to share a theme that is perhaps difficult to discuss plainly, then a Cumulative Tale is a brilliant way you might tackle that.

### So What Is This Thing?

A Cumulative Tale, which is sometimes called a Chain Tale and sometimes a Progressive Tale (but isn't always necessarily either of these), is a repetitive, rhythmic folktale that often has a surprising climax or end.

The stories *must* have repeated sentences that build upon each other, and those repeated sections should be **dialogue and action**. Every time something new happens in the story, everything that happened before is repeated.

The repetition is what makes this type of story seem easy and simple. It's also why it's hard to write.

### What the Cumulative Story isn't, really.

In a Chain Tale, or Circular Tale, the repetition isn't there. What defines a Chain is that the beginning and ending are the same. A Cumulative Tale can be a Chain, but not the other way around. (**If You Give A Mouse A Cookie** isn't cumulative, but it is circular.)

### Just a Few *Classic* Cumulative Tales:

- [This Is The House That Jack Built](#)
- [There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly](#)
- [Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears](#)
- [Chicken Little](#) (a.k.a. Henny Penny or Chicken Licken)
- [The Gingerbread Man](#) (or Boy)
  
- [The 12 Days of Christmas](#)

### It's a Type of Predictable Book

Predictability isn't always a bad thing, and in this case, it certainly isn't. When it comes to story types, there is something called a **Predictable Book**, which is a type of story that follows a specific, formulaic structure. A Cumulative Story is one of these types. Other types are:

- Chain, or Circular Story
- Familiar Sequence Story
- Pattern Story
- Question and Answer Story

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** Don't be confused with the professional use of *predictable* and think that the story's end must also be predictable. Just the opposite is true. What's predictable is the repeated return of what happened before. Whatever comes next should always be a surprise.

### ATU Catalogue of Folktale Types

In the [ATU Catalogue of International Folktales](#) (ATU: Aarne, Thompson, and Uther), Cumulative Tales are one type of **Formula Folktale**. (Other types of Formula Folktales are Catch Tales, Endless

Tales and Rounds.)

The ATU Catalogue (the updated version of the original AT Catalogue) is the way folktales are classified, to help properly organize tales by type and motif, to help track their historical origins.

**It's easy to see how the Chain Tale is *highly formulaic*. But does that mean it's *stale*?**

You've heard (and quite possibly said) that kids love repetition. They need repetition, to learn. This is why [Leitwortstil](#) can be such a great narrative tool to really bring a story home, and it's why cumulative tales are still being written today (and not just the Halloween-themed or Hollywood adaptations of classic cumulatives).

**Are there modern examples? You bet. Tons.**

**Here are some really well done modern Cumulative Tales:**

- [Move Over, Rover](#) by Karen Beaumont and Jane Dyer
- [Green Eggs and Ham](#) by Dr. Seuss (ok, a modern classic)
- [The Jacket I Wear in the Snow](#) by Shirley Neitzel and Nancy Winslow Parker
- [Oh No!](#) by Candace Fleming and Eric Rohmann
- [Hattie and the Fox](#) by Mem Fox and Patricia Mullins
- [This is the Challah](#) by Sue Hepker and Amy Wummer
- [Me and Annie McPhee](#) by Olivier Dunrea and Will Hillenbrand
- [Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain](#) by Verna Aardema
- [Joseph Had a Little Overcoat](#) by Simms Taback (based on an old Russian folktale)

**Cumulative Books I want to Read:**

There are two books I've been told are cumulative, but I'm not sure they are because I haven't read them. But these look really, really good to me. They're on my list of Books To Get.

- [Umbrellas Everywhere](#) by Elora Grace
- [And The Robot Went...](#) by Michelle Robinson and Sergio Ruzzier

**So What Are The Rules to a Cumulative Tale?**

- **A cumulative tale can rhyme, or not. Your choice.**
- **The prose must be tight, simple and not too difficult to read aloud.**
- **It shouldn't be a tongue twister. It should feel like you can sing the story.**
- **The characters are certain classic types, and they're flat and static. They should not feel real.**
- **The story is more about societal norms than character. Theme is key.**

**Character Types found in a Cumulative Tale**

The types of characters typically found in a Cumulative Tale are flat and static - but that isn't a bad thing. They're *supposed to be flat and static*. In this kind of story, characters *shouldn't* feel real and they don't have a character progression.

Sometimes, the protagonist dies. Again, the point of these stories isn't character, it's focus is story theme.

That's why characters are often [archetypes \(get those HERE\)](#) or one of these 3 types:

### Stock Character

This is a cliché character or type of character that is so often used in stories that it is more about how to use the character as a tool in the story rather than an a multi-dimensional character. Stock characters are functionally a talking road sign in the story and are most common in comedies. These characters usually have a lot of personality, but are static (they have no character arc).

### Foil

A foil (used here as a noun, not a verb) can be any important character (an antagonist, a sidekick, etc.) who displays characteristics that are the polar opposite of the protagonist. If a sidekick foils the protagonist, that means it emphasizes or magnifies the main character's personality traits by being the opposite, thereby teaching us more about the protagonist.

### Symbolic Character

These are characters where the character's function is to symbolize something else, oftentimes an aspect of society. This is different from a stock character because stock characters symbolize a personality type whereas symbolic characters symbolize a topic. Outside of a Cumulative Tale, symbolic characters can be static *or* dynamic (either with or without a character arc).

## Themes in Cumulative Tales

Theme is the key when it comes to this type of story. The plot must be progressive and involve a big pay-off - a surprise. But all of this is meant to convey something important to the way we think.

Common themes are things like **Bravery, Honesty, Giving, Family, Knowledge, and Wit**. But there is no limit to what you can choose here. Just remember that what's important about this kind of folktale is the *reason for the tale*, not the characters in the tale.

## Your Cumulative Tale

I must admit, I love this type of story structure, but I've never successfully written one. What about you? Have you written – or are you writing right now – a cumulative tale? Write below, let me know – or as ever, write me an email. I'd love to know what you're doing.

**Keep creating, no matter what.**

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