

**A Dozen Read-Throughs and
Still Going Strong:
Fluency and Content Knowledge via**

Reader's Theater

**International Reading Association
50th Annual Convention • San Antonio, Texas • May, 2005**

Presenter:

Katherine Scaper • www.edwriter.com



Table of Contents

Using Reader’s Theater for Fluency Instruction	3
Instructional Benefits of Reader’s Theater	4
Voice Inflection Mini-Lesson	5
Sample 5-Day Process	6–7
Tips, Tips, and More Tips	8–10
Writing Your Own Scripts	11
Continents and Oceans	12
Reader's Theater Assessment Tool	13
For Further Information	14
Recommended Resource for Reader's Theater Scripts	15

Using Reader's Theater for Fluency Instruction

Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read is the groundbreaking document published by the U.S. Department of Education in 2001. It highlights the importance of effective instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension. Suggested methodologies for fluency instruction include student-adult reading, choral reading, tape-assisted reading, partner reading, and Reader's Theater. Page 29 reads:

“*In reader's theater, students rehearse and perform a play for peers or others. They read from scripts derived from books that are rich in dialogue. Students play characters who speak lines or a narrator who shares necessary background information. Reader's theater provides readers with a legitimate reason to reread text and to practice fluency. Reader's theater also promotes cooperative interaction with peers and makes the reading task appealing.*”

The key word is “rehearse.” Students who normally resist reading a passage more than once WILLINGLY read it through a dozen times or more, boosting decoding and word recognition, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, content knowledge, and confidence.

The December/January edition of *Reading Today* (International Reading Association) includes the annual “What's Hot/What's Not” feature. This year's survey reads:

“**Fluency is HOT**
... and should be HOT!”

“*The rehearsal is the essence of Reader's Theater. Here is where students get practice becoming fluent oral readers. They must understand the story before they can use their voices to convey that interpretation to others. Repeated readings in a Reader's Theater setting are not tedious, but fun.*”

Lois Walker, Author of *Reader's Theater in the Elementary Classroom*, www.loiswalker.com.

Instructional Benefits of Reader's Theater:

“
Too often, children read a story and only understand it at its most superficial literal level. With Reader's Theater, they're not just reading a story, they're living it.”

Judy Freeman, author of *Books Kids Will Sit Still For*, judyreadsbooks.com.

- Boosts listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills
- Increases vocabulary
- Extends attention span
- Enhances attributes of fluency, such as phrasing, reading rate, inflection, intonation, and pause
- Introduces students to a variety of literature
- Provides opportunities to reflect on texts
- Enables students to analyze character traits and literary elements
- Calls attention to author's meaning and purpose
- Provides enjoyable familiar re-reading with a purpose
- Honors a variety of ability levels, intelligences, and learning styles
- Motivates reluctant readers
- Enhances confidence in and enjoyment of reading
- Develops interpersonal, social, and collaborative skills
- Capitalizes on children's natural instincts for imagination and dramatic play
- Provides practice in public speaking in a supportive environment
- Enhances content-area learning, including facts, ideas, and concepts
- Addresses national, state, and district learning standards
- Provides both formal and informal assessment data

Voice Inflection Mini-Lesson

Objective

Students will learn that emphasizing one word over another can change the meaning of a sentence.

Materials

Chalkboard, chart paper, or overhead projector; writing instrument

Procedure

- 1 Display the following sentence: *I didn't say Minerva stole my blue pen.*
- 2 Ask students to silently read the sentence to themselves and think about its meaning. Then have them share their ideas with the class utilizing think-pair-share.
- 3 Point to the first word. Have students chorally read the sentence emphasizing the word **I**: *I didn't say Minerva stole my blue pen.* Discuss the “new” meaning of the sentence. (Someone else said it.)
- 4 Continue the process with each word, as follows:

<i>I didn't say Minerva stole my blue pen.</i>	(I strongly deny saying that.)
<i>I didn't say Minerva stole my blue pen.</i>	(I implied it.)
<i>I didn't say Minerva stole my blue pen.</i>	(I said someone else stole it.)
<i>I didn't say Minerva stole my blue pen.</i>	(Minerva did something else with it.)
<i>I didn't say Minerva stole my blue pen.</i>	(She stole someone else's blue pen.)
<i>I didn't say Minerva stole my blue pen.</i>	(She stole one of another color .)
<i>I didn't say Minerva stole my blue pen.</i>	(She stole a different blue item .)
- 5 In pairs or teams, have students create their own sentences in which stressing different words changes the meaning of the sentence. Have students present the sentences to the class.

Sample 5-Day Process

Day One

- Give each student a copy of the script.
- Introduce the title, author, setting, and characters.
- Provide any needed background information on the topic.
- Display, pronounce, and define difficult vocabulary words.
- Ask students to make predictions about the text.
- Read aloud the entire script as students follow along. Model fluent expression.
- Discuss the text and confirm or revise predictions. Allow students to connect text ideas to their prior knowledge, to other texts they have heard or read, and to their own experiences.
- Ask students for other words to add to the vocabulary list.
- Reread tricky parts and have students follow along and then echo.

Day Two

- Review vocabulary words.
- Provide a brief mini-lesson on one aspect of fluency.
- Have the class chorally read the entire script with you.
- Assign parts. Make sure students understand that the number of lines their characters have is less important than the expression they bring to the lines.
- Explain and model behavior expectations for rehearsal.
- Have characters practice independently as you circulate around the room helping with pronunciation, expression, and reading rate.
- Have characters rehearse their parts with partners and get feedback
- Have each character read his or her part for you. Give tips for fine-tuning.

Day Three

- Review the criteria on the Reader's Theater Assessment Tool to remind students of the ideals they are working toward.
- Have a full read-through with “side-coaching,” in which you interject specific requests to the character (not the student), such as, “Frog, please read that line once again as if you're frightened,” or “This is the climax . . . all soldiers get ready to talk a bit faster.”
- Invite readers to give one another positive feedback and suggestions using character names.
- Decide on a staging area and draw a diagram with circles for stools, X's for readers, and arrows to show movement. Practice entrances and exits.
- Decide on any needed performance items, such as nametags or simple props. Allow time for students to gather and prepare them.

Day Four

- Remind students of behavior and performance expectations.
- Conduct a full dress rehearsal.
- Debrief as needed.

Day Five

- Perform the play for classmates, other classes, parents, staff members, administrators, or other guests. Videotape if possible.
- Celebrate!

Follow-Up Activities

- Meet with students in individual conferences and together complete the Reader's Theater Assessment Tool.
- Have students write about their experience in a reflection journal.
- Watch the video and have students set personal or group goals for their next performance.
- Extend students' thinking by having them suggest alternate titles for the story, write new endings, or add additional characters or scenes.
- Analyze the text, utilizing graphic organizers, such as story maps, Venn diagrams, character trait lists, cause-and-effect charts, or time lines.
- Pull out words to analyze for word families, prefixes and suffixes, or synonyms and antonyms.
- Conduct further research on the script topic.
- Discuss an issue addressed in the script.
- Invite students to illustrate their scripts and compile them in folders or binders.
- Invite students to take their scripts home to read to their families.
- Conduct running records of students' independent reading to guide your decision for future script selection.

Tips, Tips, and More Tips

To match scripts to the number of students in your class . . .

- Assign multiple small roles to one student.
- Have two or more students read the same part.
- Convert one role into two or more characters.
- Divide narration between two or more students.
- Assign a separate narrator to each character.
- Convert some narration into character dialogue.
- Cut or add characters and dialogue.
- Have some students serve as announcers to introduce the play and characters.
- Add music so some students can sing rather than speak.
- Change character names to accommodate gender.
- Have different small groups work on the same script or on different scripts.
- Provide non-speaking support roles, such as prop manager, stage designer, dialogue coach, or sound effect coordinator.
- Utilize flexible grouping.

To support participants . . .

- Start with short, fun scripts in which speakers don't have too many lines all at once.
- Be sure each participant has his or her own copy of the script.
- Have students highlight their parts, mark pauses with slash marks, underline words that need to be emphasized, and use the script margins to make notes about any needed gestures or movements.
- Discourage students from memorizing their parts so they can utilize reading interpretation skills rather than simply saying the words.

While performing . . .

- The script may be placed in a looseleaf notebook or in a folder made of black construction paper.
- Have students hold their scripts in one hand only, or have music stands available to allow actors to gesture more freely. Held scripts should be between waist and chest level.
- Have students walk on stage, wait for the signal, and then open their scripts all at the same time.
- Students can stand in a line or a semi-circle or sit on chairs or stools. Depending on the storyline, some might stand and some might sit.
- In "pure" Reader's Theater, readers don't actually look at one another but speak to a point just over the audience's head, looking up from their scripts about half the time. However, you can make the decision to have the readers interact with each other as much or as little as you like. (The narrator always faces the audience.)

- *If the audience laughs, stop speaking until they can hear you again.*
- *If someone talks in the audience, don't pay attention.*
- *If someone walks into the room, don't look.*
- *If you make a mistake, pretend it was right.*
- *If you drop something, leave it until the audience is looking elsewhere.*
- *If someone forgets to read, see if you can read the part instead, make something up, or just skip over it—but don't whisper to the reader.*
- *If readers “fall on their rear ends,” pretend they didn't.*

Aaron Shepard, author of *Readers On Stage*, aaronshp.com.

- If entrances and exits are needed, students can enter from the side or from the audience. Or, they can enter and exit symbolically by facing or turning their backs to the audience or by standing or sitting.
- To signal scene changes, readers can briefly “freeze” or turn their backs to the audience. Other techniques are flicking the lights, ringing a bell, or playing a short music excerpt.
- Encourage students to create unique voices, “ham it up,” and project humor into their roles when appropriate. The more fun they have, the more fun the audience will have. Readers can also signal the audience to join in on oft-repeated phrases.
- Remind students to use facial expressions and body language as well as their voices to depict emotion.
- Have the final reader or readers say the last three words in the script slowly and with rhythm, such as *h-a-p-p-i-l-y*, *e-v-e-r*, *a-f-t-e-r* or *n-e-v-e-r*, *s-e-e-n*, *a-g-a-i-n* to signal that the show is over. Then have the characters “freeze,” close their scripts, face the audience, and bow.

To enhance the performance . . .

- No costumes, props, make-up, sets, or scenery are needed—but any or all may be used. Just be sure they don't detract from the reading itself, because part of the fun of Reader's Theater is the opportunity for the audience to create their own mental images of the story.
- Encourage students to transform everyday objects into props. For example, a cardboard tube can be a telescope and a stool can be a king's throne.
- One item, such as a hat, can suggest an entire costume. One background item, such as a star, can suggest an entire setting.
- Simple actions can be used, such as walking or “flying” in place, pretending to pull a heavy object, or looking up into a tree or down at a ladybug.
- Characters can make name tags from posterboard squares and wear them on a string around the necks. (Keep these with the scripts for future use.)

Teach students to say . . .

- **script**—the selection that is read
- **rehearse**—to practice reading the script
- **cast**—the characters who read the script
- **understudy**—a person who practices another character's part in order to substitute if needed
- **stage**—the location where the script is performed
- **offstage**—any area that is not the stage
- **upstage**—away from the audience
- **downstage**—toward the audience
- **stage left**—to the reader's left on stage (not the audience's)
- **stage right**—to the reader's right on stage (not the audience's)
- **BTA**—“back to audience”
- **dress rehearsal**—the last practice before the script is performed

To make Reader's Theater accessible for English-language learners or students with special needs . . .

- Adapt books into “call-and-response” scripts. For example, in *Green Eggs and Ham*, you can be Sam and the students can chorally read the other character's part.
- Select scripts in which words and phrases are repeated often.
- Assign an English-language learner and a peer model to the same part.
- Spend more time practicing chorally.
- Retype the script, using an enlarged font and double-spacing. Make sure a character's speech doesn't overlap onto the next page.
- Exaggerate facial expressions, gestures, and movements to enhance meaning.
- Utilize pictures and props to reinforce vocabulary.
- Coordinate scripts with current content-area topics so students will have adequate background knowledge.
- Invite students to retell the story in their own words.
- Pay special attention to multiple-meaning words or figures of speech.

To integrate writing with Reader's Theater . . .

Have students create invitations, flyers, or advertising posters for their upcoming performances. Have them design tickets, write articles for the school or community newspaper, and write their own scripts.

Writing Your Own Scripts

Sample Adaptable Selections:

- *Fables* by Arnold Lobel
- *Rosie and Michael* by Judith Viorst
- *Yo! Yes?* by Chris Raschka
- *Hey, Little Ant* by Phillip and Hannah Hoose
- *Mouse TV* by Matt Novak
- *Martha Walks the Dog* by Susan Meddaugh
- *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type* by Doreen Cronin
- *The Web Files* by Margie Palatini
- *Get Well, Good Knight* by Shelley Moore
- *Poppleton* by Cynthia Rylant
- *Frog and Toad Stories* by Arnold Lobel
- Scenes from the *Harry Potter* books by J. K. Rowling
- Poems by Shel Silverstein and Jack Prelutsky
- Biographies
- Folktales, fairy tales, tall tales, and legends
- Excerpts from math, science, and social studies textbooks

Student Activity

- Photocopy a scene or selection that can be read in five minutes or less. Watch the reading level but allow for some new vocabulary words.
- Assign a highlighter color to each character. Have students mark dialogue accordingly, crossing out tag lines. The remaining text is then assigned to one or more narrators.
- Encourage students to cut long descriptions or minor characters or scenes, as long as everyone in the group agrees. Invite them to add additional lines if needed to fill out the story line.
- Allow time for students to rehearse and perform the adapted script.

Benefits

- Students must analyze characters, setting, and plot.
- Students have an opportunity to integrate reading, writing, and thinking skills.

When you write your own scripts, add a summary that includes:*

- Genre
- Theme
- Setting
- Number of readers
- Suggested ages or reading levels
- Approximate performance time
- Brief description of story

*Aaron Shepard

Tips For Adapting Existing Materials:

- *Select materials with tight plots, clear endings, suspense, interesting characters, lively dialogue, and appealing themes.*
- *Consider what it would take to change a book into a play as you transform the text into a script.*
- *Eliminate phrases or passages when necessary for a more dramatic effect.*
- *Avoid adding extensive narration or background information.*

Elizabeth Poe, West Virginia University, *Reading Today*, May, 2004.

“

Normally young readers can have a one-page story ready for tryout in about a quarter hour, with practically no adult help. With adult help, it can take quite a bit longer.”

Aaron Shepard

Continents and Oceans

- #1:** Earth has seven large bodies of land.
- #2:** How many?
- #1:** Seven!
- #3:** What are they called?
- #1:** They're called continents!
- #4:** What are their names?
- #5-#11:** We know!
- #5:** North America!
- #6:** South America!
- #7:** Europe!
- #8:** Asia!
- #9:** Africa!
- #10:** Australia!
- #11:** Antarctica!
- #1:** That's right! Earth has four large bodies of water, too.
- #2:** How many?
- #1:** Four!
- #3:** What are they called?
- #1:** They're called oceans!
- #4:** What are their names?
- #5-#8:** We know!
- #5:** Atlantic Ocean!
- #6:** Pacific Ocean!
- #7:** Indian Ocean!
- #8:** Arctic Ocean!
- #1:** That's right!
- #2-#4:** That's right!
- #9-#11:** THAT'S RIGHT!

The End

Reader's Theater Assessment Tool

Skill	Bravo!	Take A Bow	Star Potential	Let's Rehearse
Shows leadership while planning and rehearsing				
Works as a team member by supporting other readers				
Speaks confidently, audibly, clearly, and expressively				
Keeps audience's attention with tone, expression, and volume of voice				
Demonstrates an understanding of the character's emotions, moods, actions, and point of view				
Reads in a style that reinforces the drama or humor of the story situation				
Adjusts pitch, stress, intonation, phrasing, and pacing to achieve desired meaning				
Effectively uses facial expressions, body language, gestures, and movement				
Picks up cues without hesitation				
Listens to and reacts appropriately to other characters' lines and actions				
Stays in character even when not reading lines				
Doesn't fidget, look around, or giggle during performance				
Effectively transitions between scenes				
Effectively moves on and off stage as needed				
Handles unexpected circumstances without getting ruffled				
Puts on a performance that would make the script's author smile				

For Further Information . . .

The Reading Teacher (International Reading Association)

- March 2005: “Fluency: Bridge between Decoding and Reading Comprehension” by John J. Pikulski and David J. Chard
- December 2004/January 2005: “Curriculum-Based Reader’s Theater: Setting the Stage for Reading and Retention” by Rosalind M. Flynn
- December 2004/January 2005: “Helping Students Become Accurate, Expressive Readers: Fluency Instruction for Small Groups” by Melanie Kuhn
- October 2004: “A Focus on Fluency: How One Teacher Incorporated Fluency with Her Reading Curriculum” by Lorraine Wiebe Griffith and Timothy V. Rasinski
- March 2003: “Integrating Literacy and Science in the Classroom: From Eco-Mysteries to Reader’s Theater” by Amelia E. El-Hindi
- November 2002: “‘I Thought about It All Night’: Reader’s Theater for Reading Fluency and Motivation” by Jo Worthy and Kathryn Prater
- December 1998/January 1999: “‘I Never Thought I Could Be a Star’: A Reader’s Theater Ticket to Fluency” by Miriam Martinez, Nancy L. Roser, and Susan Strecker

Book

Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read (National Institute for Literacy, 2001)

Worldwide Web

Google “Reader’s Theater”

Recommended Resource for Reader's Theater Scripts

Benchmark Education Company
629 Fifth Avenue
Pelham, NY 10803
1-877-236-2465
www.benchmarkeducation.com

Each script:

- Is leveled (F–U, 9–50, Grades 1–5)
- Includes a word count, glossary, and synopsis
- Addresses National Content Standards in either math, science, or social studies
- Includes a teacher's guide with background topic and vocabulary information, a recommended instructional sequence, staging and performance suggestions, follow-up questions, literacy and content extensions, ELL support, and related resources

This set of scripts earned a *Learning Magazine* 2005 Teachers' Choice™ Award for supplemental materials. You can order a free leveled script and teacher's guide at: www.benchmarkeducation.com/rt.html.



“*Like storytelling, reader's theater can create images by suggestion that could never be portrayed realistically on stage. Space and time can be shrunk or stretched, fantastic worlds can be created, marvelous journeys can be enacted. Reader's theater frees the performers and the audience from the physical limitations of conventional theater, letting the imagination soar . . . There ARE rules in reader's theater, but luckily there is no one to enforce them.*”

Aaron Shepard