

What a Character!
Bringing out the best in
your students through

Reader's Theater

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INTRODUCTION

“Reader’s Theater is an authentic, entertaining, and educationally powerful way to read and communicate meaning. Reader’s Theater yields improvements in students’ word recognition, fluency and comprehension.”

Timothy V. Rasinski,
*The Fluent Reader: Oral Reading Strategies
 for Building Word Recognition, Fluency,
 and Comprehension*

“In our combined 40 years in education, with a recent focus on students with challenges in reading and motivation, we have found one instructional activity that not only combines several effective research-based practices, but also leads to increased engagement with literacy even in very resistant readers. The activity is Readers Theater...”

Jo Worthy and Kathryn Prater,
The Reading Teacher, November, 2002

“Readers Theater is well matched with children’s needs and interests. In addition to supporting multicultural perspectives, it is extremely sensitive to English language learners. Readers Theater also supports meaning making and fluency; applies easily to expository and narrative text; encourages cooperative learning in flexible groups; and nurtures positive interpersonal relationships, which are considered an important school climate dimension.”

Joseph Sanacore
The Reading Teacher, May, 2004

Reader’s Theater is . . .

- a rehearsed, oral reading interpretation of a text before an audience.
- a highly successful classroom instructional model for fluency based on sound theory and research.

Reader’s Theater can . . .

- address reading skills, curriculum standards, motivation issues, and social development.
- target the needs of particular students, teachers, and classrooms ranging from acquiring listening and language skills to demonstrating empathy and fairness to learning to analyze and reflect on texts.
- impact classroom climate by boosting students’ reading ability, confidence, and personal growth.
- give students the opportunity to “try out” character traits and practice solving conflicts through dialogue and positive action.

INSTRUCTIONAL BENEFITS OF READER'S THEATER

Academic

- 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 and learning styles.
- Enhances content-area learning, including facts, ideas, and concepts.
- Addresses national, state, and district learning standards.
- Provides formal and informal assessment data.

“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

Social and Emotional

- 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.

Sample 5-Day Process

<i>Day One</i>	<i>Day Two</i>	<i>Day Three</i>	<i>Day Four</i>	<i>Day Five</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build Background • Introduce the Script • Introduce Vocabulary • Model Fluent Reading 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build Fluency: Echo-Read • Build Comprehension • Build Vocabulary • Discuss Fluency Assessment Rubric • Assign Roles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build Fluency Skills • Choral Read for Fluency • Rehearse the Script 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rehearse the Script • Make Staging and Performance Decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perform the Script • Assess Students' Fluency

Follow-Up Activities

- Literacy Extensions: Word Study, Reader Response, Read Across Texts
- Character Education Connections

TEACHER 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 effects 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 . . .

- Readers may place their scripts in looseleaf notebooks or folders 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. Scripts should be held 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.)
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While performing . . .

- *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, try to leave it until the audience is looking elsewhere.*
- *If someone forgets to read, see if you can read the part instead, or make something up, or maybe just skip over it—but don't whisper to the reader.*
- *If readers "fall on their rear end," pretend they didn't.*

Aaron Shepard, author of *Readers OnStage*, 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 turning toward or away from the audience, or by standing or sitting.
- To signal scene changes, readers can "freeze" briefly, or turn their backs to the audience. Other techniques are flicking the lights, ringing a bell, or playing a short musical 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 . . .

- Costumes, props, make-up, sets, or scenery are not 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 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 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.
- Actors can make name tags for their characters from posterboard squares and wear them on a string. (Keep these with the scripts for future use.)

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- 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 (not the audience’s)
 - **stage right** — to the reader’s right (not the audience’s)
 - **BTA** — “back to audience”
 - **dress rehearsal** — the last practice before the script is performed

To integrate writing with Reader’s Theater . . .

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

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

The techniques you use for on-level students are the same as for ELLs: read to, read with, read by. But students in the process of learning English do not have the same knowledge of grade-level vocabulary and language structures that their native English-speaking peers do. However, they can still enjoy and benefit from participation in Reader’s Theater activities if appropriate accommodations are provided. Taking time to modify the activities to match students’ experiences with English and their levels of English-language proficiency supports their oral language and literacy development and prepares them to more fully benefit from the Reader’s Theater experience. The benefits include:

- participating in class activities that require listening, speaking, reading, and writing with English-speaking role models;
- listening to and reading with native English-speaking readers who are familiar with the vocabulary and use it in meaningful contexts;
- listening to and reading with more proficient readers who are familiar with the language structures and English syntax;
- increasing comprehension as text is supported through the use of body movements and gestures;
- experiencing the repetition necessary for language development as provided through the rehearsals;
- practicing fluency in both oral expression and oral reading;
- practicing pronunciation in both oral expression and oral reading.

TESOL LEVEL 1

Characteristics:

- Students need concrete visual clues to the meaning of the language they hear if they are to attach meaning to vocabulary and language structures.
- Students need multiple opportunities to listen to the language paired with the visuals.
- Students must be allowed to demonstrate comprehension nonverbally (pointing, nodding, drawing, following simple directions) and in one- or two-word responses to simple “yes-no,” “either-or,” and “wh” questions.
- Students should be encouraged to participate verbally, but they should not be forced to speak.

Suggested Pre-Reading Activities

- Read simple topic-related books to students.
- Ask students to draw pictures that represent their understanding of specific events in the story. Encourage students to use their limited vocabulary to describe their pictures.
- Use the Language-Experience Approach (LEA) to create meaningful text from oral language elicited from students as they share and describe their pictures.
- Ask students to contribute to and/or participate in choral readings of the story elicited during the LEA.
- Ask students to create a puppet show based on a script adapted from the story elicited during the LEA.
- Ask students to perform their puppet show for the class, reading the LEA-based script as they perform.
- Ask students to rehearse their role as the chorus for the actual Reader’s Theater activity. Assign simple, repeated phrases from the script related to the event(s) discussed and practiced during the LEA-related activities. Create lines if necessary.
- Ask students to participate in making props and/or costumes for the actual script. This will provide them with opportunities to learn new vocabulary that they can use to retell parts of the story.

Suggested During-Reading Activities

- Because participating in the class production should be seen more as a listening activity than a reading activity, do not overwhelm students with the entire script. Instead, make sure they know when to contribute the chorus lines provided on their copies of the script or post their lines on a language chart.
- While others are reading, have these students listen for information that indicates when to provide a specific prop.
- Ask students to act out selected actions the readers describe.

Suggested After-Reading Activities

- Adapt literacy extension activities to allow students to draw or complete a graphic organizer, such as a Venn diagram, to demonstrate comprehension of the script.
- Use the LEA to elicit a story based on the script, using simple questions to elicit vocabulary not used in the first LEA story. Contribute simple sentences to the story to model expanded language and/or specific language structures.
- Use the second LEA story to develop and/or reinforce specific reading skills.

TESOL LEVELS 2 – 3

Characteristics:

- These students still need visual support to attach meaning to new vocabulary and language structures.
- Students make many grammatical errors due to their limited vocabulary and knowledge of the language structures. The errors are also evident in their oral reading and should be regarded as an indication of their language proficiency, not an indication of a reading problem.
- Students are often more comfortable speaking in a small-group situation than in a large-group situation.
- Although many demonstrate developing or well-developed decoding skills when reading aloud, these students do not always comprehend what they decode. Because decoding skills often develop faster than comprehension skills, it is critical to check for comprehension frequently.
- Because they have a wide range of reading skills and perceived reading levels, some may benefit from the activities recommended for New-to-English students (TESOL Level 1).

Suggested Pre-Reading Activities

- Use Level 1 activities as needed.
- Ask students to create scripts using their native languages.
- Review the topic with students, using graphic organizers such as charts, Venn diagrams, and semantic webs to activate prior knowledge and specific vocabulary.
- Show a video related to the topic without sound. Ask students to look for specific information and describe what they see to promote oral language related to the topic.
- Present new vocabulary using real objects, pictures, and hands-on activities.
- Develop a log of new vocabulary.
- Develop or reinforce specific language structures necessary for reading the script successfully.
- Ask students to develop a class-event time line to introduce and/or reinforce the concept of passage of time and the associated verb tenses.
- Develop or reinforce “tones of voice” by challenging groups of students to show different emotions as they read or say the same line.
- Ask students to make predictions about specific characters and events after introducing the title and a “tease” about the story.
- Ask groups of students to create and share a scene, with dialogue, based on the predictions.
- Allow students who can read an assigned role but are reluctant to speak in front of a large group to choose a reading partner.

Suggested During-Reading Activities

- Use Level 1 activities as needed.
- Set focus questions for each section of the script to help students read and listen for specific information that will promote understanding of characters, events, or vocabulary to be discussed after reading.
- Ask questions that will encourage students to respond with the target language structures introduced in pre-reading activities.
- Check for comprehension using questions appropriate to the students' language proficiencies.
- Encourage students to read for meaning, adjust their reading rate if necessary, take risks with unknown words, and use learned reading strategies.
- Encourage students to discuss items from the script that they feel are important. Create a chart of their responses.
- Encourage students to identify unfamiliar or difficult words. Have students add those words and meanings to their vocabulary logs.

Suggested After-Reading Activities

- Elicit and discuss responses to the focus questions.
- Adapt literacy extension activities to students' levels of written language.
- Ask partners or small groups of students to create their own scripts using similar events but different settings or characters.
- Ask students to tape-record their favorite part of the dialogue with a partner or in small groups and explain why they chose that part. Consider making these recordings part of a portfolio documenting oral language growth and reading comprehension progress.

TESOL LEVELS 4–5

Characteristics:

- Some students may be on the verge of exiting a formal language-development program.
- Students speak in more complex sentences but may still be hesitant to speak in a large-group situation.
- Students' written language may still contain grammatical errors not typically made by native English speakers.
- Students may be able to read some grade-level materials.
- Students may have difficulty with texts about unfamiliar topics or texts that contain idioms, figures of speech, difficult language structures, or words that have many meanings.

Suggested Pre-Reading Activities

- Probe for prior knowledge of topic and essential vocabulary.
- Develop or reinforce specific language structures necessary for reading the script successfully.
- Introduce and explicitly teach idioms, figures of speech, or words that have multiple meanings that are essential to comprehending the script.

Suggested During-Reading Activities

- Continue to set focus questions for each section of the script.
- Ask questions that will encourage students to respond with the target language structures and vocabulary.
- Check for comprehension using questions appropriate to the students' language proficiencies.
- Encourage students to take risks with unknown words and use learned reading strategies.
- Encourage students to discuss items from the script that they feel are important. Create a chart of their responses.
- Encourage students to identify unfamiliar or difficult words. Ask students to add those words and meanings to their vocabulary logs.

Suggested After-Reading Activities

- Review questions and comments elicited during reading.
- Adapt literacy extension activities to students' levels of written language.

TEACHER - AND STUDENT-MADE SCRIPTS

Fiction

- Type a scene, chapter, or complete selection that is at the students' reading level and can be read in five minutes or less. Make a copy for each student.
- 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.
- Tell students they may (1) cut long descriptions or minor characters or scenes as long as everyone in the group agrees, (2) reword sentences to make them flow more smoothly, and (3) insert descriptive words to show how particular words, phrases, or sentences should be read.
- Allow time for students to rehearse and perform the adapted script.

Nonfiction

- Type a section, chapter, or complete selection that is at the students' reading level and can be read in five minutes or less. Make a copy for each student.
- Assign a highlighter color to each reader. Have the students take turns highlighting one or more sentences until they get to the end of the selection. Explain that two or more readers (or the whole group) may want to read sentences that state a main idea or summarize information.
- Tell students they may (1) cut long descriptions or minor details as long as everyone in the group agrees, and (2) alter the text if the words refer to a photograph or other graphic feature.
- Allow time for students to rehearse and perform the adapted script.

CHARACTER EDUCATION

The Six Pillars of Character

(From the "Character Counts!" Youth-Ethics Initiative at www.charactercounts.org)

Trustworthiness: Be honest • Don't deceive, cheat or steal • Be reliable — do what you say you'll do • Have the courage to do the right thing • Build a good reputation • Be loyal — stand by your family, friends and country

Respect: Treat others with respect; follow the Golden Rule • Be tolerant of differences • Use good manners, not bad language • Be considerate of the feelings of others • Don't threaten, hit, or hurt anyone • Deal peacefully with anger, insults, and disagreements

Responsibility: Do what you are supposed to do • Persevere: keep on trying! • Always do your best • Use self-control • Be self-disciplined • Think before you act — consider the consequences • Be accountable for your choices

Fairness: Play by the rules • Take turns and share • Be open-minded; listen to others • Don't take advantage of others • Don't blame others carelessly

Caring: Be kind • Be compassionate and show you care • Express gratitude • Forgive others • Help people in need

Citizenship: Do your share to make your school and community better • Cooperate • Get involved in community affairs • Stay informed; vote • Be a good neighbor • Obey laws and rules • Respect authority • Protect the environment

STUDENT SELF-ASSESSMENT RESPONSE FORM

Student: _____

Script: _____

Character I Portray: _____

Please read each item and think about how fluently you read the character's lines. As you read through each element of fluency, mark **yes** or **no** responses on the lines provided. At the bottom, tell how you plan to improve your reading in the areas where you responded/filled in **no**. Make comments or give examples of how well you read and list any areas where you could receive more help.

1. As I read, did I read for **phrasing and fluency** by:

- reading in longer, meaningful phrases? _____
- paying attention to the author's language patterns (words, sentences)? _____
- making the reading sound like talk or natural oral language? _____
- stressing certain words to emphasize/reveal the importance of a word or phrase? _____

2. As I read, did I read using **intonation** by:

- using my voice to make the reading reflect the feelings, anticipation, tension, mood and personality of the character? _____
- paying attention to punctuation? _____
- interpreting the punctuation and using my voice to appropriately raise or lower its sound because of the type of sentence/punctuation I read? _____

3. As I read, did I pay attention to **pace** by:

- using an appropriate speed of reading? _____
- reading the lines with the same speed and flow that I use when I talk? _____
- reading with very few hesitations or unnecessary pauses and repetitions? _____

4. As I read, did I read **accurately** by:

- Quickly recognizing words and reading them correctly? _____
- Really thinking about the meaning of the story and using known words (high-frequency words, sight words, etc.) and word parts as anchors to help me figure out unknown words? _____
- Self-correcting any miscues or errors on my first try/attempt? _____
- Make the words sound meaningful? _____

5. As I read, did I really try to **understand the character** and read and say the lines **the same way the character would** by:

- making inferences about the character? _____
- using my voice (tone) to sound like the character? _____
- using my voice to express a particular feeling of the character? _____
- using body language (gestures) to better express the feelings of the character? _____
- using appropriate expressions (facial) in a way that would best represent the character? _____

Plan of Action:

I will work on improving my reading fluency during the repeated readings of my character lines by:

When reading independently, I feel:

I would like for my teacher or a peer to help me with:

1. _____
 2. _____
 3. _____
-

READER'S THEATER PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT

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				
Uses facial expressions, body language, gestures, and movement effectively				
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				

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RECOMMENDED RESOURCE FOR READER'S THEATER SCRIPTS

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