

Article

## The Power of Reader's Theater

An easy way to make dramatic changes in kids' fluency, writing, listening, and social skills

By [Jennifer Prescott](#)

[Reader's Theater in 5 Easy Steps](#)

Watch very young children at play, and you'll often see some fine dramatic work. Quite naturally, young children invent characters, scenes, and stories, infusing their creations with expressive voices and invented dialogue. Settings are developed; dramatic conflicts arise and are solved. "Playing" and "a play" can turn out to be very similar.

Drama, as many teachers are discovering, is not only fun and natural for children, it also encourages emotional growth, motivation, and engagement. And one form of drama, known as reader's theater, has been found to be particularly effective in building reading fluency. Called simply "RT" by many advocates, reader's theater can also boost listening and speaking skills, enhance confidence, and transform reluctant readers into book lovers.

### A Dramatic Success Story

Lorraine Griffith, a fourth-grade teacher at West Buncombe Elementary, in Asheville, North Carolina, still recalls how one of her students struggled several years ago, as the girl took an end-of-year reading exam. In frustrated tears, the student struggled for 30 minutes — and then, finally, turned to page two of the test.

Although Griffith had worked hard to remediate her class in comprehension skills, a sad fact remained: While the children's comprehension skills were strong, not all them could actually read. "We spend an exorbitant amount of time teaching kids how to comprehend passages," says Griffith. "This takes time away from actual reading. Repeated reading is the key."

Reader's theater proved to be almost a magic solution for Griffith: In just 10 weeks of using RT, every child in her class had gained a full grade level in reading. After a year, the children's gains had jumped to three years of growth. Griffith calls the transformation in their reading fluency "totally remarkable."

Griffith's findings are borne out by a 1999 study in *The Reading Teacher* by Strecker, Roser, and Martinez, which showed that second graders who did reader's theater on a regular basis made, on average, more than a year's growth in reading. Tim Rasinski, a professor at Kent State University, in Kent, Ohio, points out that "research has demonstrated that practiced reading or repeated reading does lead to significant gains in fluency, which is a key element in effective reading programs."

Building fluency is one of the five major dictates set up in Reading First, part of the No Child Left Behind Act. Put Reading First, a booklet published by the U.S. Department of Education et al (2001), states that "Readers' theatre

provides readers with a legitimate reason to reread text and to practice fluency. [RT] also promotes cooperative interaction with peers and makes the reading task appealing."

"If you want to get your kids reading with comprehension, expression, fluency, and joy," affirms children's book specialist, Instructor columnist, and RT proponent Judy Freeman, "there's nothing more effective than reader's theater."

### **Getting Started**

Beyond its efficacy, the best news about reader's theater is how easy it can be. It does not require extensive preparation, fancy costumes, props, sets, or memorization. While staged plays might be limited by a school's budget or supplies, RT is limited only by the imagination.

Within the four walls of the classroom, students can figuratively scale mountains, battle dragons, and row Viking ships across the ocean — all from the chairs in which they sit to perform. Jo Worthy, a former classroom teacher and currently an associate professor of education at the University of Texas, explains that reader's theater "is a pretty controlled way of doing drama, so it's especially nice for the shy student or teacher. You have a script in front of you — kind of nice to hide behind — and that gives you security."

Worthy goes on to say that it's best to start small, building rules and procedures of behavior as you go along. For a first step, teachers can model fluent, expressive reading for their students during shared read-alouds. They can start involving students in choral readings, in which all students read a passage in unison, and informal round-robin readings, in which students simply take turns reading the lines in a prepared script as they pass it around a circle. Everyone gets a chance to try out each role, and kids can take the scripts home to practice with family members. From there, a teacher may choose to assign roles or simply continue with the circle-reading format.

Worthy suggests having the whole class do one script together first, then breaking the class into four groups and giving each a different script. With some practice, the teacher can get the class all working independently.

Since kids need to understand and become comfortable with the format of a script, using a prepared script is the best way to start. Finding one is easy — there are numerous scripts available online and in books (see "Free Scripts!"). Most online scripts are free for classroom use. Tim Rasinski recommends starting with short scripts — no more than two or three pages.

### **Practicing the Script**

Rick Swallow, a former sixth-grade teacher for 25 years at Vista Square Elementary School, in Chula Vista, California, remembers a student who had virtually no interest in reading — until he got the part of the hero, Max, in Maurice Sendak's classic *Where the Wild Things Are*. "I couldn't supply him with enough reading material with 'parts' that he could act out in his head," recalls Swallow. "He became an avid reader. I don't know what ever happened to him, but I envision him on a stage somewhere."

Like Swallow, most teachers find that even the most resistant readers practice their RT scripts as if they were doing a full-time job — and one that they love. "Most children have a desire to perform and express themselves orally," says Rasinski. RT gives them the opportunity to do so.

Mack Lewis, a third- and fourth-grade teacher from Central Point, Oregon, writes "Because we've inadvertently trained kids that books should only be read once...few second graders will read *Stellaluna* more than once or twice. Give kids a script and schedule a public performance, however, and they'll be more than happy to read and reread it

20 to 30 times. Twenty to 30 times!" Lewis, who has won national attention for his method of using drama to meet the standards in reading and history, explains that plays are the perfect format to teach repetitive reading. Kids don't resist it because they don't see it as a chore. Before they even know it, they gain mastery over the text. And their confidence grows immeasurably.

With all that reading, some kids may unintentionally memorize their scripts. According to some experts, that's OK. Lorraine Griffith, however, doesn't encourage her students to memorize. "After the low readers memorize, they stop interpreting," she explains. "The reading value is gone as soon as it's memorized. I want them to keep discovering things with each reading; to find new ways of expression."

### **Performing**

The simplest way to perform reader's theater, explains Rick Swallow, is for the teacher to "assign parts and simply have the students stand in a straight line at the front of the room, facing the audience, parts in hand to read when it is their time."

Swallow used 4" x 12" tagboard name tags for each character, which kids hung around their necks using strings and alligator clips. For each RT script, a teacher can keep a bag of these preprepared name tags handy.

Some teachers like kids to stand as they read their parts. Music stands can be a nice addition, leaving kids' hands free to turn pages and gesticulate. While any classroom chairs can suffice for a seated performance, Swallow's suggestion is to "get hold of some rotating stools, one for each cast member. Have the readers sit on them and rotate to the front only when they are reading their scripted part."

Once you have your makeshift stage set up, kids take turns reading their lines with as much creative expression as they can. It's that simple. However, kids need to be aware of one another and to listen respectfully.

"If the script is short enough and time is available, allowing a second and maybe even third reading with different actors each time can be both fun and interesting for the students," suggests Swallow.

For several exciting and creative variations on performing, see Mack Lewis's "More Variations on Reader's Theater."

### **Writing Your Own Scripts**

According to Jo Worthy, starting with prepared scripts "that the teacher has written or secured from other sources" is the best way to go. But once you and your students feel more confident, you can have kids begin adapting and even writing their own scripts. Linda Cornwell, an education consultant and former teacher from Carmel, Indiana, explains that "while RT has a lot of power on its own, the power is greatly increased when kids prepare their own scripts — they are truly integrating reading, writing, and thinking skills." In the experience of breaking down a story to turn it into a simple script, students learn about fundamental aspects of literature, such as character, plot, setting, and structure.

Andy Salgado, the executive director of InCollaboration, Inc., an educational arts group that partners with schools in New York City, believes that breaking a story down into its dramatic components engages kids in new and exciting ways. "When kids start thinking about dramatic issues," he explains, "they have a lot to say and write, as opposed to when they are just asked to do composition." InCollaboration sends "teaching artists" — actors and theater professionals with educational interests — into local schools to collaborate with students and teachers in reader's theater. They work in the areas of scriptwriting, musicals, dance, drama games, and other theatrical forms. The Readers Theatre Workshop, a component of InCollaboration, includes a focus on scriptwriting.

To construct a script, students should first choose a story they like, or a section of a book that takes about five minutes to read. Books or folktales are best suited for adaptation when they are rich in dialogue and have well-defined, exciting characters (see "Choosing the Right Book"). A compelling storyline, a tale that "flows" along at a steady pace, and action and conflict are all good things to look for. Tim Rasinski recommends children's trade books such as *Rosie and Michael*, by Judith Viorst; *Yo? Yes!*, by Chris Raschka; and *Hey, Little Ant*, by Phillip and Hannah Hoose.

Nonfiction books can also provide good source material, especially those about people from the past such as Ruby Bridges or Duke Ellington. With a little imagination, students can even transform a science book into a play by personifying animals and natural objects. While using nonfiction isn't as common, Linda Cornwell says, boys in particular like it. "They are interested in learning about their world with nonfiction - bringing it to life. There's an excitement about learning facts and putting drama into informational learning."

Make sure that the book is at an appropriate reading level for students. Will they be able to successfully analyze the story structure and read sections of dialogue aloud after repeated practice? However, don't be scared off by a few big or unfamiliar words. RT "helps tremendously with vocabulary," says Lorraine Griffith. After she wrote an RT script about the state of North Carolina, for example, her children knew by heart all the place names and topography throughout the state.

The age of the students is another consideration. Andy Salgado suggests that for middle-school students, "true-to-life stories are good. As the students evaluate the story, issues of race, sexuality, and identity all begin cropping up." That's good for teens who are struggling to express their needs and struggles, he explains. An example he offers is a book with a well-constructed, dramatic story: *Freak the Mighty*, by Rodman Philbrick. As students with whom he worked discussed the dramatic issues in the book and its movie component, *The Mighty*, "It helped them articulate a lot of their own needs," he says. "They became engaged; they argued with one another about issues in the story."

Salgado also believes that books should depict students as actual people worthy of respect. "Some of the books for kids show young people as goofy or ignorant," he laments, "without showing that many young people are struggling, just trying to carve out their niche."

For younger students, books about animals and magical creatures, particularly from folktales, have been successful for many teachers. The younger students, says Salgado, "want to be all the animals in the animal kingdom!"

### **RT and Emotional Needs**

Another boon of RT is its ability to develop interpersonal, social, and collaborative skills — particularly among struggling students. Linda Cornwell explains, "RT is a hands-on approach that honors different modalities...honors those kids who need a different way of expressing themselves."

The teachers at PS 162M in Harlem, New York City, know this well. The K-12 school is made up entirely of children with special needs.

Risa Stern, the arts coordinator, has been there since 1996 — the same year that the school was awarded a \$75,000 Annenberg grant. With the monies from the grant, they were able to bring drama into the school extensively. Working on children's social and emotional problems was one main goal, explains Stern. Developing the children's varied multiple intelligences was another. "Our children have strengths that we don't always view as strengths," she asserts. "They have intelligences in many different directions."

Readers Theatre Workshop and Arts Genesis, a New York City arts-education group, worked with teachers and students to build a comprehensive school drama program. "It increased the children's self-esteem tremendously," says Stern. "Their behaviors change a great deal when they know a teaching artist is on the way."

In addition to quieting anxiety, RT also proved to be a great help for the perennially shy student. Says Stern of her school's program, "It's phenomenal how much some of the teaching artists can draw the kids out."

Rick Swallow has also found RT immensely rewarding in this regard. He recalls that "students who were usually reluctant to express themselves orally blossomed in the reader's theater arena. Students would often compete to see who could read a part most convincingly." He remembers one girl so stricken with shyness that she wouldn't even raise her hand to volunteer. Then, after a starring role as Mrs. Santa Claus in front of the entire school, she became remarkably — in fact, incessantly — talkative. Says Swallow, "It was as if a dam had broken. She was a changed kid."

Sometimes overcoming shyness and mastering reading can come together in one magical confluence. Stern remembers the moment it happened for one emotionally disturbed third grader, a nonreader who "would always sit on the periphery when the rest of the class did scripts on stage. He absolutely refused to participate."

By the next year, she recalls, the child had "edged in slightly toward the stage. He'd started to pay attention." Edging in closer all the while, the child finally reached fifth grade and, almost overnight, became "a full and active participant in the theater activities." More important, he had suddenly become a reader.

"This child looked up at me with a smile," recalls Stern. "He knew what he'd done, and he was so proud. He had broken the code to reading. Truly, this child had blossomed forth from nothing."

## Related Resources

### [Reader's Theater in 5 Easy Steps](#)

The basics of organizing a reader's theater performance for your class

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