

Science Books + Readers Theater

Have you heard of Readers Theater (RT)? It's a fun, easy way to bring literature to life.

RT is a reading activity that employs theatrical techniques without the hassle of props, costumes, or sets. Instead of memorizing lines, students read directly from scripts, using intonation, facial expressions, and gestures to create characters that transport the audience into the story.

Young children are natural performers, and they love using their imaginations, so RT is a perfect fit for early elementary classrooms. Carefully crafted scripts allow emergent, struggling, and more advanced readers to participate in the same performance with equal success.

Like a play, RT requires rehearsals. And as students read the same script over and over, they gain mastery over the text. "The act of reading aloud allows students to identify their problem areas, and the more they practice, the more they improve," says Mary Tsacoyeanes, a second grade teacher in Acton, Massachusetts. "Readers Theater is also a quick, informal way for teachers to evaluate students' articulation and pronunciation skills."

According to *Put Reading First* (U.S. Department of Education, 2001), RT gives students ". . . a legitimate reason to reread text and to practice fluency. It also promotes cooperative interaction with peers and makes the reading task appealing."

Why are students—even struggling and reluctant readers—so motivated to keep doing what

A group of second and third graders performs Melissa Stewart's When Rain Falls Readers Theater script as a play at the Belmont Children's Picture Book Festival in Massachusetts.



would otherwise seem like an unbearable chore? Because they want to do a good job on the day of the performance, and they know that takes practice.

“There’s no doubt that Readers Theater is a great tool for building fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension,” says Cathy Ogren, a school library media specialist in Cross Plains, Wisconsin. “It also improves listening and speaking skills. But what I really love is how excited the kids get. Readers Theater helps even the shyest students develop self-confidence when reading out loud.”

Best of all, the benefits don’t end when the performance is over. According to Nanci R. Vargus, Assistant Professor of Elementary Education at the University of Indianapolis, the gains carry over to new and unpracticed texts.

Don’t Nix Nonfiction

Most of the RT scripts available online and in print are based on fictional stories, but many nonfiction picture books can easily be adapted into RT scripts. Just imagine your students taking on the roles of the sun, the moon, and the planets or pretending to be cells inside the human body. And scripts with animal characters work especially well.

“Kids are crazy about animals, and they’re crazy about Readers Theater,” says Vicki Palmquist, co-founder of the Children’s Literature Network. “Just imagine how enthusiastic they are about combining the two.”

RT based on nonfiction books does more than double the fun, it integrates learning and literacy. “Students are much more likely to retain science facts and concepts when they’re incorporated into a fun activity,” says Ogren.

And when a child takes on the role of a living thing, he or she feels an immediate connection to that creature. While pretending to be a slithering snake or a little ladybug, students suddenly see the world from that animal’s point of view.

“Science tends to be one of those areas where feelings are left out,” says Vargus. “Readers Theater can help students identify with animals; it’s a way of personalizing science learning.”

In the process, children gain a deeper understanding of animal behaviors and lifestyles. They learn how living things interact, and they become more aware of the roles plants and animals play in their environment.

Choosing Science Books for RT

If you’ve never tried RT with a group of students, you should probably start off with some of the scripts available online or in books. But if you want a script that teaches science concepts, you may have to write it yourself.

To do that, you’ll need to find an appropriate science-themed children’s book.*

Your best bet is to head for your library’s J591 titles. These books focus on animal behaviors—what various animals do at night, how various animals care for their young, what various animals do when it rains, etc. The “various” is important because each of the animals discussed in the book will become a character in your RT script. Books that describe one animal’s lifecycle or daily routine don’t work nearly as well.

Look at books in the J570s section, too. These titles focus on ecosystems. Photo-illustrated overviews of a particular habitat aren’t the best choice for RT, but picture books that describe the roles many different creatures play in their environment work well. Some of my favorites include *Frog in a Bog* and *Mouse in a Meadow* by John Himmelman and *Cactus Hotel* by Brenda Z. Guiberson (Illus. by Megan Lloyd).

No matter which section you’re in, search for beautifully illustrated creative nonfiction picture books with lyrical language, repeated phrases, and sound effects. You’ll find beautiful language and repetition well suited for a RT chorus in April Pulley Sayre’s *Home at Last* (Illus. by Alix Berenzy). *Rain, Rain, Rain Forest* by Brenda Z. Guiberson (Illus. by Steve Jenkins) is wonderfully written, and it has great sound effects.

As you peruse titles, keep in mind that some of the text on each page will be used as an animal introduction for the narrator, and the rest will be presented as dialog by an animal character. That means books with two sections of text—shorter, simpler text that conveys a general idea and a longer section with more details—can work especially well. *Spy Hops & Belly Flops: Curious Behaviors of Woodland Animals* by Lynda Graham-Barber (Illus. by Brian Lies) and *Leaving Home* and *Animals Asleep* by Sneed Collard (Illus. by Joan Dunning) are good examples of books with two text sections on each page. In most of the books created by Steve Jenkins, the main text is spare, but the back matter includes all the extra information you’ll need. Two excellent choices are *Move!* and *Biggest, Strongest, Fastest*.

Crafting a Script

Many RT scripts have just five to ten parts, but scripts based on animal books can easily include a role for every student in the class. If you are working with a small group, some of the animals discussed in the book can be omitted, or students can perform multiple roles. If you have a large group, struggling readers can share a role.

In addition to animal character roles, your script should include several narrators. They will introduce the animals and, when necessary, provide transitions between scenes. The best RT scripts also include a few choruses—lines spoken by many or all of the actors. They help students stay focused and foster cooperation and camaraderie.

While narrator speeches are usually best suited for your most accomplished readers, animal roles should vary in difficulty to accommodate children at various levels of emergent literacy. For struggling or reluctant readers, create parts that consist of an animal sound and just a few simple words. For average readers, write lines that are one or two sentences long and contain a couple of challenging words.

As you create a script, don't be afraid to modify or rearrange the author's text to meet your needs. Add animal sounds to make the readings more fun. Cut information that seems too advanced. Focus on animals that live in your area or that you think will resonate most with your student population. Your ultimate goal is to create lively, engaging scripts that your students can't resist reading over and over.

** If you plan to share a Readers Theater script based on a published book with colleagues or perform it outside of your library or classroom, you will need to get written permission from the author.*

Additional Resources

Shepard, Aaron. "RT TIPS: A Guide to Reader's Theater." Internet page at: <http://www.aaronshp.com/rt/Tips.html>. Date viewed: January 22, 2008.

"Readers' Theater." Literacy Connections: Promoting Literacy and a Love of Reading. Internet page at: <http://literacyconnections.com/ReadersTheater.php>. Date viewed: January 22, 2008.

Moran, Kelli Jo Kerry. "Nurturing Emergent Readers Through Readers Theater." *Early Childhood Education Journal*, April 2006, pp. 317-323.

Prescott, Jennifer O. "The Power of Reader's Theater: An Easy Way to Make Dramatic Changes in Kids' Fluency, Writing, Listening, and Social Skills." *Instructor*, January/February 2003, pp. 22-26, 82-84.

Bibliography

Animals Asleep. Sneed Collard. (Illus. by Anik McGrory.) Houghton Mifflin, 2004. 32pp.

Biggest, Strongest, Fastest. Steve Jenkins. Houghton Mifflin, 1995. 32pp.

Cactus Hotel. Brenda Z. Guiberson. (Illus. by Megan Lloyd.) Holt, 1991. 32pp.

Frog in a Bog. John Himmelman. Charles-bridge, 2004. 32pp.

Home at Last: A Song of Migration. April Pulley Sayre. (Illus. by Alix Berenzy.) Holt, 1998. 32pp.

Leaving Home. Sneed Collard. (Illus. by Joan Dunning.) Houghton Mifflin, 2002. 32pp.

Mouse in a Meadow. John Himmelman. Charles-bridge, 2005. 32pp.

Move! Steve Jenkins and Robin Page. Houghton Mifflin, 2006. 32pp.

Rain, Rain, Rain Forest. Brenda Z. Guiberson. (Illus. by Steve Jenkins.) Holt, 2004. 32pp.

Spy Hops & Belly Flops: Curious Behaviors of Woodland Animals. Lynda Graham-Barber. (Illus. by Brian Lies.) Houghton Mifflin, 2004. 32pp.

When Rain Falls. Melissa Stewart. (Illus. by Constance R. Bergum.) Peachtree, 2008. 32pp.

From Picture Book to Readers Theater



BEFORE

Here are a few pages of text from *When Rain Falls* (Peachtree, 2008). If you look at the published book, you will see that in creating the script, I ignored the text on pages 3, 4, and 5. It didn't work for RT.

Pages 6-7

When rain falls in a forest...

... scurrying squirrels suddenly stop. They pull their long, bushy tails over their heads like umbrellas.

Pages 8-9

A hawk puffs out its feathers to keep water out and warmth in.

Chickadees stay warm and dry inside their tree hole homes.

Pages 10-11

A doe and fawn take cover under a leafy tree canopy.

A red fox family nestles in a warm, cozy den.

AFTER

Here is the RT script for the section of the book shown above. I converted the picture book text into roles for a chorus, a narrator who is a more advanced reader or an adult, and six different animal characters. I simplified the text in some places, added fun sound effects, and incorporated a bit of humor. Each narrator speech introduces the animal that is about to speak, so struggling readers as well as audience members can follow the performance more easily.

Chorus 1: When rain falls in a forest . . .

Narrator: A scurrying squirrel suddenly stops.

Squirrel: Tsst! Tsst! Tsst! I pull my tail over my head. It makes a great umbrella.

Narrator: Higher up, there's a hawk.

Hawk: I puff out my feathers to stay warm and dry. Ker-ree, ker-ree.

Narrator: What does a chickadee do?

Chickadee: Dee-dee, dee-dee. I hide inside my tree hole home.

Narrator: A deer takes cover under a leafy tree canopy.

Deer: All the leaves and branches block the rain.

Narrator: Foxes nestle together inside a warm, cozy den.

Fox 1: I could use a nap.

Fox 2: Me too. [Big yawn.]

*Melissa Stewart is the award-winning author of more than 100 science books for children. You can download the entire RT script for her picture book, *When Rain Falls*, at http://melissa-stewart.com/books/mammals/bk_when.html.*