

Using Reader's Theater to Build Reading Fluency

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What is Reader's Theater?

Reader's Theater (RT) is a helpful strategy combining the need for oral reading practice, active involvement, and purposeful rereading in a fun and relaxed setting. One of the hardest things to instill in children is that rereading is crucial to developing fluency in reading and becoming good readers. Once children read a selection, they believe they should never have to read it again. Asking them to re-read a book or selection seems like punishment to most children.

An Overview of Reader's Theater

Reader's Theater is a great classroom extension activity that promotes reading and exposes students to many different types of literature. With RT, the staging can be as elaborate or as simple as you like. Children can read lines from a script while sitting in their seats, or for a more elaborate RT, include props, costumes, and sets. Within their groups, encourage students to comment on each other's performances with positive comments such as "That was great, but try saying your lines like you're talking to your best friend." Encourage them to help each other practice using correct inflection and emotion. Students should always be able to use their scripts and not be required to memorize lines. Encourage students to practice their parts repeatedly until they can read their lines aloud confidently, fluently, and with expression.



Choosing a Script

Teachers can make introducing and maintaining RT a success by selecting material that is current, familiar to the students, and age-appropriate. Using material that is outdated, uninteresting, or too challenging for the students will discourage participation. Use the following tips to create a RT that students will enjoy.

- Choose scripts that are exciting and have great dialogue.
- Choose short scripts with fewer sentences until students become comfortable with RT. As children become more confident in their oral reading ability and expression, longer parts and phrases are appropriate.
- Choose scripts that offer enough parts so that four or five children can be involved in one story. Because this is a child-centered activity, several different theaters can be happening at once in the classroom.
- Use grade level appropriate books with current themes or issues.
- Use picture books that you previously read aloud to your class. This presents a good opportunity to build partnerships in the classroom by allowing students reading at higher levels to assist those reading at lower levels. As shy students, or students reading at lower levels practice, they will become much more confident in their oral reading skills.
- Increase vocabulary by using books previously read aloud to your class, which are more likely to contain higher-level vocabulary than books written at the students' reading level.

Tips for a Successful Reader's Theater

Making sure that all students are actively participating in RT is critical to its success. Reader's Theater takes planning and preparation on the teacher's part to engage one to several groups of students at once. Allow yourself enough time to select just the right materials and prepare them for the class before introducing your students to RT. Use the tips on the next page to get your RT started.

- Have a script for each person. Sharing scripts causes confusion and creates gaps in fluency.
- Highlight each student's part so he/she can find his/her lines easily.
- Instruct and insist that students follow along silently as others are reading, so they will be able to read their lines on cue.
- Give students choices in what they will "perform" in RT. Students who have a choice in their reading tend to show a higher interest in participating.
- Allow students ample time to read, reread, and rehearse.
- Give students several chances to perform. It may take many practices before students feel comfortable reading their parts aloud and in front of the class.



Once children master the language and vocabulary in a particular script, give them the opportunity and encourage them to work on expression. This helps them understand the character's point of view and builds comprehension.

Beyond the Script

Reader's Theater is a great extension activity for comprehension, fluency, story grammar, art, and writing. Not only does RT build confident readers, it also promotes self-confidence in student performance and public speaking. Once students are reading fluently and using appropriate expression, allow them to create backgrounds, costumes, masks, or props to add to their RT. This allows students to experience what they are reading. By creating a set, they gain a deeper understanding of the story's setting, purpose, and intended audience. If you are short on time, simple background drawings and costumes work just as well as elaborate sets.

Present reader's theater at school functions, PTA meetings, Open House, and other events. If your school has an author visit, prepare a reader's theater skit from the author's work and present it to other classes as a kick-off event. Students watching RT may be encouraged to check out a book he/she may otherwise not find interesting.

Reader's Theater is a fun, engaging way to improve reading fluency and gives students a purpose for rereading. For more information on reader's theater, developing fluent readers, and the importance fluency plays on reading comprehension, please consult the following resources.

Resources

Corcoran, C.A., & Davis, A.D. A study of the effects of reader's theatre on second and third grade special education students' fluency growth. *Reading Improvement* v.42 (2005):p.105

Public Schools of North Carolina Curriculum and School Reform Services— www.dpi.state.nc.us/schoolimprovement/effective/briefs/readerstheater. Retrieved September, 2007.

Read Write Think – an instructional website supported by the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English. Retrieved September, 2007. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=172