

USING PLAYS TO BUILD COMPREHENSION AND FLUENCY  
GRADES 3 - 8

# Reader's Theater Teaching Tips

Why Use Drama?  
Because it Works

**FREE**  
DOWNLOAD

BY SCHOLASTIC & STORYWORKS PLAYWRIGHT MACKOWIECKI LEWIS

**READ ALOUD**  
**PLAYS.COM**

# Use Drama to Grow Great Readers

## Methods ♦ Productions ♦ Assessment

It's no secret! Readers theater is an effective way to build fluency, increase comprehension, and create enthusiastic readers. That's why it appears in the Common Core standards nearly 50 times! The key is the repetition.

### ♦ How it works

Readers theater is organic. It emulates how kids learn to read as toddlers. Think about it: many kids begin school already knowing how to read. They haven't had formal lessons. Their parents haven't been trained in the latest methodology. They haven't used a single worksheet or text book. Yet here they are reading. Why?

Consider for a moment how your own children learned to read. If they're like many kids, they had a few favorites among their supply of books. I recall my oldest boy latching on to *Amos & Boris* and a Sesame Street book entitled *Don't Forget the Oatmeal*. As a toddler, he would ask us to read these books over and over again. Soon, he started reading them to us. "He's not really reading," we'd tell ourselves. "He's heard the book so many times, he's just memorized the words."

But based on brain research by Lev Vygsky and others, some experts believe the difference between reading and memorization is slight. Kids get an emotional charge out of reading proficiently—whether memorized or not. The positive charge actually produces chemicals that form the neural pathways that make reading (and learning) possible. Because our son had consumed *Don't Forget the Oatmeal* so frequently, he'd mastered the text, prompting his brain to construct new pathways. Amazing!

Now consider what we often do in the classroom. We'll take a book, article, or story and ask kids to read it one time. Just once! We expect mastery or at least fluency on their first attempt. We ask kids to pass computerized tests, complete worksheets, and discuss content after just a single reading. We've assumed that language is language, that if they can decode they should be able to read anything at their grade level. Unfortunately, our brains don't work that way. Instead of experiencing a positive emotion that builds pathways, many kids in this situation suffer a negative emotion that causes them to withdraw and resist reading altogether. Don't assume it's just your low students either. Watch carefully when you ask students to read aloud in class; many of your brightest kids that seem to be good readers are just as reluctant as your poor readers. It's not simply that they're shy; they don't want to risk experiencing the negative emotions they feel when they stumble over, mispronounce, or don't understand a word.

Asking a young reader to read aloud a piece of text he or she is seeing for the very first time is akin to asking a musician to perform a piece of music he or she has never played before. Only the most talented can master it on the first go, and even they rarely do. Just as music is a language that requires repetition for mastery, so too does reading. Your students need opportunities to "sight read," to practice, and then to "perform" the material you want them to master. Plays are the perfect format.

Because we've trained kids that a book is something to be read only once, few third graders are willing to give *James and the Giant Peach* a second round. Few second graders will read *Stellaluna* more than once or twice. Give children a script and schedule a performance, however, and they'll be more than happy to read

and reread it upwards of twenty times. Twenty times! By the time they're asked to read it in front of the class, even your struggling readers will be able to read fluently. Even your "shy" kids will be willing to read out loud.

Plays give you the opportunity to teach **repetitive reading** without the resistance you would get asking a child to re-read a traditional text. Students acquire mastery, which chemically changes the brain, making them superior readers who are better able to comprehend. The brain science says it's a no brainer!



### All Kinds of Options

There are several awesome ways to use play scripts in your classroom. Here are a few!

**Readers' Theater:** In this format, students merely do readings around a table or in front of the class. It's a great starting point as you and your class become acclimated to play reading. Kids should practice in their groups and independently (such as for homework reading) before presenting.

**Stage Performance:** Even if your stage is merely the front of the room, kids love to "act out" their plays. To have a great performance they need not memorize their lines (though some will). Encourage them to work on speaking up, facing the audience, and reading fluently on cue. As students develop, they can add voice characterization (a Southern drawl, for example). Simple props are great, but sets are entirely optional. Also, don't limit yourself to the classroom. Look around your school site or community for "natural stages." Playground structures, courtyards, and grassy knolls are all potential stages. (I remember performing Shakespeare in college on a bridged walkway above a courtyard.) Wherever your stage, be sure to set specific performance times and invite other classes to watch, or you can go out into the community to perform.

**Radio Dramas and Podcasts:** Another fun way to perform a play is to record it, then play it for the class or post it on your class website. One benefit is that you can re-record scenes or sentences that don't come off. Use the free mixing app, *Audacity* to edit. Add sounds such as doorbells, footsteps, and eerie background music, which can be found online at sites like *Freesound.org*. This format is challenging at first, but after putting a few scenes together, you'll get the hang of it!

**Puppet Shows:** If you have the time and inclination to make puppets with your students, puppet shows have many of the same benefits as live stage performances. The fact that students are hidden sometimes helps them overcome their inhibitions, and the nature of the performance forces them to work on voice projection. Also, sets on a miniature scale are often easier to create. You can even have students build dioramas and use Lego figures, or characters made from clay, popsicle sticks, or paper media.

**Broadway:** All right, maybe the main stage at my school isn't Broadway, but to a fourth grader it's pretty darn close. Once you've become comfortable with directing plays in your classroom, try a full production for the entire student body. Hold try-outs, create sets, make costumes, and invite the public. Take it up a notch with playbooks, backstage passes, and a post-performance party. Or, collaborate with the music teacher to turn it into a musical. Three or four short numbers that fit the theme will do!

Of course, it's a big commitment. It will require extended rehearsal time, perhaps after school or during lunch, but the result will be memorable. For me, such performances are among the highlights of my teaching career. The kids, too, always recall them with pride and awe.

Whichever format you choose, the most important factor is that students read the same script repetitively.

## ◆ Step by Step Procedures

**Choose great scripts.** Find scripts with limited narration or where the exposition is delivered in creative ways (a great example is our Jackie Robinson play in which the Hot Dog Man and the Peanut Vendor do all the narrating).

**Split your class into groups** based on the number of parts in each of the plays you plan to use. I try to use three groups of from eight to twelve students. The size of your class and the number of characters in each play will dictate whether any of your students will need to split parts or perform more than one role.

**Plan your rotation activities.** In my class I aim to meet with each group for 20 to 30 minutes. While awaiting their turn at the “director’s table,” the remaining students do seat work, read independently, or meet with assistants or parent-volunteers for other reading activities.

My goal is to meet with each group at least three times a week. Once the groups begin demonstrating fluency with the script, you can either have them present to the class or begin rehearsing for a stage presentation (whether in class or elsewhere). Having an assistant or parent-volunteer helps facilitate this step.

After another week or two, we’re usually ready to perform a simple class play. A full stage production or musical requires a longer commitment. For basic RT or in-class presentations, three weeks is a minimum time frame, but after a month, the students begin losing interest. Aim for four, but be flexible.

When in the group, I require my students to follow **three basic rules**:

**Follow along** so they know when to read their lines. It’s also beneficial for their eyes to see

words their ears are hearing others read (this way, even struggling students with only a few lines get just as much practice as the “stars”).

**Let the teacher do all cuing and correcting** (so that we are sensitive to the emotional and instructional needs of each individual student). I instruct students simply to look at the person who has missed their cue—a silent way of letting someone know.

**Only speak if it’s your line** in the script (or if you’ve raised your hand with a question or comment).

I have my students practice their parts at home. I also encourage them to read it with an adult. The adult will help the child tackle difficult words and can model fluent reading. The next day in class, the student is able to read challenging words with greater confidence.

You’ll quickly notice when a student isn’t reading at home. When all else fails, make up for it by having a parent-volunteer, teaching assistant, or older student read lines with that child at school. Keep the focus on repetitive reading toward mastery.

## How to Assess Drama ◆

It’s the emotional charge that releases the brain-changing chemicals, therefore it is important that assessment be handled delicately. You want your students—even your poorest readers—to step off the stage feeling like a master of the English language, so the conclusion of the performance isn’t the time to be dishing out Cs and Ds in reading. If *you’ve* done a good job in your practice sessions, every student should come away feeling good about their reading.



Try creating with your students a rubric or scoring guide identifying standards for a successful performance (see ours below). It might include fluency, volume, positioning, characterization, and more. Discuss these standards before you begin rehearsals, then consistently revisit these factors as you practice. Upon conclusion of a given play, have your actors remain before the class. Ask the class, “What did they do well?” Let the audience provide feedback (which also takes some instruction). “Maureen spoke loudly,” is one comment you’re likely to hear. “Othar said his lines just like he talks” and “Toni put character in her voice,” are others. Not only does the audience provide valuable feedback for the performers, they’re actually synthesizing evaluative factors they will then apply to their own performance. You can also ask, “What do they need to work on?” and you’ll get answers such as “Matt needed to keep from turning his back to the audience,” or “Paulie lost her spot; she needed to follow along better.” You’ll find when these comments come from other students rather than the teacher, the performers are better able to receive them without the negative emotional charge of a letter grade. Note also that this is how adults evaluate theater performances in real life; we just don’t get to share our opinions with the actors. When using this approach over a number of plays, your students will learn to assess themselves, becoming surprisingly adept performers and solid readers.

Turnabout is fair play, so make sure you give your performers a chance to evaluate the audience with a question like “Actors, what did you think of your audience?” Lead them to conclude that poor behavior not only bothers others in the audience, but distracts the actors as well. Also help your students discover how a poorly enacted or slow moving play leads to the audience losing interest. If your audience is tough to please, try passing out copies of the play so the audience can follow along, or having them pre-read the script. This more active roll

will help students focus on the play, thereby helping to diffuse misbehavior.

Evaluating the play itself for its entertainment value and academic content may also be important. You can ask your students the same questions you ask in any literary or social studies discussion: “What did this play teach you?”, “Did you enjoy the story?”, “What is the setting?”, “Was this story realistic or unrealistic?”, “How does this play demonstrate George Washington’s personality?” Whatever your particular language arts or social studies standards call for, you can address it through a play. Note that plays from *ReadAloudPlays.com* are always accompanied by a Common Core-based comprehension activity.

### Pratfalls and Misbehavior

Not every play will go well. Unexpected illnesses and emergency dental appointments can sometimes derail performances. Kids, no matter how responsible, often lose or forget their scripts. Intercoms and fire drills sometimes interrupt. And of course there’s plain old misbehavior. I once stopped a stage performance in mid-scene and had the students sit down and continue it using the reader’s theater method. It was *The Daring Escape of Henry Box Brown*, a poignant play I had written for *Storyworks*. Our rehearsals had been great, and it was a fun play to enact, but for whatever reason, once the kids got on stage they became so giddy they lost focus. They stumbled through their lines, missed their cues, and laughed in all the wrong places. They forgot where their props were, and even wrestled off stage. Finally, when they accidentally pulled down our makeshift curtain, I put an end to the performance. A month later, during a new set of plays, they were super. Occasionally, plays do go sour, but if you commit to building your reading program around drama, you’ll soon be rewarded with a bank of favorite plays you come back to year after year, a class full of engaged readers, and a ton of great entertainment you can’t find on TV.



# Performance Scoring Guide

*Shade in a portion of each star based on performance*

## VOICE

### Projection

Spoke loudly

### Enunciation

Spoke clearly with proper pacing

### Characterization

Put character in voice or used accent

## READING

### Accuracy

Read lines smoothly and correctly

### On Cue

Followed along so to enter on time

### Memorized

Memorized the lines

## PRESENTATION

### Direction

Kept face toward audience

### Script/Face

Kept script away from face

### Position

Maintained correct place on stage

## PARTICIPATION

### Prepared

Came to rehearsals and shows with script

### Practiced

Practiced lines independently

### Behavior

Had good behavior at all times

## AUDIENCE

When a member of the audience:

### Attentive

Paid attention during show

### Applauded

Clapped when appropriate

### Gave Feedback

Able to give valid feedback



# Performance Scoring Guide

*Shade in a portion of each star based on performance*

Write categories in each rectangle; identify a standard for each star.

# Play Performance Scoring Guide Instructions

**Guide 1** has categories and standards already defined. *(See below for details.)*

**Guide 2** is blank; students and teacher can discuss and define the standards they want to emphasize and write them into the guide.

*Discuss each category and standard before, during, and after rehearsals and performances.*

*Rubric can be scored by instructor or, better, used by students as a self-assessment. If any given standard is emphasized during rehearsals, it's likely students will score well in that category.*

*Each star is to be shaded based on the degree to which the student succeeded in that category. For example, if during the performance a student consistently spoke with an appropriate volume, he or she would shade in the entire star. If he or she only sometimes spoke loudly enough, he or she might shade in half the star.*

## VOICE

**Projection:** Student spoke with appropriate volume, “flinging” their voice toward the audience.

**Enunciation:** Student spoke clearly and at an appropriate tempo.

**Characterization:** Student spoke with inflection, characterization, or accent.

## READING

**Accuracy:** Student read lines correctly.

**On Cue:** Student was able to follow along with the script and enter (physically or verbally) at the correct time.

**Memorized:** Student memorized his or her lines.

## PRESENTATION

**Direction:** Student kept his or her face toward the audience, especially when speaking.

**Script/Face:** If using script, student kept script away from face so audience could see his or her mouth.

**Position:** Student maintained the appropriate position on stage, especially when delivering lines. (For example, in their nervousness, students will sometimes still be saying their lines as they rush off stage instead of finishing lines, then exiting.)

## PARTICIPATION

**Prepared:** Student consistently came to rehearsals with script in hand, ready to fully participate. Student participated in the performance.

**Practiced:** Student practiced independently, such as for homework reading.

**Behavior:** Student demonstrated appropriate behavior during rehearsals, during performances, back stage, and when in the audience.

## AUDIENCE

**Attentive:** Student followed along with the performance.

**Applauded:** Student clapped appropriately and at the correct time.

**Gave Feedback:** Student was able to give reasonable feedback to the performers.

