

Teatro de lectores/Readers Theater

What Is Readers Theater?

Readers theater, frequently defined as “theater of the mind” or minimal theater, is, to quote Aaron Shepard, a “convenient and effective means to present literary works in dramatic form.” In readers theater, individuals read from literary works, most often without costumes or sets, letting their voices convey the emotion and situations of the various characters.

Frequently passages that reflect interaction between or among characters are selected, with each participant reading the part of a single character. Use the dialogue of the literary work and omit identifying phrases such as “he said” or “she said” to create the part. A narrator introduces the book, identifies the characters, provides background necessary for understanding the production, and reads narrative material to connect the dialogue. Although readers will have printed scripts in front of them, thus freeing them from memorizing their “lines,” some practice reading their parts aloud, both individually and with other “cast members,” will be required.

Preparing the Script

Adult scriptwriters

Few literary works are written entirely in dialogue. Although works such as James D. Macdonald and Debra Doyle’s “Nobody Has to Know,” found in Jane Yolen and Martin Greenberg’s story collection *Vampires* (HarperCollins, 1991), make terrific readers theater scripts without modification, some script adaptation is typically necessary. Below is a sample partial script for Charlotte Pomerantz’s *The Outside Dog*.

Here is the original segment of the book:

“Marisol,” said Grandfather, “I told you not to pet the dogs. They have fleas and ticks and who knows what.”

“But, Abuelito, this one does not,” said Marisol. “Look!”

“¡Qué raro!” Grandfather said. “There is not a flea on him.”

“So may I pet him?” asked Marisol.

“You may pet this one. But only this one. And don’t feed him a thing! ¿Entiendes?” said Grandfather.

Here is a sample readers theater based on that segment:

Narrator: Today we are going to read *The Outside Dog* by Charlotte Pomerantz. This story is about a little girl named Marisol who lived in Puerto Rico with her grandfather.

_____ will read the part of Marisol and _____ will read the part of Grandfather. I, _____, will be the narrator.

Narrator: Marisol had always wanted a dog, but Grandfather said “No.” One day Marisol saw a stray dog near her house and, while she thought Grandfather wasn’t looking, began to pet the dog.

Grandfather: “Marisol, I told you not to pet the dogs. They have fleas and ticks and who knows what.”

Marisol: “But, Abuelito, this one does not. Look!”

Grandfather: “¡Qué raro! There is not a flea on him.”

Marisol: “So may I pet him?”

Grandfather: “You may pet this one. But only this one. And don’t feed him a thing! ¿Entiendes?”

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Three readers will perform the above readers theater: a narrator, the voice of Marisol, and the voice of the Grandfather. Each reader will have a script and will read his or her part to the audience.

Notice that the readers here must be familiar with both characters and story. For example, Marisol will be pleading when she says “So, may I pet him?” and Grandfather will be disbelievingly sarcastic when he says “There is not a flea on him.” Such a situation points out one of the advantages of readers theater: youngsters must be involved in the story, or, as Louise Rosenblatt states, have an “effluent response” to the work, in order to perform well.

While a readers theater based on *The Outside Dog* could be performed by young children (the book does not contain sophisticated vocabulary), it can also be produced by teenagers for their younger peers during *El día de los niños/El día de los libros* celebrations. Most often, however, teenagers perform readers theater from passages of books they have read and loved (in contrast to the whole text performance recommended in the case of *The Outside Dog*).

Librarians can select books and passages appropriate for adaptation for a readers theater production. For example, the passage from Pam Muñoz Ryan’s *Esperanza Rising (Esperanza renace)*, in which Esperanza’s father is killed makes a dramatic production and creates a fine introduction to the story. In this case, readers theater could be performed in either English or Spanish, or as a bilingual or dual language production because there is a recommended Spanish language translation of the book available. Readers not overly fluent in English will have the opportunity to practice their linguistic skills, including pronunciation and intonation, if they employ the English text. Conversely, readers not overly fluent in Spanish will have the same opportunities if they read from the Spanish text. Either way, both the performers and their audience will have access to a multi-layered story that celebrates a culture and an admirable young girl. Martha Lengeling, Casey Malarcher, and Leath Mills discuss particular advantages of using readers theater with non-native English speakers in the July-September 1996 issue of *Forum*, reprinted on the Internet at <http://exchanges.state.gov/forum/vols/vol34/no3/p84.htm>.

Young adult scriptwriters

Teenagers, however, are quite capable of producing their own readers theater scripts. This process requires some familiarity with the book, but also allows purposeful practice with the two critical reading and creative writing skills: selecting a passage that both conveys a central or enticing event in a book, and transforming that passage into a meaningful script. Other educational values for

adapting readers theater script are discussed in Kathy Latrobe's fine article, "Readers Theater as a Way of Learning," printed in 1993 in *The ALAN Review*.

Passages containing dialogue do not have to be the only literary forms considered for readers theater. For example, the dual language text in Demetria Martínez's poem "Fragmentos/Fragments," anthologized in Ilan Stavans's *Wáchale!*, could be performed by three readers: one, the narrator, to read the biographical information about the poet; two, another adolescent to read the Spanish sections; and three, yet an additional teen to read the English sections. This poem would be particularly appropriate for a performance at *El día de los niños/El día de los libros* celebration for it highlights the strain one individual experiences in her bilingualism.

Librarians unfamiliar with readers theater can consult Aaron Shepard's thorough instructions for selecting scripts, editing scripts, reading scripts, and staging a performance (<http://www.aaronshp.com/rt/index.html#Tips>).

Readers Theater Resources

Suggested books and journal articles

Latrobe, Kathy. "Readers Theater as a Way of Learning." *The ALAN Review*.

Latrobe, Kathy and Mildred Laughlin. *Readers Theater for Children*.

Latrobe, Kathy and Mildred Laughlin. *Readers Theater for Young Adults*.

Lengeling, Martha, Casey Malarcher, and Leath Mills. "The Use of Reader's Theater in the EFL Curriculum." *Forum*.

Suggested WebSites

Aaron Shepard's RT Page. <http://www.aaronshp.com/rt/index.html#Tips>