

# TEACHING READING

## From script to stage: Tips for Readers Theatre

Aaron Shepard

Readers Theatre is often defined by what it is not—no memorizing, no props, no costumes, no sets. All this makes Readers Theatre wonderfully convenient. Still, convenience is not its chief asset. Like storytelling, Readers Theatre can create images by suggestion that could never be portrayed realistically on stage. Space and time can be shrunk or stretched, fantastic worlds can be created, marvelous journeys can be enacted. Readers Theatre frees the performers and the audience from the physical limitations of conventional theater, letting the imagination soar.

The style of Readers Theatre described in this article was developed by Chamber Readers, a nonprofit Readers Theatre company in Humboldt County, California, that has promoted reading and literature since 1975. Two teams, each with four readers, are directed by Jean Wagner, one of the founding members. Chamber Readers performs each year in nearly every public school in the county and is considered a local institution.

Like traditional Readers Theatre, the Chamber Readers' style is based on script reading and the suggestive power of language. But it adds a good deal of mime and movement as well. That's a bit more work, but it can be more fun too! (For the traditional approach, see Caroline Feller Bauer's *Presenting Reader's Theater: Plays and Poems to Read Aloud*, 1987, New York: H.W. Wilson. For tips on scripting, see the appendix to my collection *Stories on Stage: Scripts for Reader's Theater*, 1993, New York: H.W. Wilson.)

Briefly, the distinctive features of the Chamber Readers' approach are (a) characters move around the stage much as in a play, acting out or suggesting the movements described in the story, often by simple mime devices like walking in place; (b) though narrators look at the audience, characters most often look at each other; (c) scripts in sturdy binders are held in one hand, leaving the other hand free for gesturing; and (d) a set of low stools and a single high stool serve as versatile stage scenery or props.

Following is a detailed discussion of these and other elements. The word *stage* here means stage area, which could be the front of a classroom. An actual stage isn't needed.

### Equipment

For Readers Theatre, you really need nothing but scripts, but a little basic equipment can add a lot. Here are some suggestions:

- Script binders. Sturdy ring binders are best. Whatever you use, make sure the pages turn easily. On stage, the binder may also become a prop, representing a book, a notepad, the surface of a table.

- Smocks. These give the readers a team look yet are also neutral, so readers can easily change character in the minds of the audience. The smock can be a simple rectangle of cloth with a head hole, fastened together at the sides.

- Stools of chair height. These are your most useful props. For some stories, you won't need any; for others, you may need one for each reader on stage. They must be solid enough to stand on!

- High stools. One or two should be enough. These too should be solid enough for standing.

- Portable screens. These are strictly optional, but they're fun to use if they're handy. They provide an alternative for entrances and exits and for some special effects.

- Small props. These can sometimes add nice touches—as when a Pied Piper has a tin whistle to play.

### Script handling

The trick with scripts is to handle them so they can be referred to easily but don't seriously restrict movement or distract the audience. The script is held in one hand, leaving the other free for acting. For a relaxed grip, the binder spine can simply lie in the palm. If readers move around a lot, they can instead grip the binder's top edge. Part of the binder rests against the upturned forearm. Right-handers usually hold a script with their left hand, left-handers with their right.

Though readers don't need to memorize, they should know their lines and cues well enough so they can look up from their scripts about half the time. When they *do* look down, it's only with the eyes, keeping the head straight up. A character who has to look upward for much of a scene may have to memorize part of the script. A narrator who has a long speech may have to use a free hand to keep the place. A reader who will have no free hand when a page must be turned can place that page backward in the binder to get two pages facing.

### The set

You don't construct sets for Readers Theatre, but you can *suggest* them. The narrator's descriptions are brought to life by the readers' movements and mime. If a reader opens a door, we see it. If readers hang ornaments on a Christmas tree, we know right where it is.



Stools are a chief aid for suggesting sets, as well as being practical props. Three short stools in a semicircle can be a dining room. Two short stools close by each other can be a bench in a park, or a roof ridge atop a house. A single high stool can be a throne room. A high stool with a short stool next to it can be a tree to climb or a mountain. An area with no stools can be anything at all!

As in theater, you start designing your set by figuring out what locations your script calls for. Then you position those locations on your stage in whatever arrangement works and looks best. Look for ease of reader movement, stage balance, and openness to the audience.

Readers can move to different stage areas for different scenes. Or they can stay in the same area, and you can change the set. Or the set can move to them! For instance, a reader could move from room to room in a house just by walking in place, climbing some stairs, and opening some doors—all without moving an inch.

### Reader movement

After designing your set, decide where your readers will start and where they will go. Drawing a series of movement diagrams can help you spot problems, save time during rehearsal, and jog your memory the next time you use the script. In one simple diagram system, circles are low stools, double circles are high stools, crosses are readers, and arrows show movement.

To go offstage, a reader doesn't actually need to leave the area but can instead go back to audience (BTA), which indicates that the reader is out of the picture. If sitting on a stool, the reader can usually just turn around on it. If standing, the reader can move toward the back of the stage. Narrators seldom go BTA, even if they're not reading for awhile.

In regular theater, the curtain or the lights coming down indicates a scene change, a jump in time or place. In Readers Theatre, this change is shown by some kind of break in movement. For instance, the readers can all freeze in place like statues. Or they can turn

BTA, freeze, then come back in. Or they can freeze, then cross the stage for the next scene. If one scene flows smoothly into the next, without a jump, you may not need a break at all.

### Mime and sound effects

Whatever action is described in the script, readers should try either to do it or else to suggest it through mime. If someone is eating, we should see the fork carried to the mouth. If someone is hanging in the air, we should see the arm pulled tight by the floating balloon. If someone is racing a horse, we should see the galloping hooves.

The key word here is *suggest*, because the movements are often far from realistic. For instance, it's hard to take off a coat realistically when one hand holds a script. Readers quickly learn to sleep sitting up, with their heads bent to the side. And walking in place is a reader's favorite mode of travel.

Mime techniques add polish to a performance. It's always good to draw on proven tricks for walking in place, climbing up or down stairs or ropes or ladders, lifting or pulling heavy objects, flying, falling, and so on. Look for library books on mime or invite a local mime to conduct a workshop.

Part of successful group mime is being aware of the invisible. If a stool is meant to be a chair at a table, make sure no one walks through the table! Even a door that's invisible shouldn't shift position as different people pass through it. If two characters look at a picture on the wall, they will hopefully agree where it is!

Sounds in the story too should be added where possible—explosions, wind, bees, roosters, whatever. To help the illusion, this is usually handled by readers who are BTA.

### Focus

*Focus* refers to where the readers are looking. Most of the time, it's simple: Narrators use *audience focus*—they look straight at the audience. Characters use *on-stage focus*—they look at whoever they're talking to, just as in plays or real life.

But sometimes you may want characters to use *off-stage focus*. The readers imagine a screen facing them, as wide as the stage, set up at the front edge of the audience. On this screen they imagine a mirror image of all the readers. Then instead of talking straight to each other, they talk to each other's image. Off-stage focus can help create illusions of distance or height. Two characters on the same stage but using off-stage focus can shout and wave at each other as if a mile apart. If one looks upward and one looks downward, you have a midget talking to a giant, or a woman in a window talking to a man in the street.

Characters can, at times, address comments directly to the audience. They might also use this focus if the audience is drawn into the story, as might happen, for instance, if the audience suddenly becomes a hill completely covered with cats.

### Beginnings and endings

Beginnings and endings should be rehearsed along with the story so they'll go smoothly. One reader should introduce the story with at least the title and author. Beyond that, something can be said about the story, about the author, or about the performance. Just don't give away the plot! After the introduction, the readers wait to begin until they're all in place and frozen and the audience is quiet.

At the end, the last words are spoken slowly and with rhythm, so the audience knows the story is over. Everyone recognizes the ending "*happily ever after*." But the same effect can be achieved with almost any words by reading them in a "slow three."

When the story is finished, the readers freeze for a long moment to break the action. Then they close their scripts, face the audience, and bow all together.

Once young people have a general idea of how Readers Theatre works, they can take over much of the staging themselves. In fact, they often beat adults at developing mime. After all, pretending is part of their profession.



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## Titling—Finding names that “mean”

Dorothy Grant Hennings  
Gail McCreesh

An author puts a title on a story to entice readers and to communicate something about the story. S/he may choose a title that focuses on the setting (*The Haymeadow* by Paulsen), a character (*Stone Fox* by Gardiner), a feeling (*Missing May* by Rylant), an element of the plot (*Snow Treasure* by McSwigan), a symbol (*One More River* by Banks), or any key component of the story that s/he wishes to highlight. Similarly, an author focuses on these same dimensions of a story when creating titles for chapters.

Because titles are names that “mean,” classroom teachers can use them to help children create their own meanings in response to what they read. Many teachers encourage children to use book and chapter titles to predict before reading. However, there are many other ways to use titles to involve students in story meanings.

Gail McCreesh encourages her third graders to analyze the titles for the chapters of a novel to see if there is a pattern, logic, or purpose to them. She asks students, “What do you think the author is trying to achieve with the chapter titles?” For example, in *Charlotte’s Web* E.B. White used titles to highlight time, characters, events, feelings, and places as shown in the titles to the first eight chapters: 1. Before Breakfast; 2. Wilbur; 3. Escape; 4. Loneliness; 5. Charlotte; 6. Summer Days; 7. Bad News; 8. A Talk at Home. In creating the titles, he varied the syntax, sometimes relying on a prepositional phrase to communicate time or place, sometimes using a

noun to communicate character, events, or feelings. In contrast, John Gardiner used a noun pattern for the chapter titles in *Stone Fox* and named chapters after characters and key happenings from the story: 1. Grandfather; 2. Little Willy; 3. Searchlight; 4. The Reason; 5. The Way; 6. Stone Fox; 7. The Meeting; 8. The Day; 9. The Race; 10. The Finish Line. This is a pattern that third graders can easily understand. In both cases, the table of contents lists the titles, making analysis easier.

As her students read other chapter books in which authors have not titled chapters, Gail asks her third graders to *title in retrospect*—to create chapter titles after reading the book or a major segment of it. In titling in retrospect, students can use their understanding of an author’s grand design and the meaning of a book as it touches their own lives. Working in collaborative groups, Gail’s third-grade class created these titles to go along with the nine chapters of *Sarah, Plain and Tall* by Patricia MacLachlan: 1. Memories; 2. Letters from Sarah; 3. Our New Mother Sarah Is Coming; 4. Fun-loving Sarah; 5. A Perfect Dune for Us; 6. Sarah Learns About Winter; 7. Sarah and Maggie’s Flower Garden; 8. The Big, Horrible Squall; 9. Caleb and Anna’s Fears.

Gail sometimes suggests that students model their title making after the titles they have seen professional writers use. In creating titles, students at times play with parts-of-speech patterns as Gardiner did in *Stone Fox*. They name each chapter of a particular book with a proper noun, a determiner followed by a noun, an adjective followed by a noun, a prepositional phrase, a verb phrase, or with a kernel sentence. In the process, students refine their understanding of the way language works. Or they use their titles to focus on themes, moods, characters, or settings and, in the process, refine their understanding of story development.

Having worked cooperatively to name chapters of books they have read as a class, students do the same as they report on books they have read on their own: Rather than writing a typical book report, a student creates

chapter titles that touch on significant meanings of a story.

With some books, Gail divides her class into teams based on the number of chapters (for example, nine teams if there are nine chapters). She assigns a chapter to each team. Without communicating with other teams, each team rereads the assigned chapter, cooperatively decides on a title that gets at the main idea, and records the title on a card. Gail then collects and distributes the cards to the groups in a random manner. Receiving a main idea card, each group decides the chapter to which it best applies, and they keep a record of the match. The groups switch cards and repeat the activity until all groups have tried to match all the titles with chapters. Gail has found this idea particularly useful with her third graders, who like to illustrate their title cards and organize them as a timeline to celebrate the chapter book they have just completed as a class. In upper grades, each team can create a main idea title for each chapter of a novel and put its titles in random order for another team to match, then share the reasoning behind their title choices and matches.

When an author has not broken a story into chapter segments (e.g., *Molly’s Pilgrim* by Barbara Cohen), Gail has her third graders look for natural breaks that communicate changes in action, mood, or point of view. Talking together, they create titles to sum up each segment they have identified. In the same way, when uncaptioned illustrations complement a story, students add captions. Captions summarize story moods, actions, and/or characters. Again, student teams exchange their captions with other teams and match captions with illustrations. In the same way, students title the stanzas of poems and the acts and the scenes of plays they read or perform. This works at all grade levels, even with Shakespearean plays and narrative poems read in high school where again, students can exchange titles and try to match titles with scenes, acts, and stanzas. In doing this, students often begin to toy with the ultimate meaning of what they have read and the impact it has had on their own lives.