

USING PLAYS TO BUILD COMPREHENSION AND FLUENCY

WHY USE DRAMA?

READ ALOUD PLAYS TEACHING TIPS - GRADES 3-8



By Scholastic & Storyworks Playwright

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Using Drama to Teach Reading

Methods ♦ Productions ♦ Assessment

♦ Why Use Drama?

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 ready 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 Vygotsky 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.

Now consider what we often do in the classroom. We take a book, article, or story and ask kids to read it one time. We expect mastery

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. It's a fallacy and a tragedy. 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

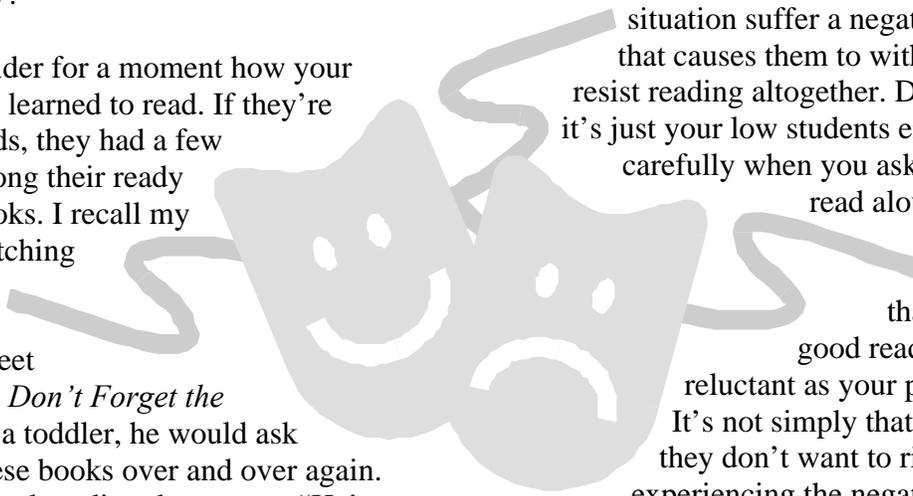
experiencing the negative emotions

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 looking at for the very first time is akin to asking a musician to perform in public a piece of music he or she has never played before. Only the most talented can do it, 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 public performance, however, and they'll be more than happy to read and reread it twenty to thirty times. Twenty to thirty 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.

◆ More Than One Way to Teach a Play

There are several enjoyable and effective ways to produce plays 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. This is the easiest performance method, but it is also less exciting for both the performers and the audience. It's a great starting point as you and your class become acclimated to play reading.

Stage Performance: Even if your stage is merely the front of the room, kids love to "act out" their plays. They need not memorize their lines (though some will) to have a great performance. Concentrate on speaking up, facing the audience, and reading fluently on cue. As students develop, they can add voice characterization (a good Southern drawl or British accent always go over well), and if you have the time, try gathering props and creating simple sets. Look around your school site or community for "natural stages." (I remember performing Shakespeare in college on a bridged walkway above a courtyard.) Playground structures, courtyards, and grassy knolls are all

potential stages. Wherever your stage, be sure to set specific performance times and invite parents to watch. You can also invite other classes, or go out into the community to perform.

Radio Drama: Another fun way to perform a play is to record it, then play it for the class. Sound props, such as doorbells, footsteps, and nature sounds help, and being able to redo a scene that doesn't come off well insures a better final product. This format is harder than it sounds, but after putting together a few you'll get the hang of it. You might even consider creating a podcast for your school's website.

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.

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, consider collaborating with your music teacher on a full production for the entire student body. Have the music teacher put together three or four short numbers that fit the theme. Hold try-outs; those that don't make it can still be part of the chorus. Create sets, make costumes, and invite the public. Make it a big event with playbooks, backstage passes, and the post-performance party. Of course, it's a big commitment. It will require extended rehearsal time, perhaps after school, during lunch, or while the rest of the class is in music, but the end result will be memorable. Begin just as you do with a classroom stage performance, using those who've been cast as a single group, working up to live rehearsals.

Whichever format you choose, the most important factor is that students read the same script repetitively. 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 double up and perform more than one role.

Once you have your “play groups” you’ll need to rotate them through a station in which they meet with you. Your remaining students can be do seat work, read independently, or meet with parent-volunteers for other guided reading activities reading while they wait for their turn at the director’s table. Meanwhile, I spend about twenty minutes “practicing” each given play with the students assigned to that play. We meet two to three times a week to read. After a week or so, we begin “rehearsing.” We’re fortunate enough to have open space just outside the classroom where I can direct my actors while still keeping an eye on my class. I also have a teaching assistant or parent- volunteer helping students with their seat work. After another week or two, we’re ready to perform. Three weeks is a minimum amount of time to work on a play, and after a month, the students begin losing interest. Aim for four, but be flexible.

When in the group, I require my students 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 spoken lines get just as much practice as the “stars”). I also ask they let me do the correcting and cueing so that we are sensitive to the emotional and instructional needs of each individual student.

I ask my students to practice their parts at home. The first time they take their script home, I 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 which of your students aren’t reading at home. When all else fails, make up for it by having a parent-volunteer, teaching assistant, or older student tutor these children at school. Again, focus on repetitive reading toward mastery.

◆ The Delicate Nature of Assessing 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 be earning high marks.

Try creating with your students a rubric or scoring guide identifying standards for a successful performance. 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?” The audience will provide feedback. “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”, “Paulie lost her spot; she needed to follow along better”, and “Trey needs to keep his script away from his face so the audience can hear him.” You’ll find that because these comments come from other students rather than the teacher, the performers are better able to receive them

without the negative emotional charge a grade has. 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. 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 is called for by your particular language arts or

social studies standards, you can address it through a play.

◆ Will Every Play Go Well?

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.

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