



experts in primary literacies

This e:update provides teachers with practical information about how to write Readers' Theatre scripts that will meet the specific needs of their students. Teacher-written scripts enable Readers' Theatre to be used on a regular basis based on books that have been programmed for the class. The range of ideas provided in this e:update will assist those new to this strategy and complement the resources of those teachers already using Readers' Theatre.

## What is Readers' Theatre?

Readers' Theatre is the oral reading of a narrative or poem. Usually the prose is adapted to make it suitable for performing as an oral reading. Texts with a lot of dialogue are best, and as far as possible, the original text is used in Readers' Theatre. For example, indirect speech might be altered to direct speech, but the original meaning and the vocabulary used by the author is retained. At times the narrated text might be split and allocated to different readers. The scripts are written so that the characters in the role of narrator are allotted to different readers. In many cases the script includes one or more narrators. While Readers' Theatre can be rehearsed and refined to include stage sets and costumes, when used as an activity within a reading program, the focus remains strongly on how the text is to be read. Therefore, there is usually an absence of stage sets and costumes. Performers remain 'on stage' for the duration of the reading and they read the script rather than memorise lines. In addition, there is minimal stage movement by performers, and they face the audience as they read the story.

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Primary English Teaching Association

## Readers' Theatre texts to improve fluency and comprehension

by Margery Hertzberg

Readers' Theatre is sometimes described as 'theatre of the mind', because with its semblance to a group story telling, the audience visualises the story by interpreting the readers' use of voice, facial expression and body gesture to convey meaning. It is sometimes also called 'Interpreters' Theatre' because the participants interpret the story through their presentation — both spoken and gestural. Similarly, the audience interprets the meaning as they watch and listen. Hence, Readers' Theatre is a valuable classroom strategy for enhancing talking, listening and reading skills.



In this picture three children are reading from a script adapted from Chapter 1 of *I am Jack* (Gervay, 2000).

You might also view some examples on YouTube, as a video clip can explain in less than a thousand words what Readers' Theatre looks like! You will note that in many of the YouTube examples the students have used props and costumes presumably because they have perfected it for an external audience.

If it is your turn to provide the assembly item, for instance, you may wish to do so too, but it does not need to be elaborate.



This picture shows students performing a Readers' Theatre For *The BFG* (Dahl, 1982). The only prop they used was a set of ears for the role of the giant.

I usually prefer to keep props and costumes to a minimum not only because it can detract from the purpose of Readers' Theatre, which is to use the drama skills of voice and gesture to tell the story, but more importantly because this e:update advocates using Readers' Theatre frequently within a reading program. When costuming and props becomes the focus the organisation of it becomes an additional drain and strain on your time. As a result, and understandably, Reader's Theatre might then not be used routinely for developing fluency in oral reading.

## Oral reading is difficult!

Reading aloud is typical practice in all grades, but oral reading is much more difficult than silent reading because it requires more complex skills. In an oral reading, the reader needs to externalise what they are reading using vocal tone, pitch and pace but simultaneously and silently read on for what is coming next — a procedure that often has a four- to five-second delay. This is the reason why many students do not comprehend what they are reading on a first oral reading. They are concentrating so hard on orally decoding the words, that attention to reading for meaning is secondary.

This understanding about the complexity of oral reading has prompted, for example, the now common practice of asking students to read the passage to be assessed for a running record silently, before reading it aloud to their assessor. It gives the assessor a more accurate knowledge about the student's reading progress (see for example, South Australia's Early Years Literacy Program at [www.earlyyearsliteracy.sa.edu.au](http://www.earlyyearsliteracy.sa.edu.au)). Similarly, to begin guided reading sessions students should read the text silently and/or follow as the teacher models, **before** reading aloud to the group.

### Reading aloud can be embarrassing

Many adults remember reading aloud at school and it was not always a positive experience. This year, I asked 230 new scheme teachers to indicate if they liked reading aloud at school and 186 of the 230 responded that they did not enjoy it. I also surveyed 17 Year 6 English as an Additional Language (EAL) students and not one of them liked unprepared oral reading. They were asked to write their reasons. Most said that it was embarrassing and they were afraid that others would laugh at them. Some also said that they did not have a loud voice and that it was faster to read alone.

It is argued in this e:update that for many children Readers' Theatre is less confronting because of the 'rehearsal' factor. Students read their scripts in small groups and it is assumed that in the first reading mistakes **will** be made but corrected in subsequent practices.

This was confirmed by an EAL student who said: *Well the first time I'm not reading really good with people. The first time I mean I get embarrassed, but not when I've done it lots of times and with my friends. When we do Readers' Theatre we read it (the script) heaps of times and so then I can read the words and understand what the story is about. Usually I just read the words but I don't know what I'm reading.* Another student put it this way: *You don't feel stupid if you make a mistake because they all know you're only practising and it's not like the whole world is going to see it.*

### Reading aloud is important for understanding the literary construction

We often ask students to read aloud for assessment purposes because it is a useful way to analyse a students' progress and diagnose specific difficulties. However, another important

▶ reason for reading aloud is a literary one. Many stories, or excerpts from stories, are just begging to be read out aloud to capture in particular the rhythm, rhyme and imagery, as the examples that follow will demonstrate. Readers' Theatre allows students to experiment with tone, volume and pace to convey meaning. Verbal expression in combination with facial expressions, gesture and position of characters enables students to provide an interpretation of the text. At the same time, an understanding of narrative construction takes place as the role of the narrator is explored. In short, Readers' Theatre is a great way to bring the words and imagery alive through voice and action or as one child recently said after performing a Readers' Theatre for *Cinderella* (Dahl, 1980): *I love doing Readers' Theatre. It's fun to get into groups and practise your reading skills and your drama skills at the same time. I love doing two things at once!*

## Readers' Theatre and critical literacy

When involved in Readers' Theatre, students are actively engaged in analysing a text, but they do so from within it. That is, by taking on the roles of the characters and enacting the author's choice of language students become *text participants*. As well, students gain an insight into the author's possible intention and positioning of them as the reader or *text analyst*. This can be a very powerful outcome. In one Year 5 class, for instance (Hertzberg et al, 2006), several groups of children were preparing a Readers' Theatre for *I am Jack* mentioned earlier. The children debated the tone of voice the mother should use. Was she cross with Jack or was she just trying to appeal to him to be patient?

There were varying opinions within the groups and all were correct and well justified. It therefore led to different interpretations by the various groups and these variations were viewed and then discussed and debated (text analyst).

## Why teacher-prepared scripts?

It is important to stress that students new to Readers' Theatre should start by using scripts that teachers have prepared before they embark on writing their own because writing scripts involves another range of complex skills. There are examples of Readers' Theatre scripts on the web, which may be suitable such as at: [www.aaronshep.com/rt/](http://www.aaronshep.com/rt/). What I am suggesting, however, is that the scripts that you write can be tailor-made for your class. For example, you might make a script from an excerpt from a book you are sharing with the class or using during guided reading. It also gives you the flexibility to design a script specific to the individuals in your class.

In the script from *Something From Nothing* (Gilman, P. 1998) that is used as Example 1 below, the main character Joseph only has to read the lines 'Grandpa can fix it', which he repeats ten times for the duration of the script. The joy of seeing a boy lacking in confidence and with reading difficulties take the lead role was truly moving for both the child and the teacher in one particular class. In addition, his word recognition skills improved because in

▶ this group's three practices, this child needed to follow the rest of the script in order to read his part.

### Example One (for small groups and suitable for approximately Years 2 and 3)

*Something From Nothing* was used for shared reading with a Grade 2 class. At least five different stories occur within this book but only one story is told through written text making it suitable also for visual literacy (Hertzberg, 1999). The written text, however, is really good for Readers' Theatre because there is plenty of dialogue and the repetitive language and rhythmic structure makes it ideal for reading instruction. This written part of the book is about a tailor (Grandpa) who makes his newborn grandson (Joseph) a blanket. This blanket becomes Joseph's security item. As Joseph grows older it gets more filthy and tattered, but he is unwilling to part with it. Grandpa refashions it into a jacket which then becomes a vest and then a tie and so on. When writing the script for Readers' Theatre from this book, the varying reading abilities in the class were considered.

Below is an excerpt of the original text to demonstrate how I converted it to a Readers' Theatre script.

*When Joseph was a baby, his grandfather made him a wonderful blanket ... to keep him warm and cosy and to chase away bad dreams. But as Joseph grew older, the wonderful blanket grew older too.*

*One day his mother said to him, 'Joseph, look at your blanket. It's frazzled, it's worn, it's unsightly, it's torn. It is time to throw it out.'*

*'Grandpa can fix it,' Joseph said!*

*Joseph's grandfather took the blanket and turned it round and round ...*

*'Hmm,' he said as his scissors went snip, snip, snip and his needle flew in and out and in and out, 'There's just enough material here to make ...' a wonderful jacket. Joseph put on the wonderful jacket and went outside to play.*

*But as Joseph grew older, the wonderful jacket grew older too. One day his mother said to him, 'Joseph, look at your jacket. It's shrunken and small, doesn't fit you at all. It is time to throw it out!'*

*'Grandpa can fix it,' Joseph said!*

(Gilman, P. 1992 pp. 1 to 8)

As there is a lot of repetitious text, I decided to separate the narration into four parts. This allowed me to give the very repetitious text to Narrators two and four and leave the more difficult text for Narrators one and three, the better readers. Note also that the protagonists — Joseph and Grandpa have repetitive text. Joseph’s dialogue throughout is ‘Grandpa can fix it’ (10 times in all) allowing a weak reader to become the star of the play! Similarly, Grandpa’s lines are repetitious:

▶ ‘Hmm ... there’s just enough material here to make a wonderful ... (jacket, vest, tie, handkerchief):’

Using the table function in Microsoft Word, I made two columns and wrote it thus. Grandpa’s part is highlighted to demonstrate that children highlight their respective roles.

Character	Script
Narrator 1	<i>When Joseph was a baby, his grandfather made him a wonderful blanket</i>
Narrator 3	<i>to keep him warm and cosy and to chase away bad dreams.</i>
Narrator 2	<i>But as Joseph grew older, the wonderful blanket grew older too.</i>
Narrator 1	<i>One day his mother said to him:</i>
Mother	<i>Joseph, look at your blanket. It’s frazzled, it’s worn, it’s unsightly, it’s torn. It is time to throw it out.</i>
Joseph	<i>Grandpa can fix it!</i>
Narrator 2	<i>Joseph’s grandfather took the blanket and turned it round and round...</i>
Grandpa	<i>Hmm ...</i>
Narrator 4	<i>and his scissors went snip, snip, snip and his needle flew in and out and in and out.</i>
Grandpa	<i>There’s just enough material here to make ... a wonderful jacket!</i>
Narrator 3	<i>Joseph put on the wonderful jacket and went outside to play.</i>
Narrator 2	<i>But as Joseph grew older, the wonderful jacket grew older too.</i>
Narrator 1	<i>One day his mother said to him:</i>
Mother	<i>Joseph, look at your jacket. It’s shrunken and small, doesn’t fit you at all. It is time to throw it out!</i>
Joseph	<i>Grandpa can fix it.</i>
Narrator 2:	<i>Joseph’s grandfather took the jacket and turned it round and round ...</i>
Grandpa	<i>Hmm ...</i>
Narrator 4:	<i>and his scissors went snip, snip, snip and his needle flew in and out and in and out.</i>
Grandpa	<i>There’s just enough material here to make ... a wonderful vest!</i>
Gilman, P, <i>Something from Nothing</i> (1998). Ontario: Scholastic Canada Ltd. Adapted for Readers’ Theatre for classroom use only and not for performance.	

## The lesson sequence

- Children were familiar with the book as it had been used in shared reading.
  - The teacher-prepared script was displayed on an overhead projector. (Of course, an interactive white board could be used if you have one).
  - The teacher read (modelled) the entire script as children followed.
  - Children were then split into four mixed-ability groups of 7
- ▶ as there are 7 roles. As one group had only 6, one child was given the role of Narrator 1 and 3 (the more difficult script).
  - The RT instructions (displayed on the OHP/IWB) were first explained to the whole class and the groups then referred to these instructions as they rehearsed.

### Readers' Theatre Instructions

1. **Decide on your roles and highlight your part.**
2. **Practice reading the script together.**
3. **In the following practices think about the following aspects and as a group decide on:**

**Verbal expression:** How will you speak your part?

- *tone (e.g. happy/sad)*
- *volume (e.g. loudly/softly)*
- *pace (e.g. quickly/slowly)*

**Body language:** What sort of expressions will you have? What sort of gestures?

- *facial expressions*
- *hand and other body gestures*

**Position:** What position will you take when you read your part? (In Readers' Theatre you do not move very much and you face the audience)

- *where will you stand or sit?*
- *will you alter your position at times?*

**Sound effects:** Do you need sound effects? If so, which?

- *do you want to use some instruments for sound effects?*
- *do you want to use body percussion?*

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### Example Two (for whole class; suitable for Kindergarten/Reception and Year 1)

The script for *Is your Grandmother a Goanna?* (Allen, P. 2007) was written for whole class participation. This story is about a boy travelling by train to visit his grandmother. At each station en route, he is greeted by a variety of animals, before meeting Grandmother. The repetitious and rhyming text make it ideal for early emergent reading instruction. The teacher and five emergent and/or transitional readers read the English words and the rest of

▶ the class, (mostly of early emergent readers), were whistles and trains. However, **all** children needed to view and read the script even if the teacher needed to prompt them when it was their turn! Repeated reading is important in learning to read and RT provides this opportunity in a purposeful and authentic way. That is, the rehearsal process is the reason for rereading.

Unlike the RT script for *Something from Nothing* in which the script remained true to the original text, the script for *Is your Grandmother a Goanna?* deletes much of the text that explains who is speaking the dialogue because we see the character speaking the part so the 'he said' and 'she replied' bits are redundant. However, I did retain the repetitive clause *cried the little boy* in 'cried the little boy and he climbed back on the train' because I thought it important to retain the metre of the story. The beginning of the script is below:

Character	Script
Narrator 1	One day a little boy set out to visit his grandmother. He went to the railway station. On the platform stood the stationmaster.
Little Boy	I'm going to visit my grandmother.
Narrator 1	And he climbed onto the train.
Narrator 2	The stationmaster blew his whistle.
Whistles (rest of class)	Wheeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee
Narrator 3	And the train went.
Trains (rest of class)	Toooooooooo! Toooooooooooooo

For an extended version of the above text, find the e:tip *Readers' Theatre extension* at: [www.elit.edu.au](http://www.elit.edu.au)

### Example Three (for small groups; suitable for approximately Years 4 to 8)

The humour in Roald Dahl's *Revolting Rhymes* is appreciated by children about 10 years old and over. For older children still experiencing reading difficulties, these *Revolting Rhymes* provide a great opportunity to explore the rhyming patterns of words with age-appropriate text. The only changes made from the original text was the deletion of the 'he said' and 'she replied' phrases. As well, since Grandma only has one line of direct speech and then dies, I changed her dialogue into indirect speech, because having a role with just one line would not appeal to most children!

It is also important not to simplify language when scripting. Firstly because if we simplify the vocabulary we do not give students the opportunity to work with difficult vocabulary. Secondly, in our attempt to simplify we detract from the beauty of the language and/or the intent. For instance, later on Wolf says that Little Red Riding Hood is 'going to taste like caviar'. This conjures up an image quite different to 'going to taste like fish eggs'.

See the layout of the script at the bottom of the page.

You will find another helpful example suitable for use with small groups at Years 6 to 8, using Morris Gleitzman's book, *Boy Overboard*. Go to [www.elit.edu.au](http://www.elit.edu.au) and for the e:tip [Readers' Theatre extension](#).

## Student-prepared scripts

These examples of RT scripts illustrate how oral readings helps capture the writer's craft and at the same time aid the teaching of reading. Once students are familiar with teacher-written models of Readers' Theatre it is appropriate for them to write their own. However, writing scripts brings in another element of skill difficulty and usually alters the purpose and focus from reading to writing. This exercise of writing scripts is of course extremely beneficial because students scrutinise the author's choice of language more deeply. Nevertheless, I argue firmly that students will have more success after experiencing many teacher models. For example, a Year 6 class, familiar with Readers' Theatre, had finished reading *Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson. Working in pairs students selected an excerpt portraying a moment of high tension and converted this into a Readers' Theatre. This choice was also predicated on the excerpt having enough dialogue because although Readers' Theatre can be written for narrated passages, it is more common and easier to work with dialogue.

Character	Script
Narrator 1	As soon as Wolf began to feel That he would like a decent meal. He went and knocked on Grandma's door.
Narrator 2	When Grandma opened it, she saw The sharp white teeth, the horrid grin, And Wolfie said,
Wolf	May I come in?
Narrator 3	Poor Grandma was terrified, 'He's going to eat me up,' she cried.
Narrator 1	And she was absolutely right. He ate her up with one great bite.
Narrator 1	In came the little girl in red. She stopped. She stared. And then she said.
Little Red Riding Hood	What great big ears you have, Grandma.
Wolf	All the better to hear you with.

## A word on copyright

Even though teachers are writing these scripts for reading instruction, copyright must be considered. After all we are manipulating the unique and creative work of the author. This is another important reason for retaining the exact vocabulary of the author and only making changes to adapt it to an oral telling. To comply with copyright the following words should always appear at the footer of each page of the script:

**(title of book) by (author and date and publishing details). Adapted for Readers' Theatre for classroom use only and not for performance.**

For example, the footer for the *Something from Nothing* RT script would read: Gilman, P, *Something from Nothing* (1998). Ontario: Scholastic Canada Ltd. Adapted for Readers' Theatre for classroom use only and not for performance.

If you did want to use a script for a performance where guests were paying to watch it, you would need to request copyright to do so. You can also check with Copyright Agency Ltd (CAL): [www.copyright.com.au](http://www.copyright.com.au)

## Conclusion

Whilst suitable Readers' Theatre scripts are available on the internet and/or in commercial publications, the purpose of this e:update is to demonstrate how easy it is to write your own scripts to cater for the specific needs of your students. Excerpts from many books that you are reading with students are suitable for adaptation for Readers' Theatre and the benefits are numerous. One teacher who wrote her own scripts and used them on a weekly basis explained to me: *My students can't wait for their next script and there are so many benefits that transcend just reading fluency. There is increased student confidence and participation and increased inferential comprehension as well as improved fluency ... It's great to see children asking me questions to clarify their understanding, rather than waiting for me to ask them questions...*

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