

KNOWLEDGE IN HAND

Building artistic and academic skills through
curriculum-based readers theatre

BY ROSALIND FLYNN

MUCH AS YOUR STUDENTS might like it to be, theatre class isn't just theatre games, improv, scene work, monologues, trust exercises, and vocal warm-ups. Most theatre teachers today want their students to leave their courses with an understanding of, or at least a familiarity with, things like the roots of theatre in Western civilization, other historical periods and cultures, theatre terminology, classical and contemporary plays, and aspects of design and technology. In other words: information and facts that will contribute to students' larger knowledge and appreciation of theatre.



Middle-schoolers at the CHAT Academy in Selma, Alabama, perform a script about cell structure for science class.

But let's face it, imparting theatre knowledge via lecture, PowerPoint, video, textbook, or worksheet is often, in a word, "boring." Students passively receive the information, which they may or may not retain, and the instruction rarely resembles the active participation that typically engages students' minds and bodies in theatre class activities. Even worse, if students are the presenters of content information, their presentations may more closely resemble the dreaded oral report, a format long embraced in academic settings and long rejected in theatrical ones.

There is a solution to this difficulty: the theatrical form known as readers theatre. Before you imagine dull, sing-songy read-alouds of uninspiring handheld scripts, let me assure

you, this is not the readers theatre of your ancestors. This is readers theatre produced by students, who function first as creative playwrights commissioned to write a dramatic script on a given topic and then as performers of their piece, with the intention that it inform *and* entertain.

To get some idea of what I mean, imagine that your curriculum requires students to identify key trends in world theatrical history from various cultures and time periods. To address this objective, your students might research, write, rehearse, and perform a scene about the Roman theatre, for example. The result might look something like the script on page 6.

This type of readers theatre differs from the traditional approach in a variety of ways. Its focus is a

curriculum-content topic rather than the retelling of a story. It contains stage directions for incorporating sound effects and gestures. It accommodates a large number of solo speakers and the frequent and intentional designation of lines to be delivered by the whole group, a sort of Greek chorus. It also challenges students to write creatively, incorporate contemporary language and expressions, and use a variety of scriptwriting techniques, such as rhyme, alliteration, chants, humor, and melodies. And the work is not done when the writing is complete; students then rehearse their original script to present it for an audience of their classmates. As both playwrights and performers, students have a larger dramatic purpose: to communicate accurate information imaginatively and theatrically.

Merging drama with curriculum content

I call this type of readers theatre curriculum-based readers theatre. This arts-integrated way of merging drama with curriculum content has become foundational in the work that I do with teachers of all academic subjects. In my graduate theatre methods course, I regularly assign my students—many of them current theatre teachers—the task of writing original readers theatre scripts on topics that high school theatre students commonly study.

Over the years, they and their students have written scripts about

theatre history topics like commedia dell' arte, Greek theatre, Medieval theatre, Shakespeare's theatre, Noh theatre, and Theatre of the Absurd. (The Roman theatre example provided here appears compliments of one of my recent graduate students.) They have also created scripts that summarize the plots of famous dramatic works like *King Lear*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Antigone*, *Everyman*, *Hamlet*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *The Miracle Worker*.

The short *King Lear* readers theatre script excerpt on page 7, for instance,

comes from drama teacher Ruby Duehring's students at Thomas Stone High School in Waldorf, Maryland. After reading the play in class, Duehring assigned the script writing to assess the students' comprehension of the play's plot.

Here's what she had to say about the process: "As a quick run-down, I had students read some sample scripts to understand the concept of readers theatre. We discussed the characteristics together and then filled out the script assignment sheet, listing things we thought the scripts should include. Prior to writing, we set the number of gestures, sound effects, quotes, and pages together. The character numbers represent half the class so that performances could have an audience. They wrote scripts in groups of two or three. I allowed the groups autonomy in how they wrote, so some groups wrote back and forth and some divided the play into equal sections. The only rule was that there had to be equal handwritten parts from each group member. Finally, we discussed creating personality types for some of the character numbers. This idea became especially important for those dividing the play into parts so that the final script was smooth.

"In the end, the groups that had the most combined experience with Shakespeare had the longest scripts, but all of them seemed to come away with an understanding of plot and theme."

These curriculum-based readers theatre activities are one way to merge drama, theatre, writing, reading, speaking, and content learning. They provide students with a motivating purpose for researching, writing, and performing information about curriculum content. An entire class can participate simultaneously, or small groups can plan and present for their classmates, other classes, or audiences of any size. And you don't have to confine your script writing to plays; students have created scenes dealing with acting terminology, rules of improv, the rehearsal process, theatre etiquette, musical theatre, aspects of technical theatre, and theatre superstitions.

Excerpt from a student-written script on Roman theatre

Note: For the sake of simplicity, I generally suggest that students assign numerals to identify their characters in a readers theatre presentation.

1: The Romans were cheaters!

2: Did you know that?! (*Gesture*)

3, 4: Nope.

5: Wow, how did they cheat?

6: They copied the Greeks!

7, 8, 9: You mean they used Windex to cure their wounds?! (*Gesture*)
(*Sound effect*)

10: No! You watch too many movies!

1, 10: We're talking about Roman theatre!

2: You know, the lights. (*Gesture*)

3: The sounds. (*Sound effect*)

4: The stage! (*Gesture*)

ALL: Romans copied the ideas of Greek theatre. (*Gesture*)

5, 6: You see, Greeks solved the problems of sound. (*Sound effect*)

7, 8: And lighting. (*Gesture*)

9, 10: By performing in the great outdoors! (*Gesture*)

1: Like the Greeks, Romans built theaters with semi-circular, tiered seating!

2, 3: Like a stadium? (*Gesture*)

4: So aside from mimicking the Greeks, did the Romans do anything else?
(*Gesture*)

5: Of course!

6, 7, 8: You see, the Roman audiences were loud and rowdy! (*Sound effect*)

ALL: How rude! (*Gesture*)

9: So, to solve this problem they used symbols to show different types of characters.

ALL: (*Sound effect of a cymbal*) (*Gesture*)

9, 10: Not that kind of symbol!

ALL: Oh.

1: Symbols like the masks the actors wore. (*Gesture*)

2: Brown for men.

3: White for women.

4: A sad face for a play known as a "Tragedy." (*Sound effect*) (*Gesture*)

5: And a happy face for a play known as a "Comedy." (*Sound effect*)
(*Gesture*)

Getting started

I have used this approach to readers theatre with all ages and skill levels, but it works best with middle or beginning high school students. I'd suggest planning five successive one-hour class periods for the entire exercise, though you could certainly divide the activity into a broader time frame. Begin by sharing several sample readers theatre scripts with your students. (I have a number of sample scripts available for free on my website.)

To get an initial sense of how the exercise is going to work, gather your students (seated) in a straight line or semicircle, distribute the script copies, and ask for volunteers to read the sample script's solo lines indicated by the numerals on the left hand side of the script's column. After the first read-through of the script, solicit students' ideas for gestures and sound effects to perform when the script calls for them. Because the script is always present and in full view of the audience in readers theatre performances, explain to your students that they will always be holding their scripts in one hand and be limited to performing any gestures with their remaining free hand. For aesthetic purposes, my preference is to have all performers hold their scripts in their left hands, leaving their right hands free for gesturing. (Yes—even the left-handed students.) All sound effects must be created either vocally or with percussive body movement, such as foot stomping.

During this first read-through, help students refine the line readings for parts spoken by "All" or by pairs or small groups. Review and repeat portions as needed and then ask students to stand and run through the script again.

Before moving on to another script example, ask everyone to examine the first script and identify its main characteristics. Check once again to confirm students' grasp of the need for gestures, sound effects, and lines spoken in unison. Discuss the use of humor, contemporary or conversational language, and lines

of dialogue that are mostly short in length. Identifying these script characteristics will help students as they begin to write their own scripts. Point out any additional scriptwriting techniques used—things such as incorrect responses that are later corrected, current slang expressions, repeated words or phrases, and rhythmic raps or chants.

Make sure you have several sets of other scripts on hand, so you're ready to repeat this process as many times as necessary before moving into the next phase of the exercise.

Making the assignment

Depending on the skill and experience of your students, you may choose to have them work on a specific topic or historical period, or allow them more flexibility in choosing their script focus. Some areas of study can be explored through several lenses. For example, if you are studying Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, one group's script topic may be a plot summary, another group might focus on the themes in *The Crucible*, and a third on the Salem witch trials held in the late seventeenth century. If you want students to learn about a

variety of backstage jobs, assign the writing of scripts that describe the duties of personnel like the stage manager, set designer, props master, house manager, and costume and wardrobe crew. Even topics like stage directions, lighting equipment, and flat scenery can be dramatized as readers theatre.

To aid students in the research phase of their script writing, you will need to provide or recommend sources of information: textbooks, articles, web sites, plays, etc. I also recommend providing a script planning sheet that:

- Identifies the topic, audience, source(s) of information, and the script's specific goal.
- Notes particular content-related elements that the script should feature (vocabulary words, direct quotes, names, dates, definitions, explanations of facts, and examples that illustrate them).
- Lists aspects of readers theatre that the script should contain, including solo lines for a specified number of speakers, the recommended number of lines spoken by "All" speakers, and the suggested number of stage directions for gestures and sound effects.

The planning sheet should also remind students that their final scripts

Excerpt: summarizing *King Lear*

ALL: Lear is mad! (*Gesture*)

1: He runs away to Regan's castle.

2: What a cry baby!

3: I hope Regan was nicer than Goneril.

4: Too bad she wasn't even there.

5: Regan snuck off to Gloucester's castle because she knew Lear was on his way.

6: When Lear arrives at Gloucester's, he finds his two daughters there.

ALL: Oh snap! (*Gesture*)

7: Typical story—when you need someone, they always betray you!

8: Okay then? Well, you're right, kind of. Goneril and Regan both team up against their father.

1: So he must have gone to the Happy Acres Retirement Home?

2: Ha! Not! He ran back into the storm!

3: What an idiot!

ALL: He lost his mind. (*Gesture*) (*Sound effect*)

4: The wind was fierce!

ODDS: (*Sound effect*)

5: The thunder loud.

EVENS: (*Sound effect*)

6: But Lear was louder!

9: "Blow winds and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!"

Curriculum Based Readers Theatre Script Assessment Checklist

Script Topic or Title: _____

Script Writer(s): _____

	Strong 3	Adequate 2	Minimal 2	No evidence 0
CONTENT				
All required content information (dates, vocabulary, definitions, etc.) is included .				
Content information is accurate .				
Content information is clearly and effectively communicated .				
MECHANICS				
There are solo speaking parts for the specified number (____) of speakers.				
Lines are distributed among solo, pair, small group, and whole group voices.				
Opportunities for sound effects are created and indicated in stage directions.				
Opportunities for gestures are created and indicated in stage directions.				
Spelling is accurate.				
Script is legible .				
STYLE				
Opening lines capture the audience's attention.				
Overall context of script remains consistent throughout the text.				
Language is effective and appropriate for intended audience.				
Script contains entertaining elements.				
Closing is logical and effective.				



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Eleventh and twelfth graders at Dallas County High School, Plantersville, Alabama, perform a social studies script on the Lewis and Clark expedition.

should be no more than two typed pages (or three to four pages hand-written), and should *not* contain blocking, stage movement other than gestures, or separate scenes.

Developing scripts

When students know from the start of an assignment how the work that they produce will be assessed, they are more likely to meet or exceed assignment goals. I use the script assessment checklist on the left as both a tool for students to gauge the quality of their work and for me to grade their finished scripts. It helps both student and teacher to clearly identify the criteria for excellence in the written scripts at four quality levels: strong, adequate, minimal, or no evidence. Share and discuss this checklist with students before they begin writing their scripts.

The list is divided into three categories: content, mechanics, and style. The content category concerns the script's curriculum information. Mechanics focuses on the functional aspects of the script—speakers, sound effects, gestures, spelling, and appearance of the script copy. The style category deals with the script's distinctive features and manner of expression. Each element in the checklist's left-hand column is a brief description of a quality that contributes to an excellent curriculum-

based readers theatre script. Review the elements with your students and remind them to consult the checklist as they write.

Here are some specific questions to address in each script category.

For content:

- To what extent is the curriculum or content information covered in the script? How well are the specified learning standards addressed in the script?
- How thoroughly does the script include all specified content elements such as facts, procedures, strategies, terms, names, dates, definitions, direct quotations, original language, and vocabulary?
- How accurately, effectively, and clearly does the script communicate the content information? Is there sufficient detail?

For mechanics:

- Does the script contain parts for the specified number of speakers?
- Does it include a variety of solo lines, lines that are spoken by the whole group, by small groups, and by pairs?
- Does it feature stage directions for sound effects and/or gestures?
- Is the spelling correct?
- How legible is the script? Is it neatly written or typed?

For style:

- How effectively do the script's opening lines establish the script's

context—set the scene—and grab the audience's attention?

- Are the script's language and word choices effective and appropriate for its intended audience?
- Is the chosen context of the script apparent and effective? How well is the context maintained throughout the text of the script?
- How logical and effective are the script's final closing lines?
- Does the script contain elements that make it entertaining as well as informative? Does the script show evidence of imagination, invention, and creativity?

On the final question, here are some things you might want to suggest that your students include to make their scripts more interesting: humor, compelling characters and context, chants, call and response, rhyming and alliteration, dialogue sung to a familiar melody, a tune hummed underneath spoken words.

It's important to remember that, even if your students are new to theatre, one of the most appealing aspects of this exercise is the opportunity to be creative and innovative. You want to emphasize that curriculum-based readers theatre is about both content and artistry, and students ought to enjoy themselves as well as learn. Presentations might take the form of a TV game show, celebrity

(living or dead) interview, infomercial, or political campaign.

For instance:

1: Hello everyone and welcome to Theatre Talk Radio! Today's topic is:

ALL: Medieval Theatre! (*Sound effect*) (*Gesture*)

2-5: What's so great about Medieval Theatre?

1: Well, in the Dark Ages, from about 600-1000 A.D., there was barely any theatre at all.

6-10: Oh no! (*Gesture*)

2-5: But theatre came back, right?

1: Oh yes, and it was used to teach people about Christianity.

3: Oh yeah! (*Sound effect*) The plays were called Liturgical Dramas!

As a rule of thumb, I usually divide a class up into groups of four or five students—too many makes the writing process cumbersome. However, smaller groups can write a script for a larger group—even for the entire class. Before you turn your groups loose to begin writing, distribute an assignment sheet that includes instructions like this:

1. Assemble with your group and discuss your script's curriculum topic.

2. Review the script planning sheet. Be sure you understand all its requirements.

3. Research and make a list of all the information that your script must include—definitions, facts, examples, etc.

4. Decide on the context—the circumstances or setting—and characters for your script. For example, will it be a TV show, a press conference, a contest, a commercial, etc.?

5. Choose a scribe (a person to do the physical writing) and write your script in pencil, using only one side of the paper. Number your pages. For ease in making changes, begin by writing on every other line of the page or leaving blank lines between each speaker's lines of dialogue. That way, you have writing space if you decide to add any new lines, sound effects, or gestures. Hint: You may want to write four or five lines without

assigning speakers and then go back and indicate speakers by number. Then write the next four or five lines, stop, and go back and indicate speakers by number, and so on throughout the scriptwriting.

6. Read your script aloud every so often to hear how it sounds.

7. Consult the script assessment checklist and discuss with the group how well the script seems to meet the criteria for excellence.

8. Type your script on the computer, unless we've agreed to simply use handwritten scripts.

9. Turn in your finished draft so your teacher can make enough photocopies for all cast members.

From playwrights to performers

As with any writing assignment, the student playwrights brainstorm, create a rough draft, and revise their readers theatre script to arrive at a final draft. A time allotment of two periods for writing their drafts and two periods rehearsing is usually sufficient. At this point, students move from being playwrights to performers. Rehearsing their written words aloud may prompt students to make changes in the text of their script, but the assignment now requires that they shift their focus to aspects of effective performances.

If possible, try to schedule all of the script performances on the last day of the exercise. That way, everyone gets a chance to share and compare their work. Whether their script informs their audience about topics like principles of blocking, basic stage safety, or Aristotle's six elements of drama, your performers must deliver the content with effective projection, expression, energy, and concentration. When students do not need to memorize lines—thanks to the script-in-hand approach of readers theatre—rehearsals proceed more quickly into performances.

There are a number of discrete elements of readers theatre performances that are easy to communicate and assess. The performance assessment checklist on page 11 identifies four basic aspects of strong readers theatre performances

(appearance, vocal qualities, focus, ensemble playing) and includes a simple proficiency scale. For the sake of space, I'm not going to go into detail on the rubric for each one of these skills; it's up to you to clarify for yourself what constitutes "consistently" in regard to things like facial expression, vocal projection, and ensemble work.

As with the script checklist, sharing and discussing this performance assessment criteria with students in advance of performances lets them know what they are striving to achieve. For some students, concrete evidence (in the form of an assessment tool) that their performance behaviors can be assessed lends more validity to the assignment and influences how seriously they work on it.

After each group presents their performance, begin a reflective dialogue with all students by complimenting the strong aspects of both the script and its delivery. Pose questions like: "What was effective about the script? What did you learn by listening and watching? What aspects of the performance were effective?"

After discussing the positive aspects of the group's work, ask for recommendations for script edits and ways to enhance future performances: "What ideas do you have for strengthening the content or wording of the written script? How might you coach the performers to give an even stronger performance of their script?"

Beyond the theatre class

There are additional aspects of readers theatre that contribute to its effectiveness as a learning strategy. As a theatre teacher who works regularly with actors learning lines from scripts, you know firsthand the truth of this equation: reading plus repeating plus rehearsing equals retention.

So, in addition to this kind of readers theatre being a creative and engaging way to have students work with theatre content information, the students are much more likely to retain the information they have learned.

Repeated reading of the same text orally is also one of the best ways to

Curriculum Based Readers Theatre Performance Assessment Checklist

Performer's Name _____

The Performer...	Consistently 3	Usually 2	Rarely 1	No evidence 0
APPEARANCE				
...enters the performance space appropriately.				
...holds the script correctly—in left hand, not blocking face/mouth.				
...exhibits good posture—weight evenly balanced; Straight back; Body remains still when not gesturing.				
...uses effective facial expressions.				
...performs gestures correctly and with energy.				
...exits the performance space appropriately.				
VOCAL QUALITIES				
...projects—has good vocal volume.				
...uses effective vocal expression.				
...articulates—speaks clearly.				
...uses an appropriate rate of speech—not too fast.				
FOCUS				
...maintains concentration.				
ENSEMBLE PLAYING				
...works well in ensemble—behaves as a contributing member of the performance team.				

Total _____

increase students' reading fluency. Reading fluency—the ability to read a text accurately and quickly and comprehend what is read—is a highly desired reading skill for students in general. Practicing this skill serves them in subject areas beyond theatre.

If you are a theatre teacher who also teaches other subjects, it would be an easy leap for you to use these curriculum-based readers theatre learning activities with other content areas. English, social studies, and even science and math classes can benefit from your theatrical expertise when you combine your theatre teaching methods with required content knowledge, involve your “non-theatre” students in this arts-integrated way of teaching and learning, and spread more drama—the good kind—around the school.

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