

# Reader's Theater

## Overview:

If ever there was a unit whose sole purpose was to bring life into an otherwise stagnant English or language arts curriculum, this is it. Reader's Theater is the perfect unit for driving a stake through the heart of unending literary analysis and end-of-grade testing preparation (little of which is the choice of your teachers). As a unit, its prime goals are to put joy back into the classroom and to allow literature to be what it was when you enjoyed it the most as a young student – fun. Recognize that it is not without its demands and certainly there are rules that are fairly stringent as this project is about competitive reader's theater as opposed to the normal classroom version. But you will come to find that even its rules make for an enjoyable challenge.

Let us begin with how Reader's Theater operates. First, you have to accept the fact that this is not a play. Plays allow for easy movement, characters talking to one another, costumes, lighting, special effects and props. This style of presentation allows for limited movement, no direct eye contact between characters, no costumes, lights, et al. You also need to understand that although acting is involved, this is first and foremost, storytelling. For this reason, reading skills and eye contact with the audience are crucial. You are here to read out loud a story - not to present a play. The closest we come to acting is the separation of dialogue from prose and the emotion that you put into reading that characters' dialogue.

The rules for Reader's Theater can be very rigid. They tell you what you can and cannot do. The student's goal is to make the most out of what they can do; therefore, imagination is crucial. Each team of readers (and they can extend from two to seven students) will be equipped with stools or chairs for each and every presenter. This furniture is placed in a staggered line facing the audience and situated to fit the needs of the piece (see "Blocking"). Each reader has a script from which to read from and that is all you have to work with – a script, a stool and your sense of creativity and innovation. What follows are the rules that you are allowed to bend, but never break. Reader's Theater is a test to see what you can do when all else is stripped away from you but a story and teamwork.

## Introductions:

Each piece must be introduced by one member of the group who may stand before the audience or speak from their stool or chair. If the narrator or character (Not all pieces have narrators.) chooses to stand before the audience in order to introduce the readers, then they should take their place before the actual production begins. This introduction, whether it is a pre-cut script or not, must include:

- the title of the piece
- the author's name(s)
- any background material the audience might need to understand the presentation
- introduction of readers and characters
- explanation of "Every Man" roles

Remember that your introduction is not timed.

## Rules for Blocking:

Once the material has been selected and the piece cut for presentation, thought must be given to blocking or physically presenting the material. The following rules apply to all groups:

1. All presentations must be performed from stools or chairs.
2. At no time can the readers look at one another while the performance has begun. They must focus on a member or members of the audience to act as the person/s they are speaking to. If they have no lines, are not involved in the scene, or have not yet been brought into the scene, they should be looking down into their script or facing away from the audience. ONLY THE NARRATOR MAY LOOK DIRECTLY AT A MEMBER OF THE GROUP.
3. If a script includes a narrator, the narrator's stool must be the farthest one forward on either the right or left hand side of the presentation, but sufficiently moved away from the scene so as not to block the readers. The narrator may address himself to anyone - readers or audience - and is encouraged to do so. Narrators may complete physical actions as the readers do but are subject to the same limitations.
4. The chair or stool is the student's stage. You can sit, kneel, stand or lay across it, but you cannot leave it except for specific purposes. Students may get off their stools to portray falling, fainting, sickness or death, but they must regain contact with their stool or the stool adjacent to it as soon as possible. It should be noted that this type of movement is not encouraged and teachers and judges alike will examine its necessity very closely. If done, it should always be practiced so that there is a minimum of risk. Remember that this is a reading presentation, not gymnastics.
5. Readers may walk from one stool to another, but do so at their own risk. To fall off or to execute the maneuver awkwardly is to take the chance of losing points on their production. You are NOT encouraged to include this type of blocking in your production. You are also not allowed to swap stools with other readers in the midst of your presentation.
6. A piece might ask a reader to pick up their stool and run with it to a new location. As long as the stool is in the reader's grasp, this is permissible. Keep in mind that this is a rare exception to the rules and should not be abused. Stools may also be used as props if it is appropriate to do so (As always, see your teacher.).
7. A reader – or readers - may run around the team with their stool or chair (in order to simulate a chase) as long as one hand remains in contact with it. Once again, there should be an obvious motivation for this action and students need to recognize that it can be interpreted as the easy way out of a situation where greater imagination – and a fixed stool - would have been the better option.
8. The stools should be arranged in such a way that the characters are not blocked out from one another so that the audience cannot see them. The lead characters should always be the farthest forward of the other readers unless a blocking script specifically requires them to be in the rear.
9. Points are to be taken off for poor posture, shifting about or unintentionally falling off or having a reader simply sitting about doing nothing.

10. Students may turn around on their stools in a seated or standing position. This is often a device - along with lowering your head - to show that a reader has left the scene.

11. You may make no physical contact with any other reader.

12. Setting up your stools in a straight line shows poor imagination. Unless it is the best alignment possible for your piece, attempt to show a greater degree of creativity in how you place your readers.

## **Rules for Delivery:**

1. **As previously stated, the narrator may speak to anyone within the group, though that student may not speak directly back to the narrator.** A reader replying to the narrator would speak in their direction, but not at them. This seems a silly rule on its surface, but the narrator symbolizes the audience reading the story while the readers are the story. Readers should speak to members of the audience and use them to represent other characters.

2. **The readers must be consistent with which members of the audience are acting as the characters they are speaking to.** For instance, if I, as a reader, have decided that a certain member of the audience is the character that I am speaking to, then that person should always remain representative of that character throughout the presentation. You must remember that this is reader's theater and not a play. In a play you may make contact with another actor and speak directly to them. As this form of theater requires the reading to go directly to the audience, you can't have direct interaction between you and your fellow players.

3. **The readers must maintain good eye contact with the audience.** A reader whose face is buried in their script will do very poorly. The readers must be sufficiently familiar with their own dialogue to look up from it and look at the audience. This is not to suggest that readers should not use their script and memorize their lines, quite the opposite. As this form of theater is based on reading it is important that you do exactly that or you will actually be counted down in eye contact if you don't.

## **Rules for Players:**

1. **Extras - A team may bring in members of the class to play certain additional parts.** In the classroom project, these individuals may/may not earn extra credit. This is a teacher's decision. Be aware that you may not gain as much time in practice from these individuals as they are concerned with their own presentation. If you choose to employ students from other groups, ensure that the roles they play are minor in nature and will not severely detract from your practices if they are not available to you.

2. **A group may also choose to create an "Every Man" character that will fulfill a variety of roles within a production.** This becomes especially important to those groups choosing to do picture books, as many include a variety of characters. This reader should be proficient at voices and body language. As stated previously, the Every Man character should have his /her parts explained to the spectators in the introduction so that there is no confusion to the teacher or audience. Needless to say, the advantage that such a reader holds is that the group would not have to bring in students from other groups. The best way to utilize such a student is to give them a series of small roles rather than major ones. Major roles are best kept to single character readers.

**3. All readers must have a minimum of five speaking turns in order to qualify for an individual grade.**

Note that some teachers may choose to give a lesser grade if the character on stage does well, but has only a minimum or near minimum amount of speaking turns; the logic being that it is unfair for one reader who must be consistently good over many lines to receive the same grade as one who has but a handful. The individual teachers will make clear their feelings on the subject.

**4. Gestures and pantomime must be used (and will be graded), but at no time should the characters come in contact with one another.**

**5. No props, makeup or costumes are allowed, though certain types of clothing may be used to "suggest" a certain character (i.e. - wearing suspenders to create the image of an old man).** As in all things, clear it with your teacher first. Hair may be worn to suggest an age for the character but there should be no dyeing.

**6. Should a student be used in more than one production – and the maximum should be two – they must declare which presentation they wish to be graded on before the pieces are presented.**

## **Specific Instructions:**

1. Generally, there are no make-up dates for any individual that is sick. Only at the teacher's convenience and the group's cooperation could such an assignment be recreated. If a significant member of a group is not available on the day of a presentation or the group is unprepared, they may present the following day at reduced points, but not after more than one day's delay. The group may proceed on the chosen date by bringing in another member of a group to substitute. Each teacher will explain to you their own feelings about this rule and how they will enforce it.

2. Everyone on a team or as a partner in a duet will receive the same grade. You will be judged on your introduction, eye contact, blocking / pantomime, facial expression, gestures, involvement, pace / timing, teamwork, delivery and ability to follow the rules.

3. There are 400 points possible for the presentation with an additional 40 points to be earned through conduct and use of practice time.