Language Arts Lessons for Active Learning, Grades 3–8

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Fennessey, Sharon M.
Language arts lessons for active learning, grades 3–8 / Sharon M. Fennessey.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN-10: 0-325-00984-8
1. Active learning. 2. Language arts (Elementary). 3. Language arts
(Middle school). I. Title.
LB1027.23.F46 2008
372.6—dc22 2007038774

Editor: Danny Miller
Production service: Lisa Garboski, bookworks
Production coordinator: Sonja S. Chapman
Cover design: Night and Day Design
Composer: Aptara, Inc.
Manufacturing: Steve Bernier

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
12 11 10 09 08 VP 1 2 3 4 5
for

all the dedicated teachers
who spend endless hours on the job
because they care about their kids
and hope to make a difference in their lives
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It’s the start of another school year. As I look at the faces of the new students in front of me, I wonder about the unique talents of each child and how I can use that talent to motivate and help them learn. I believe that their wide-ranging abilities and diverse backgrounds enhance their creative thinking and influence achievement. I try to integrate lessons throughout the year that will utilize these talents to strengthen their skills as readers, writers, speakers, and listeners.

These lessons are ones that I’ve used successfully as a drama specialist and a classroom teacher in the intermediate and middle grades. They incorporate a variety of hands-on activities: games, pantomime, tableau, choral reading, improvisation, Readers Theatre, story enactment, writing in role, debating, interviewing, and performance projects. Working with students of diverse abilities and styles over many years, I have found that these strategies are effective teaching tools that can be powerful additions to a language arts program.

Some of the strategies may already be familiar to teachers. Read-aloud books, choral reading, Readers Theatre, and game playing are popular and frequently used in today’s classrooms. But other strategies (pantomime, tableau, improvisation, and enactments, for example) may be less familiar, and teachers might lack the confidence to create and facilitate a lesson that is built around them. I often hear comments such as the following during my teacher workshop presentations: “My kids would love that activity, but I’m not sure I know how to organize and run a lesson like that.” Remembering these words, I decided to write this book in lesson format. Each lesson has a specific focus, step-by-step directions for the learning activity, and helpful hints in the “Teacher-to-Teacher” section based on my experience with the lesson.
How to Select Lessons from This Book

All the lessons presented here integrate the essential skills in reading, writing, speaking, or listening. For this reason, they do not take time away from the curriculum but support all strands of language arts.

I have tried to take into consideration learners with diverse abilities and learning styles. Not all activities are meant for all students. A teacher who knows the abilities of the class can select lessons with the learners in mind, choosing activities that will challenge but not overwhelm the kids. The lessons here do not indicate a specific grade level, but rather a range of grades because the abilities of students vary from class to class, school to school, and so forth. A classroom of fifth graders in one school might participate successfully in the mock trial that is described in Chapter 6, but in another school it would be better suited for the seventh grade class.

When selecting a lesson to use, I suggest that attention first be paid to the “Focus,” which states the main objective. Second, read through the detailed description of the lesson to determine if your kids are ready for the type of activity that is described. The third consideration is the time element. Some lessons are divided into several sessions and would not be suitable for a fifty-minute time slot.

As a teacher selecting these lessons, please consider the spirit in which they were written. They are suggestions, not written in stone, ideas for lessons that you can adapt to fit your teaching style and change to make your own. Here are my suggestions:

- Choose lessons based on the needs of your students and that you feel are important to their literacy development.
- Choose lessons that attract you and ones that you would feel comfortable teaching.
- Use these lessons as an inspiration to create your own lessons.
- Adapt the lessons as needed to fit the needs of your learners.
- Select your own resources (rather than my suggestions) if they are familiar and readily available.
- Select lessons from Chapter 2 to lay the groundwork for participating in the activities in subsequent chapters.
- Participate in the process and share your enthusiasm and love for language arts.

How This Book Is Organized

The lessons presented here are a result of my own teaching of language arts in elementary and middle school, and as a drama specialist. The first
chapter (Setting the Stage for Active Learning) explains the rationale behind this approach, gives detailed descriptions of the strategies that are used throughout the book, and suggests management tips for using them as a venue for learning.

Chapter 2 (Warm-ups for Active Learning) contains lessons that will help prepare the kids for learning through participation. They are recommended to build cooperation, confidence, and concentration, and foster mutual respect at the start of the school year. These lessons, some of which have a game format, are the building blocks for skills that are needed in the chapters that follow.

The subsequent chapters can be used in any order. Chapter 3 (Games and Activities to Enhance Language Learning) contains lessons that are designed to teach writing and enrich vocabulary. They can be accomplished in one teaching session. Chapter 4 (Activities to Promote an Understanding of Story Elements) focuses on using a variety of strategies that promote an understanding of story elements such as plot structure, character conventions, setting, mood, theme, dialogue, and narration. These lessons connect reading with writing.

Many of the lessons in Chapters 5 and 6 take more than one teaching session to accomplish. Chapter 5 (Activities to Develop Oral Language and Reading Fluency) uses literature as an inspiration for a variety of performance readings that develop oral language skills, reading fluency, comprehension of the plot, and an understanding of character. Chapter 6 (Language Arts Performance Projects) contains projects that require an extended period of time to prepare, rehearse, and perform. Literature is the springboard for these performance pieces that involve research, reading, writing, and speaking skills. A focus is cited for each lesson but in these performance projects, all the language arts components of reading, writing, speaking, and listening are synthesized.

A Balanced Approach

By sharing these lessons with fellow teachers, it is my hope that you will try some of them with your class. These strategies have worked for me, and certainly the kids love the time they spend actively participating in this kind of learning. As teachers we need to continue to experiment for effective ways to develop language arts literacy. There needs to be a balance between pencil and paper tasks and participatory learning. This is especially true at this time with the increased focus on testing and retesting our students. As teachers, it is more important than ever to find the time to let our children’s voices be heard and valued for their self-expression.
1 Setting the Stage for Active Learning

If you step into my classroom, you will likely see students working in small groups. They are talking, moving, making decisions, and generally cooperating with each other. They appear relaxed as they participate in their learning. It was not always this way. As a first-year teacher, I worried that I wouldn’t have enough prepared material to fill the day in a series of directed lessons. In the years that followed, I gradually stepped back and let my students become more involved and take responsibility for their learning. My classroom became a workshop where students participated in authentic acts of reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

In this atmosphere, the students might play the “Mystery Words” game (Chapter 3) as a way to increase their vocabulary. They might create and perform poetry in “Fractured Nursery Rhymes” (Chapter 3) as a means to gain an understanding of rhyme and meter. They might participate in a Readers Theatre (Chapter 5) to improve their reading fluency or role-play a character from literature to improve their literary analysis skills (Chapter 4). All these activities and many more that are described in these lessons are ways to engage students, teach language arts skills, and enrich learning.

Why Active Learning Is an Effective Strategy in Language Arts Teaching

My kids love the time they spend involved in hands-on learning. They are active participants and find it stimulating as well as motivating. But these lessons are more than just appealing. They teach many of the language arts skills that meet the standards, and they provide a way of learning that accommodates a variety of learner styles and intelligences. These lessons reinforce concepts as students put them into action in authentic acts of speaking, writing, reading, and listening.

By using a wide range of activities in language arts learning, it is possible to meet the needs of varied learning styles and abilities. Not all learners are confident or motivated to write and read, but when the goal of
writing and reading is to prepare an interview with a character or organize a talk show, a Readers Theatre, or a courtroom trial, then the writing and reading become real and the kids are excited about it.

**Lessons That Support the Language Arts Curriculum**

The lessons in this book are not add-ons to the language arts curriculum. For me, they have always been an integral part of my teaching of language arts. I have used them in my class to introduce a variety of concepts (for example, a writer’s mini-lesson on the topic of character development). At times they are used to provide a lead-in or follow-up to a reading mini-lesson. They can be a culminating activity for literature study or for a writing experience (poetry, for example). In essence, all the lessons in this book integrate an essential skill in reading, writing, speaking, or listening.

Many of the lessons, especially those that involve dramatic readings, improve reading fluency, expression, and comprehension of the text. The repetitive reading has a purpose—to rehearse for a performance. During the rehearsal process, the actors practice reading with expression. They give attention to punctuation. They learn to articulate and pronounce each word correctly. A script for a Readers Theatre, a TV news program, a radio show, a choral poetry reading, and a play are examples of activities that provide repetitive reading practice.

The games and drama activities also provide an opportunity for spontaneous oral composition. Whether it’s one line or an entire scene, the kids make it up as they go along. The improvised oral composition helps students with written composition by giving them practice creating a storyline and dialogue. Dramatic play can provide the oral rehearsal for writing a fictional story or a play script.

Speaking skills are improved when children have regular experiences in activities that involve the use of oral language in a structured experience (choral reading, Readers Theatre, enactments, improvised scenes, etc.). The kids develop an awareness of vocal qualities such as articulation, inflection, projection, variety in volume, rate, tone, pitch, and the use of stress and emphasis. As they experience using their voices, they also learn to communicate through body language and movement. Children need practice coordinating words with gestures and facial expression. They practice this coordination when they become a character from a book or an invented character. Playing these characters allows the learners to move and gesture unconsciously because they are portraying someone other than themselves.

Many of the lessons in this book are designed to strengthen listening skills. Through the varied activities, the children regularly experience listening to respond to cues, to react to another player, to solve problems, to formulate questions, to imagine, and to understand a story (read-aloud
books) or a play script. Repeated experiences in oral language work in tandem with the listening experiences. To participate in these hands-on activities, kids quickly learn that it’s critical to be an active listener.

These lessons also promote an understanding of the structural elements of literature (plot, setting, character, theme, mood, or atmosphere, for example). By teaching literary elements, we teach kids how literature works, and we better enable them to utilize this knowledge in their own writing. In some of the lessons included here, the learners recreate scenes from literature. This is a powerful way to learn about the form and structure of a story. In the planning for the re-creation, I ask questions related to the setting, the mood, theme, and the characters. By becoming characters from a story, experiencing the plot, and creating a setting and mood through dramatic interpretation, the students move toward an understanding of the basic elements of literature. The drama experience takes them from the abstract idea of plot, character, setting, mood, and theme to a concrete experience with these elements, and a better understanding of these concepts.

Finding the Time for Games, Activities, and Performance Projects

The use of games, drama, Readers Theatre, improvisation, and so forth in the language arts classroom is not new. Many teachers utilize one or more of these strategies to teach language skills, and other teachers that I have encountered express reluctance as to how they can fit activities and projects such as the ones in this book into the daily language arts lessons. I understand their skepticism. The daily schedule is tight. These lessons, however, integrate easily into any strand of the language arts curriculum. They are another way for children to learn the subject matter through actively participating in their learning. When I teach the idea of sequencing, for example, I use the lesson “Simple Action Pantomime” (Chapter 3). To help students develop their ability to predict, I use the lesson “You End It” (Chapter 4). To enhance students’ ability to use inferencing skills, the lesson from Chapter 4 entitled “Exploring Characterization” works well.

Creating a Classroom Environment for Active Learning

When a new class of students arrives in September, I focus on assessing their social skills. I observe them in the classroom, at recess, in the cafeteria, and in the halls, making mental notes of their behavior. As I watch them, I’m thinking of how to prepare the group to function as a productive class. Experienced teachers know that unless social skills are in place, the chance of a classroom functioning as a successful environment for
learning is minimal. This is especially true in the intermediate and middle grades where students spend a lot of time and energy trying to look “cool” in front of their peers. In a classroom where students are participating in games, drama, theatre, and many other hands-on activities, a positive social atmosphere is essential. A good part of language arts learning in my class is done in collaborative groups, so developing a sense of community, trust, respect, and shared responsibility is a primary goal as we begin the school year.

Establishing a Sense of Mutual Respect

Every student needs to know that he or she has respect from his or her peers and from the teacher. If the atmosphere in a classroom is one of mutual respect, then the kids will participate willingly and share their ideas knowing that their peers will not laugh. The expectation is that all students will respect the effort that each student makes to arrive at a solution to a problem.

A respectful classroom atmosphere does not come easily. It needs constant work to establish and then to maintain it throughout the year. Giving time and attention to social skills will set the stage for productive learning. Persistence is important. It takes time out of a lesson to stop and deal with misbehaviors. If inappropriate behavior is not addressed in a positive manner, it will continue. The success of the activities described in these lessons is dependent upon learners who can work as an ensemble or in cooperative groups. Chapter 2 includes many lessons that encourage student cooperation and respect.

Arranging the Physical Space

Each year it seems to me that my classroom is shrinking even though the dimensions remain the same. Computers take a lot of space, as do work stations and a library area. I’ve had to fight to maintain an open area where my students can all meet for discussions, read-aloud books, storytelling, and numerous games, activities, and project presentations. The space is important. In this area we sit close together. We have a sense of community. There are no desks to separate us. We are close enough to make eye contact and to experience the warmth of smiles and laughter. This intimacy is essential in any group collaboration. My students know that when they sit in our open space they need to be ready to listen. They anticipate that exciting things will happen there.

Our open area has a prop shelf at one end. On this shelf are some simple props (cups, dishes, magazines, newspapers, purses, briefcase, jewelry box, an assortment of fake food, etc.) and a few costume pieces (aprons, shawls, capes, hats, jackets, tunics, etc.). The use of props and costumes is introduced gradually as students become comfortable working in this space.
Promoting a Comfortable and Productive Climate for Learning

Experienced teachers know that the teacher's attitude can influence the learning atmosphere. If I want my kids to be respectful, for example, then I need to model it. A few strategies for creating a positive classroom atmosphere conducive to hands-on learning that have worked for me are the following:

- I try to be supportive and handle negative behavior in a positive manner.
- I show my enthusiasm for the lesson. Enthusiasm is contagious. The kids know when you really love what you are doing and they want to be a part of it.
- I am a careful listener. I focus on possibilities for helping students by asking skilled questions. Thought-provoking questions help students discover approaches or solutions to the problems presented.
- I work to find the strong points in each of my students and I capitalize on those.

Management Strategies for an Active Classroom

If you have ever watched kids pass through the door on the way to a recess, then you have witnessed an electrifying burst of energy as they bolt onto the playground, smiling and yelling to each other. Kids love being active. So the question arises, “While my students are involved in active learning in the classroom, how can I avoid having the classroom sound like the recess yard?” I think that most teachers work on this on a regular basis while teaching daily lessons. The same cues and ground rules that we use when children work at their desks or tables also work in the open learning area.

Nevertheless groups need to be organized, expectations need to be clear, and a structure needs to be in place for each activity. Following are a few management tips that have worked in my classroom during active sessions.

Taking a Serious Approach

I keep my attitude businesslike as I introduce and facilitate the activities. I want to convey to my kids that their participation in the games and so forth is another way to learn a subject, not a time for a recess. By handling the time spent participating in these active lessons as seriously as I would handle a math or science lesson, the idea of a “drama recess” slowly fades and in its place is the idea of a work space that is an alternative area to their desks and pencil and paper tasks.
Making Expectations Clear
I make my expectations clear for social behavior. A quick reminder before we start a session usually keeps behavior on track. I expect good listeners. I expect that they will show respect to their peers and me (students know what this heavily packed word called respect means in real examples because we have invested a lot of time understanding the impact of the word). I expect cooperation while working in groups, and that each student will make the best possible effort to find appropriate solutions to the problems presented.

Participating in the Activities
I participate in many of the lessons for several reasons. At the start of the year I lead many of the games to model how they are played. When the kids feel comfortable with them and know the rules, then I choose a student to lead. Also, I feel that if I ask my kids to perform, then I should be willing to do it myself. The same attitude prevails when I teach writing. If I expect my kids to participate in the arduous process of writing, then I should be willing to work on my own writing and share my difficulties and successes.

Giving Clear Directions and Establishing Cues
My oral directions are clear and to the point (Typical examples: Sit cross-legged on the drama circle. Find your own space. Eyes on me. Listen for my stop signal). If the activity is complicated and involves groups that are preparing a presentation, then a “What You Need to Do” list is posted and a deadline is suggested. Knowing the deadline keeps the groups working productively during the planning session.

I teach students the cues that I plan to use as signals to start or stop. I use the same cues in every session. Perhaps the most important cue word is the one that signals them to stop. I use the word freeze. Any word or sound effect can be used as long as all the kids know that when they hear it, it means all action stops and there is immediate silence. At the start of the year, we practice responding to the cue by walking around the class, then freezing when I give the cue. I use other signals to start and stop the action in any performance piece. The word curtain is used to signal that the action should begin, and again the word curtain signals that the scene should end. It really doesn’t matter what cue is used. What matters is the response to the cue.

Focusing on Success
I emphasize what my kids are doing right rather than focus on what they’re doing wrong. For example, if a group is performing a tableau (a living picture) and one student is unfocused, then I look for those stu-
dent who are focused and compliment them (for example: “I like the way Mary and Billy are concentrating. I’m getting a clear picture of the action.”).

While performing, if a student engages in “horseplay” to get attention, my response to the silly behavior might be something like this: I ask the student to recall the problem or task that was given at the outset of the activity to be sure that the assignment was understood. As I ask a series of questions designed to help the student self-evaluate, it becomes evident to the student that the horseplay was not a valid response to the problem presented. By handling negative behavior in this way, the focus is put on the activity rather than on the child’s behavior. I give the student a chance to rethink the response and come up with an alternative solution. Usually success is achieved the second time around.

**Planning Each Session Carefully**

A productive session that involves active learning is one that is carefully planned. I schedule the block of time needed for the activity and prepare any materials needed for the lesson. I have a clear objective in mind and share this purpose with the students at the start of the lesson.

**Involving All the Students**

At the start of the school year, I schedule lessons in my open space involving all the students in large group work. Everyone is working in unison and no one is waiting for a turn. It is during the “downtime” that students get off task. Also, when everyone is working together, students feel more confident. The spotlight is not on one person, but on everyone.

When I begin small group and partnered activities, then it’s time to have a discussion about the role of the audience. I explain that even though the audience is sitting and watching, it has an active role. While a group is presenting, the audience’s involvement centers on being polite listeners and evaluative listeners. Often I give a viewing purpose by posting a few questions for discussion after each performance. (Example: Did the group solve the problem presented? Was the setting revealed? How did the actors reveal the setting to the audience?) By using this approach, the discussion focuses on the solution to the problem that the kids were solving rather than on the actors who performed in the presentation.

**Types of Activities Used in the Lessons**

The lessons in this book incorporate a variety of hands-on activities to teach language arts. I know that teachers will recognize some of them. Games, read-aloud books, Readers Theatre, debating, and public speaking are often used in the classroom. Teachers have less familiarity with activities such as
pantomime, improvisation, tableaux, and enactment. Terminology that might need some clarification is defined here.

**Read-Aloud Books**

Although many teachers use read-aloud books regularly, the use becomes less frequent as students move into the higher grades, and yet it can be a very helpful strategy. In fifth grade I regularly use picture books to teach lessons; I have even used them with my college students. Before I begin a lesson, I show the students the picture book (some might be familiar with the title) and I explain to the kids why I am using it for the lesson. Once they understand the rationale, they sit back, relax, and enjoy the experience of hearing a story that reminds them of their happy days in the primary grades.

**Games**

As teachers we are familiar with games as a learning tool and a means of recreation. Games present an opportunity for emotional and social growth. Through games children develop confidence, concentration, and group awareness. Games strengthen communication skills when students observe, experience, and react to others and to situations. Through participation in games, the learners practice cooperation and discipline. Games are used frequently in Chapters 2 and 3 to provide an opportunity for social growth. The effectiveness of the games depends on the leader (the teacher) who explains and directs the game. The leader makes sure that the players respect the rules and each other.

**Pantomime**

Pantomime is a means of conveying ideas through movement, gesture, and expression rather than in words. Pantomime can be as simple as a single gesture (wrinkling the nose in reaction to a bad smell), or complex with a series of detailed movements (making a bed). Pantomime is the prologue to improvisation. When students are successful expressing meaning with their bodies, the natural next step is to add words to the dramatization.

Structuring pantomime in large groups is an ideal strategy for developing confidence in learners. Students are focused on movement and expression without the additional burden of creating dialogue.

In my role as the leader, I incorporate ideas into the lessons that are relevant to my kids’ lives. Eating an ice cream cone and doing homework are familiar activities to my learners, but driving a bus or working as a bank teller are out of the realm of their experience.

To assure success in pantomime activities (or any hands-on experience), I act as a coach by talking and asking questions while students perform. In theatre terminology, this is called *side-coaching*. It is a useful
strategy to stimulate new ideas as players work to solve a problem. Teachers engage in this style of coaching on a daily basis in the form of questions that they ask students during an activity. In science, for example, as a teacher facilitates during an experiment, productive questions are frequently used to generate new ideas. Although the term side-coaching might be new, the process is not new to teachers. In the pantomime example of eating the ice cream cone, my side-coaching questions might be the following: Is it a sunny day? Is the cone melting? Do you bite or lick the cone? Do you eat slowly or quickly? How can you show the texture of the cone? Is it one, two, or three scoops? Side-coaching encourages students to develop detailed pantomimes because the questioning puts the focus on the process, not just the solution.

**Tableau**

A tableau is a living picture (like people captured in a moment of time in a photo). In the classroom, groups of students create frozen positions to depict a scene from a story. The living pictures are carefully prepared to communicate an idea from the text. Gesture, expression, body position, focus, and energy are all considered during the planning stage. In my experience using this strategy, I have found it to be effective in promoting comprehension of story structure, characterizations, and setting.

**Choral Reading**

In this activity, students read (or recite from memory) the same text. It is read aloud with variations of speakers and vocal techniques. Choral reading is prevalent in primary grades and used less frequently in the upper grades. This is unfortunate because I've observed older kids involved in the experience and they love it. Due to the communal effort, all the readers (even the struggling ones) are successful. After several practices, the performers are reading the text smoothly. There are solos and duets, pauses and crescendos, and gestures and facial expressions to create interest for the listener during the reading (see Chapter 5 for suggestions on staging a reading). Poetry or any short texts are good choices for a choral reading.

**Enactment (Story Dramatization)**

In this activity, students act out a story, adhering closely to the author's plot and the dialogue used by the characters in the text. In other words, the actors try to bring to life the words of the author.

Enactments take careful planning. After a decision is made to enact a scene from a book (or the entire book if the text is short), the scene is outlined to determine the major plot actions, the setting, and the characters. Using the outline as a motivation, the actors begin the scene. Scripts are not used and most of the dialogue is improvised. Occasionally, the actors
use a line directly from the text, especially if it is key to the meaning of the story (for example: “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the fairest of them all?”). The dramatization is repeated several times. During each repetition, more details are added, dialogue is refined, and a sense of place (setting) emerges. If time allows, students work on improving their voices. Props and a few simple costume pieces are added to suggest their characters. In Chapter 5, there are several detailed examples of enactments.

**Improvisation**

In theatre, the term *improvisation* refers to a *spontaneous creation* by the actors. No scripts are involved. Improvisations take many forms. A pantomime could be improvised. A single line (“One-Line Improvisation with a Prop,” Chapter 2) or spontaneous movement (“Introductions,” Chapter 2) could also be termed improvisation. In Chapter 4, “On-the-Scene Reporter” takes an impromptu interview format.

Even though the term *spontaneous* is used here, it is important to note that many improvisations need careful planning (like a good piece of writing that is the result of a step-by-step process). To create a scene, the actors need a main idea or conflict. Scenes must have a beginning, middle, and an end. Character relationships need to be clear to the audience. Movement around the playing area is blocked out so all the actors are visible. “You End It” (Chapter 4) and “Enacting Scenes from Literature” (Chapter 5) utilize the improvisational process to create scenes.

**Readers Theatre**

Readers Theatre is now popular as a teaching strategy across the curriculum in many classrooms. Unlike conventional theatre, in Readers Theatre the actors read rather than memorize scripts. They use their voices to interpret and communicate a story or informational content to the audience. The emphasis is on spoken words rather than on movement, scenery, lighting, costumes, and so forth.

In many classrooms, Readers Theatre is an opportunity to read a prepared script from published or Internet resources. By doing so, oral language, fluency, confidence, and motivation are enhanced. However, I believe that Readers Theatre has greater potential as a learning strategy if the participants create their own scripts. By doing so, the learners synthesize reading, writing, speaking, listening, and curriculum content into the performance preparation. Chapter 5 includes details on adapting literature for Readers Theatre and also on writing original scripts for a Readers Theatre.

**Scripted Drama**

Scripted drama is a performance that follows a written script that is memorized or sometimes read by the actors. Chapter 6 has examples of scripted performances (“TV News Show” and “Writing in Role”).
Debating

In debating, students choose a side for or against a proposition and prepare arguments to support their side of the issue. Writing, reading, speaking (sometimes extemporaneous), listening, and critical thinking are skills that are combined in debating. If the debate is between literary or historical characters, then role-playing is needed. The debate becomes a dramatic performance. Chapter 6 includes a lesson using this strategy.

Courtroom Trial

Students participate in a mock trial acting as lawyers, witnesses, jurors, judge, and the accused. They use trial procedures in the drama as they prepare statements, arguments, cross-examination questions, and rebuttals. Trials can involve fictional characters from literature (for example, *The Wicked Witch v. Snow White*) or characters from historical trials (example: John Adams’ defense of Captain Preston). Chapter 6 includes a lesson using a courtroom trial, as shown in Figure 1–1.
**Interview**

Students take on the role of reporters by preparing questions to ask in a face-to-face interview. The person being interviewed (real or fictional) is asked to express opinions or share background information. In “On-the-Scene Reporter” (Chapter 4), students interview fairy tale and nursery rhyme characters caught up in a conflict. To prepare for “A Meeting of the Historical Society” (Chapter 6), students interview a family member or relative. In “Talk Show Host” (Chapter 6), characters from a novel appear together on a talk show and are interviewed by the host.

**Writing in Role**

In this activity, the writers step into the shoes of another and share the feelings and ideas of a character from a book. The first-person narrative takes the form of a monologue, diary entries, or a letter. In Chapter 6, there is a lesson that uses this strategy.

**Using the Lessons in This Book**

I suggest in the introduction that teachers choose lessons from this book that they feel comfortable teaching. If your background is limited in drama, then you might want to choose some of the traditional games or activities such as debating, interviewing, choral reading, and storytelling. However, each lesson in the book describes the activity in great detail, making it possible for a teacher who enjoys using a hands-on approach to successfully implement any of the lessons.

For teachers who are interested in widening their knowledge base in drama as a teaching strategy, or learning more about performance projects such as Readers Theatre, storytelling, and story dramatization, the “Recommended Professional Reading” at the end of this book might be helpful.
READERS THEATRE

Focus

The focus is on adapting text into a Readers Theatre script.

Grade Levels: 3–8

Purpose

After my students complete a novel in literature study, I ask them to prepare a response activity. One of their favorite response modes is the creation of a “Readers Theatre.” The group members select and adapt a section of the text, transforming it into a Readers Theatre script. After rehearsing the script, they perform it for their classmates. The performance often motivates the audience to read the novel if they haven’t done so already.

To transform the text (narrative and dialogue) into script form, the students use many skills. The author’s writing is the basic foundation for the script, but students need to analyze the section that has been chosen for its meaning, evaluate which parts are appropriate, adapt the dialogue into lines for the actor, and create additional lines as needed. The adaptation process is a natural follow-up to a Readers Theatre from a published resource. From prior participation, students know how this style of performance works. Once they have had experience creating an adaptation for performance, they are motivated and experienced enough to write an original Readers Theatre script (see “Documentary Theatre” in this chapter).

Benefits

• promotes an understanding of the text
• improves oral reading fluency and expression
• encourages an analysis of the characters

Materials Needed

• a novel that has been read by the group that will create the adaptation
• multiple copies of the selection chosen for adaptation
• stools for the readers (optional)
• music stands for the scripts (optional)
Description of the Activity

The adaptation of a scene from a novel into a Readers Theatre script is a process that involves selecting a chapter, adapting the narrative and dialogue into a script, rehearsing, and finally performing. The entire class can participate in the preparation of a Readers Theatre if they are all reading novels in literature groups. Each group prepares a script from the novel that they have just completed reading. If all the students in the class are reading the same novel, groups can be formed, each choosing a different chapter from the novel.

I sometimes take the time to model the idea of an adaptation. I choose a short text (for example, the fable *The Woodman’s Ax* by Aesop) as a model for an adaptation. It has sufficient dialogue and narrative and we quickly turn the text into a Readers Theatre. The ideas that are modeled during this process are listed on chart paper to provide guidelines for the creation of their own scripts. The following guidelines were created for the Readers Theatre adaptations:

- select a chapter or a section from a chapter
- ask the teacher to reproduce the selection for all members of the group
- read the selection several times to evaluate how it can be used
- choose a narrator to introduce the Readers Theatre, establishing the place, time, and point in the plot where the performance begins (the same narrator might also bring closure to the performance)
- list the characters and decide who will read those parts and label their names in front of the part
- cross out the tag lines ("she said") for each character
- choose readers for other important narration, label the parts with the readers’ names
- omit or condense long descriptions that might slow the performance
- note any sound effects
- read through the script to practice the order of the actor’s lines
- rehearse for expressiveness and timing
- practice not looking down at the script all the time
- use your voice to communicate each word clearly

The entire process takes about a week. I usually allow two sessions for the kids to prepare the script, and two sessions to rehearse and bring it to performance level. On Friday, the last session, the performances are shared with the class. During the planning and rehearsal times, I conference with
each group to facilitate their work by asking questions, offering suggestions, or solving casting problems that might arise.

**Teacher-to-Teacher**

While students are in the process of selecting passages for the adaptations, I have a conference with each group. It’s important that they choose a chapter or section of a chapter that has tension or conflict. An abundance of dialogue is another characteristic that is favorable for an adaptation.

I teach this lesson after the class has experienced a Readers Theatre using a published script. With a prepared script, the focus is on the delivery of the script and it gives the students an opportunity to learn how this style of theatre is performed. Once the learners are comfortable with the performance style, then the next natural step is to create their own script by adapting the text from a chapter book, short story, or a picture book.

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**RADIO THEATRE**

**Focus**

This lesson focuses on fluent reading and oral interpretation.

**Grade Levels: 3–8**

**Purpose**

I first began using Radio Theatre in my social studies curriculum. It was an especially effective reporting device for research topics such as the Depression of the 1930s and World War II. During this time, the radio was an important communication medium in our culture. Families gathered around the radio console to listen to news reports, music, comedy shows, and radio dramas. I noticed that my students responded enthusiastically to the experience so my thoughts wandered to how I could apply the idea to my reading curriculum.

In the social studies experience, the students researched and wrote the script for the Radio Theatre. However, in literature study, the text of the book was used and simply adapted to create the radio drama. The adaptation was less time-consuming than writing an original script from a researched topic. I thought also that the radio broadcast was an alternative for those readers who were shy about performing. In a radio drama, the performers are not seen. They are only heard. The focus is on an oral
interpretation of the script and the creation of sound effects. In a radio broadcast, it’s the actor’s voice that creates the picture in the listener’s mind, similar to storytelling. Because the medium relies on the sound of the voice, the performers must practice the reading to become fluent. They work on phrasing and variation in rate, pitch, and emphasis. With unseen movement, gesture, and facial expression on the radio, clear speech becomes even more important. The act of articulating, projecting, and pronouncing words correctly allows the audience to better understand the story being dramatized.

**Benefits**

- develops fluency: phrasing, variation in rate, pitch, and emphasis
- creates a medium for an aesthetic response to literature
- provides an opportunity to practice clear speech: correct pronunciation, articulation, and projection

**Materials Needed**

I use any chapter book or short story that is appropriate for my readers. I look for sections in the text that involve conflict and action and have some dialogue. For example, my students used Chapter 10 (“Let Us Open the Casket”) from Lowry’s *Number the Stars*. It was a tense moment in the story and there were opportunities for eight character parts and sound effects. A microphone (real or fake) and a pretend console radio (made from cardboard) are optional props, but they are effective in setting the mood for the broadcast.

**Description of the Activity**

A Radio Theatre is a dramatized reading of a text with narration, dialogue, and sound effects. One way to get a feel for the medium of radio is to listen to old radio dramas. There are recorded collections on CDs that include some of the most popular shows from radio’s golden age. It’s good listening practice and students immediately understand what they need to do to prepare for the performance. By listening to a show such as “Sergeant Preston of the Yukon” and discussing it afterward, the students realize that radio images are imagined. The medium relies on the expressive voice and sound effects.

If a short story is being read, the entire story can be performed. If it is a chapter book, then a dramatic section of a chapter that the students have already read silently is selected. This lesson might take two or three reading sessions during the preparation and the performance depending on the experience and abilities of the students.
Session 1

In literature group, we discuss and select a reading for a radio drama; usually three or four pages is sufficient. We look at the possibilities for performance. We locate the dialogue and the narrative sections. I assign or let students choose a part to read. I guide the readers as they organize the reading. In the chapter “Let Us Open the Casket” from *Number the Stars*, there are eight characters. There were seven students in the group. Therefore, some students had double roles playing two characters or a character and a narrator. I remind them to drop the tag lines when a character speaks. Once the parts are determined, the readers go off to practice.

During the rehearsal the readers practice using their voices expressively. They come up with ideas for creating the sound effects. In this selection, there are about nine effects needed: the house door closing, car doors slamming, pounding on a door, heels of soldier’s boots approaching, a woman gasping, a woman weeping, someone being slapped on the face, sound of soldier’s boots departing, and a car’s engine starting.

Session 2

If additional rehearsal time is needed, then the students practice again reading smoothly and expressively. They time the sound effects to come in at the appropriate moment in the reading. They might add a short introduction and a closing.

Session 3 (Radio Theatre Performance)

There are several ways to present a radio drama. It can be performed informally for the teacher during a literature group meeting. Sometimes I tape-record the reading so that students can hear it later or use the tape as part of a longer radio show. Presenting the reading to the entire class is another opportunity to present their work. One reading group in my class painted a large cardboard box (opened like scenery) to look like a console radio. The group sat behind the “radio” cardboard scenery to perform the Radio Theatre without being seen by the audience. Someone in the audience was given the job of “turning on” the radio. The rest of the class listened to the “broadcast” in front of “the console.” When the performance was finished, I led a discussion about what they learned from the experience.

Teacher-to-Teacher

The radio drama activity can be used several times to develop fluency while reading a book. But I find it more practical to use it as a response activity at the end of a novel. I try to have all my literature study groups working on the same type of activity. That way, other groups are not disturbed by a group of students rehearsing for a Radio Theatre. It can get noisy at times, but it’s productive noise. A few reminders about voice levels usually keep rehearsals manageable.
DOCUMENTARY THEATRE (A CURRICULUM-BASED READERS THEATRE SCRIPT)

Focus

The focus is on creating an original Readers Theatre script to convey information.

Grade Levels: 5–8

Purpose

Documentary Theatre is the name I use to describe a Readers Theatre that is written by my students based on a curriculum content topic. It could be in language arts, math, science, or social studies. The activity involves reading, writing, speaking, and listening (the language arts strands), and integrates a curriculum topic. This activity is appropriate for fifth grade and up. Reading, selecting essential facts, organizing information, drafting and revising a script, and rehearsing and performing are skills needed to put together a Documentary Theatre.

There are many reasons why this activity is successful in the classroom, but the rationale can be stated in two words—motivation and retention. Whenever the final product is a performance, my kids are motivated to work hard during the process of researching and writing. They find that writing a script for a performance is more exciting than preparing the traditional written research report. When the script is completed, the students rehearse. Rehearsal requires repetition as they practice the script over and over. The process of rehearsing and performing the script aids in the retention of the curriculum content.

Benefits

- aids in the retention of curriculum content
- motivates the learners to research and write
- helps learners select the essential information relevant to the topic
- develops research skills
- provides practice in reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills

Materials Needed

Any curriculum topic can be chosen for a Documentary Theatre. In this lesson, I focus on a social studies topic, immigration in the early 1900s.
I used paperback picture books as a resource for the research and writing of the script. They were the following:

- *Immigrant Kids* by Russell Freedman
- *If Your Name Was Changed at Ellis Island* by Ellen Levine
- *Coming to America: The Story of Immigration* by Betsy Maestro and Susannah Ryan
- *We Rode the Orphan Trains* by Andrea Warren

**Description of the Activity**

The preparation of a Documentary Theatre takes time, but the results are well worth it. It can take six to eight sessions of preparation during a period of about four weeks to prepare a script. The time factor depends on the length of the material chosen as a resource. A page from a textbook, or a two-page informational handout will take a lot less time (perhaps three sessions) than researching a short book. Nevertheless, the process remains the same whether the readings are short or long.

**Sessions 1 and 2**

During these sessions, the groups are formed (about six in each), topics are chosen, and materials are distributed. I explain the assignment to the class. Their goal is to create a script that accurately conveys information about the topic to an audience. Like storytelling, the information should be conveyed in a way that captures the interest of the listeners.

The researchers formulate questions about the topic (who, what, where, when, and why). Several students act as readers and others take notes based on the questions that were formulated. In this collaboration, students help each other understand, select, and organize the essential ideas for the script. By the end of these sessions, there should be a list of important facts about the topic. I have a conference with each group to ask questions and check their recorded information.

**Sessions 3 and 4**

During these sessions the students organize their notes, select information that they want to use, and draft a script based on the information they recorded. The script must have a part for everyone. As they write, they need to keep in mind that they are not listing a series of facts, but instead they are charged with telling an exciting story to the audience. The story needs an introduction and a closing.

**Sessions 5 and 6**

During these sessions, the writers revise the script after conferencing with each other and with me. They work to create clarity and smooth
transitions from one idea to another. They work to inject some humor, lively expressive language, a variation in the length of the lines spoken, and variation in solo and unison readings. After the revisions are completed, the parts are assigned, and the final version of the script is photocopied. It will probably be a two- or three-page script.

Sessions 7 and 8
Rehearsal might take one or possibly two sessions. I watch the groups to determine when they are ready to perform. During rehearsal, they practice reading fluently, picking up cues, and using their voices with expression. They decide on positions for the actors (sitting, standing, etc.) and they add gestures, sound effects, mood music, and perhaps a prop or costume piece.

Final Session (The Performances)
Usually the Documentary Theatre is performed for their classmates. At times, I invite another class or parents to be part of the audience. With four groups performing, it is necessary to schedule the order of the performances and practice the transition from one group to another to facilitate the setup time for each group. I also teach the groups how to bow with a professional flair after each performance.

Teacher-to-Teacher
A Documentary Theatre is an excellent reporting device for research in any subject area. It combines research writing with performance. When my writers write for an oral performance, I find that the writing style is natural, with the voice of the writers coming through loud and clear. This is not always true when they write a traditional research report.
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