Reader’s Theater – Teaching Across the Curriculum

Target: 4th – 5th Grade

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**Abstract**

It’s no secret that Reader’s Theater is an excellent tool that can be used to help students increase and sharpen their skills in reading, specifically in fluency and comprehension. It is, however, less commonly known that Reader’s Theater can be incorporated into all subjects regularly taught in a classroom. When a student can team up with classmates to write their own script based off of something they’re learning in science, math, or social studies, the doors are opened for them to better comprehend the material. Writing scripts, assuming roles, and performing theater pieces across the curriculum make learning more exciting and engaging in content areas that tend to be difficult or boring.

**Objectives**

After being assigned a content area or a given topic, the students will be able to…

1. Gain knowledge of selected content by reading textbooks, related handouts, and picture books aloud and independently throughout designated times of regular class instruction (in courses like science, math, social studies).
2. Develop new vocabulary by choosing and discussing content area words from the reading materials provided.
3. Construct their understanding and ideas about the given topic by participating in whole-class and small-group discussion during regular class instruction.
4. Interpret what they have learned about a given topic by writing and performing a reader’s theater piece with an assigned group of classmates.
5. Engage in content across various curriculum areas by viewing images, reading text, writing an original script (when applicable), and appropriately performing the script in front of an audience.

In regards to Reader’s Theater specifically, the students will be able to…

1. Reformat a text or create text inspired by picture books, videos, or other related images according to Reader’s Theater guidelines.
2. Perform a Reader’s Theater piece with an assigned group.
3. Read with fluency while also showing signs of comprehension through using expression, gestures, props, etc.

**Materials**

1. Picture books – students should be provided with images that will inspire their writing and help them to be more creative in using the content.
2. Where available, videos and images from the Internet may also be used.
3. Scripts
   1. Because the target grade level is 4th – 5th grade, students should be capable of writing their own scripts based off of materials provided for them. The focus of my idea here is to use images to fuel the majority of the inspiration for the scripts.
   2. Use pre-made scripts for younger students (see accommodations below)

**Procedures**

If students are not familiar with Reader’s Theater, the first time this lesson is used it would be most beneficial to do so with Literature/Language Arts rather than reaching across the curriculum. Students can be provided with their first script rather than create their own during this first experience. The script can be adapted if necessary. The teacher should read through the script (or a different, example script) out loud to model for the students what he or she is looking for in terms of fluency and expression.

This lesson is targeted towards students who have already participated in Reader’s Theater. When this is the case, the following guidelines may be followed for a 5-day experience:

Day 1 – provide the students with content.

* Give them textbooks, fact sheets, pieces of literature, picture books, or a set of instructions. Images should fuel the majority of their inspiration for the script.
* Let them know what exactly it is that they’re supposed to do.
* Review storyline aspects – explain things like plot, theme, ideas, narrator, characters, chorus, etc.
* Describe the importance of answering the questions of who, what, when, where, why, and how to organize information.
* If time permits, show example videos of Reader’s Theater productions.

Day 2 – create (or provide) the first script.

* At the beginning of the year, do Reader’s Theater within a literature unit. Create a script for a story that you are reading in your class or use one that is provided from any resource.
* Review aspects of Reader’s Theater from day one, break students into groups, and assign roles.
* When scripts are provided, use different scripts (either different variations/adaptations of the same story, or different stories altogether) for each group so that presentations are not repetitive. Have student highlight roles and read through the script together a couple of times.
* When students write their own scripts, assign each group a different topic or subtopic of a content area so that the presentations are not repetitive.

Day 3 – assign and assume roles.

* Have the students break into their groups to work on their performance.
* Each student should be given a part. Determine how you will help students choose who will play each role if multiple students want the same part.
* Have students highlight all of their lines so that they can follow along easily.
* Groups should be working independently, with the teacher regularly checking on each one to answer any questions or concerns.
* The students should be reading through the script aloud multiple times, each time critiquing each other on the delivery of their lines. This will help students read with more emphasis and fluency during the final product.

Day 4 – practice, practice, practice!

* Students should work on adding appropriate movements that will emphasize the dialogue.
* Gestures like pointing, waving, scratching heads, etc. can add a lot to the performance and to the students’ comprehension level of the script.
* Small props may be used if appropriate. Students should make or bring props on this day so that they can do a “dress rehearsal” of sorts as they continue practicing reading through their scripts.
* This will be the last day they have to run through everything. Groups should continue to constantly read through their scripts.
* If time permits and permission is granted, film a run through of each group and have them watch it back to critique it and learn from their mistakes.

Day 5 – performance day.

* Students will perform their pieces for the rest of the class, and possibly additional audiences.
* Lines should not be memorized but it should be evident that the students rehearsed their roles.
* Lines should be delivered with expression and enthusiasm.
* Assessment will take place during the performance (see below).

**Differentiation for Exceptional Learners**

When forming groups of students, the combinations are endless. I believe it is most beneficial to group students heterogeneously, in that they are all on various ability levels. I find this helpful because student A could be on a higher reading level than student B, but student B could be better at science than student A. Throughout the assignment, both students will have an opportunity to share their skills with the group and help each other out. The students will learn from the assignment, but also from each other.

Accommodation for different grade levels

* Students at different grade levels would need different sets of challenges in order to make this lesson successful.
  + For younger students who are incapable of writing their own scripts, scripts could easily be provided by the teacher.
    - There are countless resources for RT scripts in books and online.
    - Many textbooks may also have helpful ideas that would allow the teacher to create his or her own script for their class.
  + Students who are capable of writing their own scripts but may not be able to do it well could have some input in the scripts instead of being responsible for creating it entirely on their own.
    - The teacher could present them with a rough draft of a script (either borrowed or original) and the students could go through it and make suggestions or edits based on things they noticed in the picture books or other information they have.
  + Finally, older students who are willing and able to write their own scripts should be given the responsibility to do so, as it enhances their reading, comprehension, and writing skills.

Differentiated instruction is very easy to incorporate into Reader’s Theater. A teacher can easily cater to each student’s individual needs through these lessons. Scripts can be specifically chosen or even edited to accommodate any student’s reading level. Scripts can be printed in larger font or each character’s lines can be printed on a separate page in order to accommodate dyslexic students or students who have problems with focusing or attention.

**Assessment**

Reader’s Theater, when used to teach across the curriculum, can be assessed in many different ways. In order to be efficient and to make the entire process worth your while, students should be assessed in both literature/language arts and the subject with which their Reader’s Theater was tied to. For example, if your students created an Reader’s Theater script regarding the American Revolution, their performance could be used to grade their reading fluency (look for speed and accuracy), comprehension (look for appropriate expression and phrasing), and writing skills (look for accurate content, grammar, and spelling), while the content of the script itself as well as the physical production (expression, gestures/motions, and information presented in the production) can be used to assess the students’ knowledge and understanding of the social studies unit. Where applicable, the performance and the script can be used as an assessment of a student’s knowledge of a unit rather than taking a traditional pencil and paper test. Rubrics should also be used to come to a final grade for each student and for groups. Any rubrics you plan on using should be presented to students and reviewed at the beginning of the lesson.

**Reassurance**

Reader’s Theater is a time-consuming endeavor, and at times it can seem like it is more fun than it is educational; however, when you use Reader’s Theater to teach across the curriculum, students are able to learn factual information in a more thrilling way. In the extensive amounts of time used to create Reader’s Theater scripts, work on performance skills, and review information, students are comprehending the information on a deeper level than if they were responsible for simply reading the textbook on their own time. So, as teachers, we can rest assured that although spending a lot of time on Reader’s Theater can take away from other class instruction, this time is being well spent because it is actually benefiting students and helping them to truly learn. With that being said, not all lessons should be taught as Reader’s Theater. If you find that your students enjoy Reader’s Theater, you could use it to teach more in-depth or difficult lessons from other subjects, or even use it for special occasions or as an incentive.

**Samples**

The following are picture books that would be useful for 4th-5th graders in drafting scripts for potential content areas:

*Social Studies*

Branches of Government, the Capitol, other Government topics:

A Visit to Washington D.C. by Jill Krementz

The Lincolns: A Scrapbook Look at Abraham and Mary by Candace Fleming

City! Washington D.C. by Shirley Climo and George Ancona

*Science*

Energy, States of Matter, Ecosystems

Energy is Everywhere by June Young

Looking at Solids, Liquids, and Gasses: How Does Matter Change? by Jackie Gaff

Life in a Grassland by Dorothy Hinshaw Patent and William Munoz

*Math*

Multiplication, division

Multiplication on the Farm by Jennifer Rozines Roy and Gregory Roy

Cheetah Math by Ann Whitehead Nagda

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JtLhTlSW4XA>

This example of Reader's Theater in Social Studies is a little bit more elaborate than necessary, as it includes costumes and a set, but it is a great example video to watch or to even share with students because it perfectly represents how a class could adapt historical information from a textbook into an engaging and educational performance.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIDthZ4zf4Y>

This example of Reader's Theater in Science is another useful resource. It just provides more insight into how students can create scripts (or teachers can provide scripts) for just about any content area and incorporate countless state or national standards.

<http://beyondpenguins.ehe.osu.edu/issue/keeping-warm/creating-readers-theater-scripts-from-informational-text>

This website was beneficial in my research of teaching across the curriculum. It can be difficult to adapt non-fictional information into a literary piece, but this resource provided ample tips and examples that were helpful.

**Script**

The following link goes to a preview of a sample script. Teachers and students alike can benefit from looking at this script sample before they engage in creating their own scripts.

https://www.threedoggraphx.com/files/Water%20Cycle%20World%20Preview.pdf