

READERS THEATRE

A Unique Approach to Reading and Writing

BY MELVIN D. CAMPBELL

When I first heard about Readers Theatre¹ I immediately recognized this dramatic teaching technique as something that could be used in any classroom at virtually no expense—no props, no costumes—just students reading a script. This powerful tool would make the Bible come alive for Adventist students.

As I introduced Readers Theatre scripts into Bible classrooms, I realized that the technique was also useful for teaching reading. As a result I, with my graduate students, have written more than 400 scripts ranging in length from one to 15 pages. The scripts have been used in many classrooms in the

United States, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, and other Pacific islands. Readers Theatre has also been used in farewell tributes, baby dedications, weddings, communion services, Christmas and Thanksgiving programs, Sabbath schools and church services, and mission stories.

Why Use Readers Theatre?

Teachers often forget that students

learn best when the learning is enjoyable and has purpose. The Readers Theatre format fulfills these qualifications for both reading and writing. The response to Readers Theatre has been very positive. Even high school and college students have enjoyed being involved.

Readers Theatre is an art form in which two or more readers interpret literature by vocal and visual clues. In

contrast to representational drama, Readers Theatre focuses on the audience rather than the interaction among the readers. The exchange among the participants is directed toward the audience. This is called off-stage focus. Acting is mainly done with the voice, creating settings, emotions, and

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characters in the minds of the audience, who participate via their imagination. Readers Theatre seeks to communicate a story so well that the listeners step in and become a part of the action. There are no rigid requirements for writing or presenting Readers Theatre, but there are some common characteristics:

- Two or more readers are used.
- Sentences are usually short (this will vary with the nature of the material).
- Sentences are broken up into shorter phrases, sometimes just one word.
- Phrases and words are repeated and become predictable.
- Standard punctuation is used.
- Minimal staging, costuming, and props are needed.

Following are brief summaries of experiences that I have observed in using Readers Theatre. The examples illustrate its use in primary and middle school, resource classroom, high school, college, and seminars. Due to the lack of space only a few examples and parts of scripts are given.

Fifth-Grade Social Studies

The students had been studying maps and compasses. On an upcoming field day they would put their skills to use at a park. All morning the students studied maps and compasses, ran orienteering courses, and played in the woods and about the duck pond. At two o'clock the teacher called them together for reading class. She arranged them in groups of four and gave them the Readers Theatre script, "Maps,"²² to read together. Each group of four students performed the reading using the top of a park bench as staging. No one fidgeted or groaned for the entire 45 minutes!

Reader 1: Maps tell us
 Reader 2: up from down,
 Reader 3: north from south,
 Reader 4: east from west.
 Reader 3: Maps tell us
 Reader 4: how far,

Reader 1: and seas,
 Reader 2: and sands,
 Reader 3: and pinnacles,
 Reader 4: and mire,
 Reader 2: and paths,
 Reader 1: and Heaven.
 Reader 3: Oh, pray, kind sir,

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Readers Theatre can be used in any classroom at virtually no expense.

Reader 1: do you have a map that shows
 Reader 4: the heights of fame,
 Reader 2: the sea of doubt,
 Reader 3: the depths of fear?

Special Education

Poor readers with behavioral problems were taken from their fourth- and fifth-grade classrooms and placed in a resource room. On this day the resource teacher and I had them reading for an hour and a half with no behavioral problems. In fact, the students asked to return to their classroom to read aloud for their "better-behaved" classmates! They performed the Readers Theatre script called "Caps."²³

Reader 1: This is a tale of a peddler,
 Reader 4: some monkeys
 Reader 2: and their monkey business.
 Reader 3: Once there was a peddler
 Reader 1: who sold caps.

Reader 2: He carried his caps
 Reader 3: on top of his head.
 Reader 4: He had on his head
 Reader 1: his own checked cap,
 Reader 3: then a bunch of gray caps,
 Reader 2: then a bunch of brown caps.

Reader 4: No caps!
 Reader 1: He looked in back of him.
 Reader 3: No caps.
 Reader 2: He looked behind the tree.
 Reader 1: No caps.
 Reader 4: He looked up into the tree
 Reader 1: and saw on every branch
 Reader 3: a monkey
 Reader 4: and on every monkey—
 All Readers: His caps.

Administrative Seminar

A seminar for school administrators discussed the characteristics of successful principals. Each of the three sessions began with participants reading from a Readers Theatre script describing various types of principals. The scripts were given to a small group the night before so they could practice the reading. The discussion, readings, and writing in-

cluded in the seminar were based on the concepts presented in the script. The following is part of one script, "The Principal."⁴

Narrator 1: Walt Walters
 Narrator 2: is having a fairly good school year.
 Narrator 1: He has been teaching for about . . .
 Narrator 2: about four years.

Principal: Is your son enjoying his classes here at Uptown High?
 Ms. Greymatter: Well, yes . . . I mean for the most part, yes.
 Principal: For the most part?
 Ms. Greymatter: That is what I have come to talk to you about.
 Principal: Oh.
 Ms. Greymatter: It is Mr. Walters' class.
 Principal: Is there a problem with Mr. Walters' class?
 Ms. Greymatter: My son says he never gets his papers returned.
 Principal: Really! Homework or tests?
 Ms. Greymatter: Both, I am afraid.
 Principal: That doesn't sound like Walt.

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Academy Bible Class

Academy students were studying how to make good choices in their senior Bible class. Instead of the usual lecture approach with minimal class participation, the teacher chose to perform a Readers Theatre script called "Choice."⁵ This particular script uses 13 readers. The class was divided into two groups. Each group spent 15 minutes reading the scripts as a group. Then each group presented their version of the reading to the other half of the class. This was followed by a discussion on choices. The students asked for more Readers Theatre scripts.

Reader 1: So God told them to stay together,
 All Chorus: but they didn't.
 Chorus 2: The first bad choice!
 Satan: Eve, come over here and have some fruit.

Chorus 3: That is the fruit
 Chorus 4: from the tree of knowledge of good and evil!
 Eve: No, God said not to eat of that tree.
 All Chorus: Good choice.
 Satan: Eve, eat and be like God.
 Chorus 3: Choose not to eat, Eve.
 Satan: You won't die.
 Chorus 2: He is lying to you, Eve; don't eat it.
 Satan: Look at me. Look at me! Am I dead?
 Reader 2: Eve took the fruit and ate it.
 All Chorus: Oh, no!
 Chorus 1: The second bad choice.
 Chorus 3: She chose to be bad.
 Reader 1: Eve felt none the worse for it
 Reader 2: but she must get back to Adam as God had said.
 Chorus 4: Good choice.
 Eve: Adam, eat this.

Science Class

Recently I gave a workshop for elementary teachers at the National Science Teachers Association Convention⁶ showing how Readers Theatre scripts can combine science teaching and literature.

Readers Theatre can also integrate science and reading. For a first-grade unit on animals, the teacher made transparencies of the scripts. The class read in unison from the projected scripts in response to the two readers. "Bears, Bears, Bears"⁷ is one example.

Reader 1: My name is _____.
 Reader 2: My name is _____.
 Reader 1: We need your help to sing this song.
 Reader 2: Let's sing a song of a bear, bear, bear.
 Audience: bear, bear, bear.
 Reader 2: He didn't have a thing.
 Reader 1: He didn't have a thing he could wear, wear, wear.
 Audience: wear, wear, wear.
 Reader 2: So—
 Reader 1: He growled,
 Audience: Grrrr!

Combining Reading and Bible Classes

Reading and Bible can be combined very nicely by casting the audience as a biblical character in Readers Theatre format. In the reading below the audience takes the part of the pearl and treasure of great price. They respond in unison to the two readers. "The Pearl,"⁸ calling for group responsive reading, has been used in school worships and church services.

Reader 2: The kingdom of heaven
Reader 1: is about a man selling
Reader 2: all he has to buy a pearl.
Audience: So—
Reader 1: You are the pearl.
Audience: I am the pearl?
Reader 2: You are the pearl of great price.
Audience: I am the pearl!
Reader 1: You are the pearl.
Reader 2: And you are the treasure.
Audience: I am the treasure?
Reader 2: You are the sought-after treasure.
Audience: I am the treasure!

American Literature

In an 11th-grade class, I approached American literature using Readers Theatre

Readers Theatre focuses on the audience rather than the interaction among the readers.

atre scripts from various periods of American history. Scripts were based on the writing of Jonathan Edwards, Abraham Lincoln, Patrick Henry, and Martin Luther King. Here are excerpts from "A Letter From a Birmingham Jail."⁹ Two students read King's response to three ministers from Atlanta. (The classroom also can be divided into three groups, with each group reading one of the ministers' parts.)

Minister 1: Why are you in Birmingham?
Minister 2: An outside agitator?
Minister 3: Are you there to cause trouble?
King 1: I am in Birmingham because justice is here—
King 2: Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages

King 1: to carry the thus said the Lord.
King 2: Just as the apostle Paul left Tarsus
King 1: to carry the gospel of Jesus Christ—
King 2: So—
King 1: I am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town of Atlanta.

* * *

Minister 1: Now is not the time to be an extremist.
Minister 2: Be content and wait.
Minister 3: Get rid of your discontent.
Minister 2: Discontent turns to extremism.
King 1: Was not Jesus an extremist for love?
King 2: "Love your enemies!"
King 1: Was not Amos an extremist for injustice?
King 2: "Let justice roll down like water!"
King 1: Was not Paul an extremist for the gospel?
King 2: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus."

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King 1: Was not Luther an
extremist for reform?
King 2: "Here I stand; I can
do no other."

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Students Write Their Own Scripts

After the students were taught to write scripts, they were assigned to produce Readers Theatre scripts from their choice of American literature. The best script was written by the poorest student! (Poorest by the traditional means of measurement.) She not only wrote it well but, along with two friends, did an excellent job of reading it.

To help elementary students write and think, I developed a Readers Theatre in which students must fill in the blanks and then read the script to the class. The following incomplete script from John 3:16 was given to several groups of four students in a multigrade classroom. Each group brought a different perspective and interpretation to the text, which then became the basis for discussion. This simple exercise could be used effectively with any type of literature.

Narrator 2: For God,
Interpreter 2: _____
Narrator 1: For God so loved the
world
Interpreter 1: _____
Narrator 2: that he gave his one
and only Son
Interpreter 2: _____
Interpreter 1: _____
Narrator 1: that whoever believes
Narrator 2: in him would not per-
ish—
Narrator 1: But—
Interpreter 2: _____
Interpreter 1: _____
Narrator 2: But have everlasting
life.
Interpreter 2: _____

Benefits of Readers Theatre

Here is a summary list of some benefits I have discovered from using Readers Theatre in classrooms.

- There is no problem getting students to read aloud.
- Poorer readers are often more expressive than better readers.
- Many students want to memorize the script for later performances.
- Students enjoy taking scripts home to read with siblings and parents.

- The students want to read the original work of literature.
- Many students are eager to read for non-school audiences.
- Students are eager to write scripts.
- Students listen while others read scripts.

Readers Theatre ties in well with a literature-based approach to reading, cooperative learning groups, and reading across the curriculum. It offers a novel way to encourage students to read and write.

Remedial Instruction

Reading instruction by the neurological impress method has proven very effective. Readers Theatre can be used as a basis for this technique, using either adults or peers to read along with the poorer reader. Having two persons read the same part does not diminish the effectiveness or interest in the readings.

Readers Theatre allows words to be emphasized and repeated without the monotony of the usual drill. Certain parts of speech can be used repeatedly throughout a script to introduce and reinforce concepts. The technique encourages students to listen to the interpretation of others.

Rather than using Readers Theatre explicitly to teach reading, many teachers use it to combine reading with other areas in the curriculum, such as Bible, social studies, and science. Reading becomes an integral part of school life when Readers Theatre is integrated into various settings. My experience indicates that teachers can use the readings even if they have virtually no background in drama.

Ellen White¹⁰ gives emphatic advice concerning the use of the voice. Readers Theatre can enhance effective communications with other human beings and with God.

The simplicity of Readers Theatre is what makes it so useful in the classroom. There is no costuming and very little

staging. The students learn to act primarily through the use of their voices. While gestures can accompany the readings, they are not necessary. Teachers can write their own scripts or purchase ready-made ones.¹¹ Teacher-written scripts have the advantage of being tailored to needs of the classroom. Scripts as well as suggestions for performance and writing can be found in books on Readers Theatre.¹²

As I talk to teachers who have used Readers Theatre, I find that their students are experiencing more enjoyment in reading, writing, and thinking. ☺

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Throughout this article the term *theatre* is used. This use is not to be confused with the use Ellen White made of it. The distinction will need to be made clear in certain areas of the world to avoid misunderstanding. *Theatre* is used in the professional literature to refer not to a physical place but a condition of the mind as the result of the reading. The beginnings of Readers Theatre can be traced to the early 1800s but did not surface again until the 1950s as an art form. During the period 1860 to 1915 Readers Theatre was not a part of instructional or entertainment genre.

2. Used with permission of the Scription Drama Company, Riverside, California 92515.

3. Esphys Slobodkina. Used with permission of the Scription Drama Company, Riverside, California 92515.

4. Used with permission of the Scription Drama Company, Riverside, California 92515.

5. *Ibid.*

6. National Science Teachers Association National Convention, Houston, Texas, March 1991.

7. Used with permission of the Scription Drama Company, Riverside, California 92515.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Martin Luther King. Used with permission of the Scription Drama Company, Riverside, California 92515.

10. Ellen G. White, *Adventist Home* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Assn., 1952), p. 343.

11. Readers Theatre Script Service, P. O. Box 178333, San Diego, CA 92117 U.S.A. (scripts and secular workshops available); Scription Drama Company, P. O. Box 1096, Riverside, CA 92515 U.S.A. (religious and secular scripts and workshops available).

12. G. Bennett, *Readers Theatre Comes to Church* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1972); L. I. Cogger and M. R. White, *Readers Theatre Handbook: A Dramatic Approach to Literature* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman & Co., 1973); R. A. Tanner, *Readers Theatre Fundamentals* (Caldwell, Idaho: Clark Publishing, 1987); G. L. Ratliff, *Beginning Readers Theatre: A Primer of Classroom Performance* (Urbana, Ill.: ERIC, 1981); K. H. Latrobe, C. Casey, L. A. Gamm, *Social Studies Readers Theatre for Young Adults* (Englewood, Calif.: Teachers Idea Press, 1991).