



## **A Brief Introduction to Readers Theater**

Readers Theater is a form of shared oral reading. Bernice Cullinan, noted authority in the field of reading, states that this approach “helps students to make connections between the new and the unknown” while it “interrelates all aspects of language learning. Readers Theater involves the whole class in reading skills, language appreciation, creativity, self-expression, and group cooperation. No previous theater experience is required to use this strategy, which is effective with both elementary and middle grade children. The selection of material is what makes the strategy age-appropriate and content-relevant.

A Readers Theater activity is not intended to be a performance like a play or skit. The purpose is to have all students participate actively, not just as members of an audience. However, Readers Theater scripts can certainly be presented to others.

Depending on your group or audience, the script can be handled several different ways. The simplest way is to select or prepare a script and the people to play the parts, distribute the script, and have them read their parts. They do not need to read the story ahead of time. You can highlight the various parts with colored highlighters on the scripts or have the readers do this so they will be able to follow the text more easily. One way to have all students actively involved is to divide the class into small groups and have each group read the script. With a short script/story, it can be instructive to have each group read the script, discuss its meaning, and develop some “twist” to their reading that feels appropriate given their discussion. These “twists” can be as simple as having the people who are not speaking turn away from the audience, having all the group members touch the person who is speaking, etc. (It is surprising how small changes can affect how listeners “hear the story.”) Two small groups can then present their readings to each other and discuss the differences in the two presentations.

If you want to present a script as a performance, you can have the readers read silently and practice a couple of times. While practicing they can suggest props or “mime actions” that might enhance the storytelling. It will help the audience know which character is speaking if you make large signs with the characters’ names to hang around each player’s neck. It is not necessary for readers to memorize their lines. The Readers Theater Institute suggests that black folders for the scripts makes them less obtrusive. High stools that swivel like piano stools are also a nice touch but not necessary.

If you have never created a script, you will find it helpful to read the text to be scripted aloud—perhaps several times—to “hear” different voices, things that should be read by different people. Use a pencil to write down a number when a different speaker should begin. Repeated lines are usually read by the entire “cast.” Then use colored highlighters to mark the different parts. The text can be retyped as a script or used as is.

Children as young as seven can learn to script a story after having some experience with the approach using prepared scripts.

To illustrate, consider the poem “The New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus (the poem inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty. Here is the poem:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin-cities frame.  
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she  
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me—  
I lift my lap beside the golden door!”

Here is one possible way (certainly not the definitive way) it could be turned into a Readers Theater script:

Narrator 1: Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles.

Narrator 2: From her beacon-hand  
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin-cities frame.

Narrator 3: “Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!”

Narrator 2: cries she  
With silent lips.

Narrator 3: “Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me—

Narrators 1, 2, and 3 together: I lift my lap beside the golden door!”

The Readers Theater activity should be followed with discussion of the story and the meanings students find there.