

# Readers Theatre Plus Comprehension and Word Study

*Chase Young, Faida Stokes, Timothy Rasinski*

Readers Theatre provides an opportunity for nonreaders, emergent readers, and proficient readers to get hooked into reading.

Before the turn of the century, Martinez, Roser, and Strecker (1998) told a story about five second graders whose reading identities were positively changed by Readers Theatre. It was a compelling article that likely influenced many educators to consider implementing Readers Theatre in their own classrooms. The improvements in students' affect toward and confidence in their reading were as impressive as the gains in reading achievement itself; one student reported, "I never thought I could be the star, but I was the best reader today!" A second noted, "Readers theater is the funnest reading I ever did before" (p. 333). Rinehart (1999) described how Readers Theatre could be used to support students who struggled severely with reading, providing an incentive to explore the use of the activity with various student populations. A few years later, Worthy and Prater (2002) reported a similar phenomenon where students' reading motivation increased as a result of participating in Readers Theatre. The following year, an entire classroom of students engaged in Readers Theatre and saw up to two years' growth in reading ability, and many at-risk struggling readers ascended to grade-level reading (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004).

Noting its versatility, Flynn (2004) reported that Readers Theatre can easily be adapted for use in various curricular areas. Two studies published in 2009 provided more reasons to implement Readers Theatre. The first study reported remarkable gains in word recognition automaticity (reading rate) and expression after the teacher implemented Readers Theatre on a consistent and regular basis (Young & Rasinski, 2009). The second study reported an increase in expressive reading, namely, expression/volume and pace; in addition, the researchers found through student interviews that students' reading motivation and their confidence had both increased (Clark, Morrison, & Wilcox, 2009). Vasinda and McLeod (2011) investigated the integration of technology (podcasting) with Readers Theatre and

reported gains in overall reading achievement over a year for struggling readers in a 10-week implementation. Moreover, they noted that the authentic performance aspect of Readers Theatre challenged students to read with meaningful expression.

Researchers and educators have agreed with Tyler and Chard's (2000) description of the natural link between repeated readings and Readers Theatre. The activity builds on the well-established method of repeated readings (Mercer, Campbell, Miller, Mercer, & Lane, 2000; Samuels, 1979; Vadasy & Sanders, 2008) and integrates authenticity by providing a real purpose for repeated readings: rehearsal for a performance (Young & Nageldinger, 2014). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that a multitude of studies have reported increases in motivation and confidence, mostly because students rehearse to the point of proficiency, stand alongside their peers, and read aloud with confidence and competence. Thus, students who may struggle can achieve success in the context of Readers Theatre (Rinehart, 1999; Young & Rasinski, 2009).

## A New Approach to Readers Theatre

Our previous framework focused mainly on aspects of reading fluency, namely, word recognition accuracy, automaticity, and prosody (see Young & Rasinski, 2009). Because of the great benefits of Readers

*Chase Young* is an associate professor in the Department of Language, Literacy, and Special Populations at Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX, USA; e-mail chaseyoung@shsu.edu.

*Faida Stokes* is a doctoral student in literacy at Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX, USA; e-mail fas011@shsu.edu.

*Timothy Rasinski* is a professor of literacy education at Kent State University, OH, USA; e-mail trasin@kent.edu.

Theatre, we would like to offer yet another possible week-long framework that teachers can use to implement Readers Theatre with additional components that target reading comprehension and word study. Moreover, considering that the scripts are often challenging for many students, we feel that the release of responsibility could be more gradual. With research in mind, our revised format is summarized in Table 1, followed by research-based justifications for the modifications.

## Monday

Previously developed Readers Theatre formats placed the responsibility for reading on the student relatively quickly in the instructional protocols. While developing this model, we considered Pearson and Gallagher's (1983) notion of gradual release. To that end, at the start or introduction to the play in this format, the teacher is solely responsible for the reading and students only listen. A recent meta-analysis (Lee & Yoon, 2017) indicated that repeated readings typically rendered larger effects on students' word rec-

ognition automaticity when students first listened to the text read aloud. This initial read-aloud serves the students in several ways. First, the teacher models proficient oral reading by reading aloud, a method that is enjoyable for students and also demonstrates fluent reading (Farrell, 1966). Second, it helps students comprehend the text. Having listened to the entire story, students have a better understanding of how to expressively read their parts. Essentially, the teacher read-aloud helps them prepare to engage in Readers Theatre in a meaningful way.

During the read-aloud of each script, we ask students to think carefully about the text and generate questions as we read. Teachers are encouraged to pause at predetermined points in the story and solicit questions. Others might prefer to have students raise their hands to signal to the teacher when they develop a question. Generating questions while reading is an effective strategy for boosting reading comprehension (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000). Given the strong connection between vocabulary and reading comprehension (Pressley, 2002), the teacher will discuss,

**Table 1**  
**Readers Theatre + Comprehension and Word Study Format**

Day	Building fluency with gradual release of responsibility	Comprehension	Word study
Monday	The teacher models texts to be performed on Friday. Students follow along and discuss the quality of the teacher's reading.	As a whole group, generate questions while reading the script.	Choose, discuss, and analyze unknown words. Add to the word wall.
Tuesday	Choral reading of script	Students choose their scripts, and the teacher helps students generate a summary of their respective scripts.	Choose, discuss, and analyze interesting words. Add to the word wall.
Wednesday	Small-group rehearsal; the teacher coaches.	Students assign parts and rehearse in their assigned groups. The teacher goes from one group to another to coach, give encouragement, and talk about the meaning of the script.	Choose, discuss, and analyze root words and/or affixes in words (if any). Add to the word wall.
Thursday	Practice: Dress rehearsal	The class does a run-through of the scripts and texts to be performed. Afterward, students retell the script in their own words to a partner.	Choose, discuss, and analyze content vocabulary (if any). Add to the word wall.
Friday	Grand performance: Students perform for an authentic and supportive audience of classmates, parents, and other visitors.	After the performance, students discuss what they liked most about their script and what could have been done to make the script even better.	Chorally read and discuss the word wall.

define, and add unknown words to the group's word wall as the word study component for this lesson.

## Tuesday

The following day, the students select their desired scripts. This process naturally reduces the whole class into smaller groups. In these small groups, the teacher relinquishes some responsibility to the students. Along with the teacher or a volunteer, each group engages in a choral reading, and thus students are supported by their peers and the teacher or volunteer while reading aloud. Reading in this manner is associated with increased reading fluency, as indicated in comprehensive reviews of fluency research (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003; NICHD, 2000). Although many variations of choral reading exist, it is simply defined as reading aloud in unison as a group (Vacca, Vacca, & Gove, 2000; Young & Rasinski, 2016). After a few choral readings, students are typically ready to assume more of the responsibility. It should be noted that the number of readings may vary by group, so it is up to the teacher to decide when to conclude. Still, research has indicated that four readings is optimal (Lee & Yoon, 2017). After the choral readings, groups generate summaries. Prior research has claimed that summarizing texts can help increase reading comprehension (Brown, Campione, & Day, 1981; Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991; NICHD, 2000).

Similar to the previous day, we choose (or harvest) words to put on the group's word wall. However, this time we focus on interesting words. We do this so students begin to think about how words might be considered interesting, develop their love for words, accelerate their vocabulary acquisition, and increase their vocabulary inventory (Rasinski, 2011).

## Wednesday

On the third day of this rotation, students work with their groups to select their parts and begin rehearsing their individual roles. On this day, with the help of their peers, students focus on accurate word reading and rehearse several times as they work toward automatic word recognition. This act of repeated reading is an effective way to increase students' reading automaticity; in other words, students begin to read effortlessly, swiftly, and accurately (Samuels, 1979). As students become more automatic, they can also focus more on reading comprehension (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974).

The comprehension focus here is completely dynamic. The teacher roves the classroom, meeting

with each group to discuss the meaning of the script, provide clarity, advise for prosody that reflects the meaning of the script, and influence motivation and purpose. We choose not to limit that conversation as it is based entirely on what the students need and the type of text they are reading. Accordingly, we encourage teachers to engage their students in discussions that require students to infer, predict, debate, make judgments, apply principles, and other sophisticated approaches to discuss texts and apprehend meaning (Almasi, O'Flahavan, & Arya, 2001; Young & Mohr, 2016). For example, a script might have an antihero in the story—a character who solves the problem but does it in a controversial manner. In that case, the teacher may want to explore that notion deeply with students and engage in a high-level discussion of ethics. We would love to offer more specific directions for this day regarding comprehension, but we have confidence in the many talented teachers in the classroom who can engage their students in critical and high-level discussion about their scripts. Additionally, it would be futile to place boundaries at this juncture, given the breadth and depth of teachers, students, and scripts chosen for this activity.

Learning roots and affixes is a proven strategy for teaching vocabulary, which can lead to better comprehension (Baumann, Kame'enui, & Ash, 2003). In addition to the usual root words, we also encourage teachers to note Greek and Latin roots. Approximately 90% of academic words in English are derived from Latin and Greek. Moreover, the generative nature of Latin and Greek roots in English means that one root can lend itself to learning multiple English words. For example, we can point out the many words that are based on the Latin root *man*, which means hand: *manuscript*, *manual*, *maneuver*, or *emancipate*. In this way, students learn one root which helps define multiple words (Rasinski, Padak, Newton, & Newton, 2008).

## Thursday

The following day, the students have a dress rehearsal, which essentially means students practice reading expressively and coach each other as necessary. Note the gradual release of responsibility, as this is students' fourth day of interaction with this script. We have known for decades that students who read with appropriate expression are typically better comprehenders (Goodman, 1964). Recent research has claimed that students in primary grades who

read with adultlike expression are more likely to be proficient readers in intermediate grades (Miller & Schwanenflugel, 2008). Therefore, teachers and students often mention the author's intended meaning of a text or script when coaching each other's reading expression. This helps readers match their expressive reading with the actual meaning of the text.

After the dress rehearsal, the students choose a partner from a different group and retell their script in their own words, making sure to include the necessary elements of a good retelling, such as using proper nouns and telling the events in order. This process requires students to think about important story elements and recount main ideas chronologically, which is associated with increased reading comprehension (NICHD, 2000).

If applicable, the students and teacher add content area vocabulary to the word wall. This will be especially helpful if the students are reading a nonfiction script. However, there are often content area words present in fiction; for example, if the main character is the captain of a ship, there might be several nautical terms, which could be added to the group's word wall. It is imperative that students build their content vocabulary to aid in reading comprehension (Blachowicz, Fisher, Ogle, & Watts Taffe, 2013; Nelson-Herber, 1986).

### Friday

The final day of this approach to Readers Theatre is the grand performance, when students perform their assigned script for an authentic and supportive audience. This is an ideal time to invite parents, other classes, administrators, and anyone willing to cheer for the students; after all, the performance was the purpose behind the extensive practice, arguably a motivating factor for the students (Rasinski, 2010; Young & Nageldinger, 2014). After each group performs, discuss what students liked about the performances and about the scripts. Further, engage the students in a discussion about the quality of the texts, and examine how they could have been made even better. In terms of literature processes, our conversation requires students to evaluate texts and hypothesize how changes could have enhanced their entertainment value; both are considered high-level skills (Costa & Kallick, 2000). Groups also present their word walls and share the definitions of the previously unknown vocabulary, interesting words, content area terms, and roots or affixes.

### TAKE ACTION!

1. Select scripts for your students.
2. Use the five-day format in Table 1.
3. Have a grand performance!
4. Repeat weekly.

### Conclusion

We recently implemented this framework at Incarnate Word Academy, and teachers loved it. One teacher said, "I thought it was great. I can see how you can incorporate any sort of literature study. I love how you can space it out throughout the week. I am definitely going to use it in my classroom." Another simply stated, "It was great for us and the students." Essentially, that is our goal: to provide something great for teachers and students. We think the engagement factor and the increased focus on comprehension and word study make this approach to Readers Theatre a viable option for teachers.

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