

# All the World's a Stage:

## Using Readers Theater to Teach History and Develop Reading Fluency



Grades 4–10

Using AIT Products

- *Front Row Center*, program 5, “From Page to Performance: ‘Ain’t Got Long to Stay Here’”
- *Heroes Read*, program 18, “One Fine Day: A Radio Play”
- *Inventing Flight*, program 2, “Wright Time, Wright Place”
- *Retro News*, program 3, “The History of Aviation”

### Overview

Why teach fluency to older students? Because non-fluent readers are busy concentrating on decoding words, they lose focus on what the text means. Consequently, fluency plays a major role in how well students understand science and social studies information. It is vital that all students become fluent readers so that they can understand the vast amount of expository information they encounter beginning with third grade.

A popular strategy for building fluency today is the Readers Theater (RT). In RT, students “perform” a reading of a book-based script, rereading or “rehearsing” together several times before a

final performance in front of an audience.

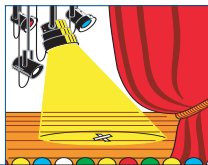
Without sets, props, costumes, or memorization, students have the opportunity to perform within a safe environment that makes learning fun. And as they rehearse, students learn how the voice can be used to project meaning, which not only improves their reading skills but also increases their comprehension of the material. Although RT developed its niche in elementary language arts classes, it can be used as a powerful learning tool for content area classes as well, and students as old as high school can benefit from the experience.

In this lesson students will create and perform a script within a Readers Theater to develop deep understanding of an historical event from their

social studies curriculum. The suggestions written here are built around an American history topic example—the Wright Brothers’ first flight—but can be easily adapted for any topic or time period that suits your needs. All activities suggested—regardless of historical topic or grade level—align to the following national language arts and social studies standards:

- **Standards for the English Language Arts<sup>1</sup>**

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).



“I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.”

—Confucius

4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

- **National Standards for History<sup>2</sup>: Standards in Historical Thinking**

- \* Standard 2: The student comprehends a variety of historical sources:

- E. Read historical narratives imaginatively, taking into account what the narrative reveals of the humanity of the individuals and groups involved—their probable values, outlook, motives, hopes, fears, strengths, and weaknesses.

- **NCSS Curriculum Standards for the Social Studies<sup>3</sup>:**

- \* II Time, Continuity & Change: Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the ways human beings view themselves in and over time.

- e. Develop critical sensitivities such as empathy and skepticism regarding attitudes, values, and behaviors of people in different historical contexts.

<sup>1</sup> 1996. Standards for the English Language Arts. Urbana, IL: The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). Found at: [www.ncte.org/about/over/standards/110846.htm](http://www.ncte.org/about/over/standards/110846.htm)

<sup>2</sup> 1996. National Standards for History Basic Education. Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools. Found at <http://nchs.ucla.edu/standards/>

<sup>3</sup> 1994. Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies. Washington, D.C.: Task Force of the National Council for the Social Studies. Found at [www.socialstudies.org/standards/](http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/)

## Objectives

- Understand the characteristics of Readers Theater and work in cooperative groups to create an RT script from a narrative historical account or an excerpt from historical fiction.
- Demonstrate proficiency in oral reading fluency (including oral expression, phrasing, reading rate, and accuracy) within a Readers Theater experience.
- (Optional, with Extension Activity) Comprehend grade level historical topics, responding to essential questions about enduring themes of history, the motivations of key characters in an historical era, and concepts of time, continuity, and change.

## Vocabulary

accuracy	monologue
dialogue	narrator
dramatic	oral expression
expository paragraph	phrasing
fluency	Readers Theater (RT)
historical fiction	reading rate
intonation	

## Preparation

Before beginning this lesson, decide how much input you wish to give students in the reading material selection process. RT lends itself to different levels of participation. Read through the following and decide which options will work best with the topic you are studying in social studies and the ages and abilities of your students.

**Option 1:** You select a work of historical fiction you want the class to read and study as a group. If you always assign *Johnny Tremain* or *The Iliad* or *A Tale of Two Cities* in your history class, those would make good options. You might assign one chapter or selection of the book to each group

and have them work to adapt the text into script format. NOTE: For the purposes of this lesson plan, a book by Elizabeth Van Steenwyk, dealing with the Wright brothers' first flight, will be used. This is a short picture book, without chapters. Groups would all perform the entire story for a book like this one. See the materials list for more information.

**Option 2:** Allow groups to select an historical novel or narrative on their own (with the teacher's approval). This option may take more time but students are more likely to become engaged with the story if they are allowed to select it themselves.

**Option 3:** Allow groups to create their own historical fiction story in script form from any historical event in the time period you are studying. Again, this will be more time consuming and take quite a bit more work.

## Materials Needed

- AIT video *Front Row Center* "From Page to Performance: 'Ain't Got Long to Stay Here'" — CUE the tape to approximate time code 4:32 (about 4 minutes in total length)
- AIT video *Heroes Read*, "One Fine Day: A Radio Play" — CUE the tape to approximate time code 3:20 (the first viewing about 5 minutes in total length; later you will show 14 minutes).
- Copies of the worksheet **Oral Reading with Expression** (one for each student in the class).
- AIT video *Inventing Flight*, program 2, "Wright Time, Wright Place" — CUE the tape to approximate time code 05:00 (less than 2 minutes in total length).
- AIT video *Retro News*, "The History of Aviation" — CUE the tape to approximate time code 0:31 (about 1.5 minutes in total length).

- Copies of the worksheet **Turning Descriptive Paragraphs into Narrators' Monologues** (one for each student in the class).
- Optional: If you choose to assign a specific work of historical fiction, you should gather classroom copies ahead of time (at least one book for each group of 5–6 students). NOTE: The example used in this lesson plan is for the book *One Fine Day: A Radio Play*, by Elizabeth Van Steenwyk—see Resources for details.

### Planning Notes

The Internet is a rich source of tips and strategies for making the most of RT. There are also many books written on the subject. Following are some suggestions that you might find useful.

- Review Aaron Shepard's "RT Tips: A Guide to Readers Theatre," which provides tips on staging, scripting, and reading. During Day Two, use the tips that will help students in your grade level get the most from script writing and performing RT. Found at [www.aaronsherp.com/rt/Tips.html](http://www.aaronsherp.com/rt/Tips.html).
- Consider binding the students' scripts inside colored folders that students can hold easily when standing in front of the audience—one color for each group or vary the colors for narrators, main characters, support characters, and so on. Printing the characters' names in bold font on the outside of the folders will help the audience keep track of the dialogues.
- One of the video examples demonstrates how RT can be adapted for a radio play. If you choose to extend your RT production in this way, you may wish to gather some sound effects materials. Suggestions for creating sound effects can be found in the teacher guide for *Heroes Read*, "One Fine Day: A Radio Play." (The materials list from that guide has been reproduced in the Appendix at the end of this lesson.)

### Time

This project will take about three 45-minute class periods, in addition to homework, rehearsal time, and student performances.

NOTE: The activities describe only in-class lessons and discussions and may not immediately follow each other. The scheduling of activities will depend on the ages of the students and the amount of time you wish to give them for group work performed outside class, including collaboration, script writing, and oral reading rehearsals.

## Procedure—Day 1

### Introduce Topic: Comparing Stage to Radio Plays

Explain that students are going to be creating and performing a script about the current topic being studied in their history classes. They will be working in small groups to design their own scripts and rehearse their performances, and each student in the class will have a speaking part to perform. They will be performing their creations before a live audience. (Decide ahead of time if you want the performances to be conducted only in front of the rest of this class or before a larger audience.)

### Pre-Viewing Activity

Begin a quick brainstorming session by asking students to describe what they know about the characteristics of theater, listing all suggested ideas on the board or chart paper. Spend about 30–45 seconds on the activity, or stop when ideas are exhausted. The session should result in ideas such as "costumes," "stage," "speaking parts," "props," "stage makeup," and so on.

### Video

Prepare students for watching the first two AIT videos, from *Front Row Center* and *Heroes Read*, by explaining that you want them to notice the different characteristics of theater in the two videos. In the first clip students will watch part

of a scene from a play written about the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s point of view.

Show students the four-minute clip from *Front Row Center*, "From Page to Performance: 'Ain't Got Long to Stay Here,'" beginning at approximate time code 04:32, as the host begins, "You've taken his life and created a play . . ." STOP the video at approximate time code 08:30, when the screen goes to black after the scene. (NOTE: This scene portrays racial conflict and derogatory language common in the American South during the Civil Rights Movement. Teachers should preview the clip before deciding to show it to students.)

The second clip shows part of a play performed by fifth-grade students from a story of the Wright brothers' first flight. Show students a portion of *Heroes Read*, "One Fine Day: A Radio Play," beginning at approximate time code 03:20, with the onscreen image of a book illustration and as the narrator begins, "Now, let's go to the beach of Kitty Hawk, North Carolina . . ." STOP the video at approximate time code 05:00, after the reader portraying Wilbur Wright says, "You'll get a chance to do both before the day is out, Orville. I'm sure of it."

### Class Discussion: What Is Readers Theater?

Lead a discussion about the differences in the two play formats demonstrated in the video clips. Ask students to describe all of the ways the two formats are similar and how they are different. (Encourage them to notice that the first group of performers memorized their lines while the second group read openly from scripts.) Now write the words "Readers Theater (RT)" on the board or chart paper and explain that Readers Theater is more like a radio play than a stage play, and even the simplified costumes and sound effects aren't necessary (although they are permissible). Add the following definition for RT to the board or simply read it to the class:

"Readers Theater is minimal theater in support of literature and reading. There are many styles of RT, but nearly all share these features:

- Narration serves as the framework of dramatic presentation.
- No full stage sets. If used at all, sets are simple and suggestive.
- No full costumes. If used at all, costumes are partial and suggestive, or neutral and uniform.
- No full memorization. Scripts are used openly in performance."<sup>4</sup>

Explain that the word "Readers" in the title demonstrates how important the book is to this type of performance. In RT, performers use their voices to show meaning, so the reading requires a lot of rehearsal before it is performed before an audience. Repeated readings are very important, and using verbal expression is vital to helping the audience gain meaning from the text. Discuss some of the instances when readers demonstrated expression with their readings.

### Homework

Hand out copies of the worksheet **Oral Reading with Expression** and instruct students to practice reading the story excerpts several times before the next class period. They will "perform" the readings in small groups in the next class period. NOTE: Teachers of fourth- or fifth-grade students may choose to omit the final excerpt from *A Tale of Two Cities*, if it's beyond their students' comprehension.

<sup>4</sup> Definitions for Readers Theater come from Aaron Shepard's RT Page. See Resources for more information. This description was found at [www.aaronshp.com/rt/whatis.html](http://www.aaronshp.com/rt/whatis.html) on December 10, 2007.

## Procedure—Day 2

### Review/Reflection

Divide the class into small groups and have them spend about 10 minutes reading the passages from the homework assignment aloud to each other. NOTE: If your students did item number three from *A Tale of Two Cities*, ask that the listeners guess the emotion or meaning of the passage after each expressive reading.

Ask volunteers to read a few of the passages aloud to the class and discuss how the reader's oral expression (including the words in the sentence he or she chooses to stress) can affect the meaning of a passage.

### Introduce New Topic: Converting Narrative Text into RT Scripts

Lead a brief discussion with students about the differences between a story and a script. If you have examples of a story that is also in script form, pass copies around for students to look at the difference. Direct their attention to the descriptive information about setting and characters' actions. Remind the class that the job of an RT scriptwriter is to create an auditory experience that allows listeners to imagine the setting and action of a story without listening to long paragraphs describing them.

### Video

Prepare students for watching two AIT videos from the series *Inventing Flight* and *Retro News* by explaining that they will see how RT takes descriptive or expository text and turns it into a dramatic reading with several different voices to enliven the experience and deepen understanding. Begin the first clip, *Inventing Flight* "Wright Time, Wright Place," at approximate time code 05:00, at the black screen before the narrator begins, "But in many ways, Orville and Wilbur . . ."; and STOP at approximate time code 06:45, after the speaker says, ". . . and they took real delight in that."

Then show students the clip from *Retro News* "The History of Aviation," beginning at time code 00:31 as the news program begins, and stopping at approximate time code 02:02, after the Wright brothers' story ends.

Ask students to think about what they learned about the Wright brothers in those two clips, and how the format is different from a radio play like the excerpt from *Heroes Read* "One Fine Day: A Radio Play" that they saw on Day One.

### Class Discussion

Write on the board or chart paper or project the following two examples:

1. a. "Whoever has made a voyage up the Hudson must remember the Kaatskill mountains. They are a dismembered branch of the great Appalachian family, and are seen away to the west of the river, swelling up to a noble height, and lording it over the surrounding country. Every change of season, every change of weather, indeed every hour of the day, produces some change in the magical hues and shapes of these mountains, and they are regarded by all the good wives, far and near, as perfect barometers. When the weather is fair and settled, they are clothed in blue and purple, and print their bold outlines on the clear evening sky; but sometimes, when the rest of the landscape is cloudless, they will gather a hood of gray vapors about their summits, which, in the last rays of the setting sun, will glow and light up like a crown of glory." (from *Rip Van Winkle*, by Washington Irving, published in 1819. Historical setting: the years immediately before and after the American Revolutionary War [1770s–1790s])
- b. Narrator 1: If you have ever made a voyage up the Hudson River, you must remember the Catskill Mountains. They are part of the great Appalachian Mountain chain and are

seen away to the west of the river, rising to a noble height and lording it over the surrounding country.

Narrator 2: Every change of season, every change of weather, indeed every hour of the day, produces some change in the way these mountains look, and they are regarded by all good wives and mothers in the surrounding villages as perfect weather forecasters.

Narrator 1: When the weather is fair and mild, the Catskill Mountains are blue and purple. But sometimes, when the rest of the sky is cloudless, they appear to have a hood of gray fog around their peaks, which, in the last rays of the setting sun, will glow and light up like a crown.

Narrator 2: That's when the women of the nearby villages lock their windows tight and pull out their children's warmest clothes.

2. a. (EXCITEDLY) Orville, can you hear me?  
You're flying!
- b. (ANGRILY) Orville, can you hear me? You're flying!

If possible, project Aaron Shepard's RT site and read as a group the "Tips on Scripting" (found at [www.aaronshep.com/rt/Tips1.html](http://www.aaronshep.com/rt/Tips1.html)). (If projection isn't possible you may want to print the tips and duplicate them for the class.) Discuss the following questions before sending students to their groups for scriptwriting work.

1. How might you use the narrator to describe the setting and movement of the story? Look at Example 1 on the board—what was changed when this *expository paragraph* became a two-part narrator *monologue*? What was deleted?

2. The Web site describes six possible ways to handle the narrator's role. Which do you think would work best for your group and story? What do you like best about that choice? How will you reach consensus if the members of your group don't agree?
3. How can you use the script to help a reader insert the right amount of expression or feeling into a line of dialogue? Look at example 2, taken from the homework assignment. How do the two descriptions change how the line is read? (You might want to ask volunteers to read the lines using the different emotions suggested.)
4. You will be working in groups of five or six students. What might you do if you don't have enough characters in your story for speaking roles? What would you do if the story has too many characters?

### Group Work Assignment

Students will be working in small groups to create and perform an RT script for the historical period you are currently studying. Assign groups of five or six students. NOTE: If you choose to allow students to select their own story for script adaptation, you might assign each group a particular topic or allow each group to choose a topic.

If time remains in this class period you might allow groups to begin creating their RT scripts. If you have preselected an historical novel, pass out copies of the book and assign the groups to read the entire book (if it is a short story such as *One Fine Day: A Radio Play*) or a particular chapter or section at this time.

### Homework

Pass out copies of the worksheet **Turning Descriptive Paragraphs into Narrators' Monologues**, and have students rewrite the expository paragraph from *The Last of the Mohicans* for one or more RT narrators to read.

## Procedure—Day 3

### Review/Reflection

Have volunteers take turns reading their narrator scripts from the homework assignment to the rest of the class. Discuss the best way to alter the text to make the descriptions interesting for a listening audience. Ask students to share their experiences collaborating on script writing so far. What problems or conflicts arose, and how did they resolve them?

### Introduce New Topic: Rehearsals, or Repeated Oral Reading

Remind students that the purpose of their RT script is to take a fictionalized account of a real event from history and perform it in a way that makes the event entertaining and interesting for a listening audience. It doesn't rely on props, costumes, stage sets, or memorizing, although some of any of these features are acceptable. The most important piece of the production is the text itself. Because of the importance of the text, students must perform their best oral reading of the script. Just as in regular theater, therefore, Readers Theater requires plenty of rehearsal time (in this case, repeated oral readings) to make sure all performers know their “parts.”

### Video

Return to the radio play students previewed in a short clip on Day One: *Heroes Read*, “One Fine Day: A Radio Play.” This time show the entire 13- to 14-minute performance, beginning at approximate time code 01:28, as the author says, “I think the experience of reading aloud . . .,” and STOP at time code 15:35. This clip begins with the author's reasons for writing this book in script format and includes the entire RT (or radio play) performance by a group of fifth-grade students. NOTE: You may choose to hold this video to show after all groups have performed their own Readers Theater productions.

### Group Work Assignment

Have groups continue their collaborative work to adapt their selected stories, chapters, or selections into RT scripts. Remind them that they need to assign parts for each person in the group to read, adjusting the story for fewer or additional roles. Direct them back to Aaron Shepard's RT site for more strategies and tips. The final script should be written on a computer, printed, and submitted to you for a grade, so remind students to follow Aaron Shepard's advice about the script format, font size, and so on.

NOTE: The writing of the script may take several days. Adjust the deadline according to the ages and abilities of your students. You may choose to monitor the writing within your classroom or assign this activity as homework.

When groups have finished their scripts, collect them and make duplicates so that every group member has a copy (retaining a copy for your grading purposes). At this time you might pass out the colored file folders and highlight markers discussed in Planning Notes. Have students use a highlighter to mark their roles in the script. It is a good idea for each student in the group to use a different color highlighter or for students with multiple roles to highlight each of their roles in a different color.

Provide ample time for the groups to practice oral reading of the scripts. Circulate around the room and give assistance as needed. Remind students that you will be assessing their oral reading fluency, including their expression, accuracy, reading rate, and phrasing of sentences.

## Assessment

### Individual Assessment

Individual assessments should reflect each student's oral reading fluency. You may wish to create a rubric similar to this one, which allows for evaluation of fluency on four criteria. Assign

	Excellent	Satisfactory	Needs Improvement	Total
oral expression				
phrasing				
reading rate				
accuracy				

points according to their performance in each criterion (e.g., 3 points for excellent, 1 point for needs improvement) and average the points for a final grade.

### Group Assessment

Schedule time for groups to perform their RT scripts, either for the rest of the class or for another audience. In addition to the script-writing task itself, group grades should reflect evidence of effective participation, collaboration, and consensus in the script writing, rehearsing, and performance of the story.

### Extension Activity: Essential Questions in History

The ultimate evidence that the RT experience was successful lies in how well students developed a deep understanding of the historical topic being studied. Extend the learning by having students write an essay dealing with one or more of the following key questions related to social studies concepts.

- How would you describe the attitudes, values, and behaviors of the main characters in the story you performed? How do their words and actions reveal the humanity of the individuals and groups involved—their probable values, outlook, motives, hopes, fears, strengths, and weaknesses? Support your conclusions with examples from the text.
- How might the events of the historical story you performed have played out today? How might modern characters behave differently?

What might remain the same? Explain your answers.

- What events from the story you performed impact something about the world today? How might things be different today if events had played out differently? Give an example.

### Resources

[www.aaronsherp.com/rt/](http://www.aaronsherp.com/rt/)

Aaron Shepard’s RT Page: Scripts and Tips for Readers Theater is a valuable resource for teachers interested in the Readers Theater instructional approach.

[www.scriptsforschools.com/](http://www.scriptsforschools.com/)

Scripts for Schools offers educational readers theater scripts catalogued by grade, subject/topic and theme for a minimal cost.

<http://havescripts.com/index.html>

Follow the “Readers Theater (Classroom)” link for free downloadable scripts, many of which develop an historical theme.

The *Heroes Read* video used in the examples in this lesson plan features the following work of historical fiction:

- Van Steenwyk, Elizabeth. *One Fine Day: A Radio Play*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003.

## Oral Reading with Expression

Practice reading the following lines, changing the way you read each to demonstrate how readers can use their voices to change the meaning of written passages. Each passage is taken from a published book of historical fiction.

1. Read the sentences following the instructions in parentheses and stressing the words in italics. (From *One Fine Day: A Radio Play*, by Elizabeth Van Steenwyk, published in 2003[(see Resources section for citation)]. Historical period of the story: First flight of the Wright brothers on December 17, 1903.)

What's *wrong*?

*What's* wrong?

But you're not *moving* very fast.

But you're not moving very *fast*.

But *you're* not moving very fast.

But you're not moving *very* fast.

(EXCITEDLY) *Orville*, can you hear me? You're flying!

(ANGRILY) Orville, can you *hear* me? *You're flying!*

2. Read the following passage twice, first to express defiance and then fear. (From *The Last of the Mohicans*, by James Fenimore Cooper, published in 1826. Historical period of the story: The French and Indian War, in 1757.)

"I will go no further!" cried Cora, stopping unexpectedly on a ledge of rock, that overhung a deep precipice, at no great distance from the summit of the mountain. "Kill me if thou wilt, detestable Huron; I will go no further."

3. Read the following passage in two ways, using your voice to change the meaning in any way you choose. (From *A Tale of Two Cities*, by Charles Dickens, published in 1859. Historical period of the story: The French Revolution 1793–94.)

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness . . . ."



# Appendix

## Radio Sound Effects

### SOUND EFFECTS OFTEN FOUND IN RADIO PLAYS

Arrow (bowshot, whizzing by, etc.)  
Audience sounds (applause, laughter, intermission noises, etc.)  
Birds (rustling wings, twittering, singing, etc.)  
Breaking glass  
Clock (or bomb) ticking  
Doors (opening, closing, slamming, creaking, etc.)  
Fire (lighting match, burning fuse, roaring fire, etc.)  
Footsteps (through leaves, in snow, on hard ground, up/down stairs, with high heels, etc.)  
Gunshot  
Horse hooves (walking, trotting, galloping, many horses, etc.)  
Insects  
Rain  
Tearing/ripping sounds (paper and material)  
Thunder  
Water (splashing, pouring, rushing, etc.)  
Wind (whistling, hard blowing, through trees, etc.)  
Window (opening, closing, slamming, etc.)

### EVERYDAY ITEMS USED TO MAKE SOUND EFFECTS

Aluminum cookie sheets  
Aluminum foil  
Aluminum (or other metal) pie/cake pans  
Balloons  
Birdseed  
Bottles (glass and plastic, large-mouth and small)  
Brooms (long or short bristles)  
Cans, all sizes and shapes  
Cardboard  
Clothes hangers (wire or plastic)  
Dishpans  
Dried beans or corn  
Newspapers, magazines, catalogs, phone books  
Old shoes  
Paper, recycled (including grocery sacks)  
Pasta (any kind), uncooked  
Pitchers and bowls, any material  
Plastic grocery bags  
Rubber bands  
Sand, gravel, rocks  
Sticks, logs, wooden blocks of any size  
String or yarn  
Styrofoam®, any size or shape  
Wire