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Bringing Science to Life

WITH READERS THEATER

Melissa Stewart

As I was developing the curriculum guide for my nonfiction picture book *When Rain Falls* (Peachtree 2008), I wanted to include a fun activity that would bring the book's science concepts to life for young readers. I wracked my brain for ideas, but nothing seemed quite right. Then, as I was drifting off to sleep one night, two words suddenly popped into my mind—Readers Theater.

Readers Theater (RT) includes all the excitement of performing a play, but none of the hassles—no props to track down, no costumes to sew, no sets to build. Sometimes students memorize their lines, but more often they read directly from a script, using intonation, facial expressions, and gestures to create characters that transport the audience into the story.

Children are natural performers, and they love using their imaginations, so RT makes reading practice an adventure instead of a chore. As students read and listen to the same lines over and over, they gain mastery over the text, and studies show that the improvements in fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension carry over to new and unpracticed texts.

Do Nonfiction and RT Mix?

Could I really adapt my nonfiction picture book text into an RT script? There was only one way to find out. I spent the next few weeks reading every RT script I could find. I also read books and websites with information about writing and performing RT. But I found no mention of nonfiction.

Still, I was sure that students would embrace nonfiction-based RT. I could clearly envision them taking on the roles of the sun, the moon, and the planets, or pretending to be cells inside the human body. And since kids love animals, I thought scripts with animal characters would be an ideal way to integrate learning and literacy.

During school visits, I've seen firsthand that when a child takes on the role of an animal character, he or she feels an immediate connection to that creature. While pretending to be a slithering snake or a little ladybug, students suddenly see the world from that animal's point of view. And in the process, they gain a deeper understanding of the creature's behaviors and lifestyle, as well as its place in its environment.

Now, I was committed to creating an RT script based on my picture book. But I wasn't sure how to get started. That's when I had the good fortune of meeting Toni Buzzeo at a writer's retreat. Besides being an award-winning children's author, Toni is a smart generous person who worked for many years as a school librarian in Maine. She is also the author of *Read! Perform! Learn! 10 Reader's Theater Programs for Literacy Enhancement* (Upstart Books 2006).

Toni assured me that my picture book was perfect for RT and even helped me write the first few lines. After that, the script composed itself in my mind faster than I could type the words.

Choosing Animal Books for RT

When I began sharing the script with teachers, school librarians, and media specialists, I was delighted by their enthusiasm. They immediately saw the benefits of combining science learning and RT. Some requested advice for creating additional scripts for elementary students. Others wanted to guide middle-school students in writing RT scripts that they could perform for younger children.

To answer these requests, I searched for other science-themed picture books that could be transformed into RT scripts and identified their common characteristics. I discovered that some science titles best suited for RT adaptation are shelved in your library's J591 section (animal behaviors). Books like *Leaving Home* by Sneed Collard (Houghton Mifflin 2002) and *Move!* by Steve Jenkins (Houghton Mifflin 2006) include information about many different animals. And each of those creatures can become a character in an RT script.

From Picture Book to Readers Theater

BEFORE

Here is the text from pages 6–11 of *Under the Snow* (Peachtree 2009).

Under the snow in a field...

...dozens of ladybugs pack themselves into a gap in an old stone wall.

Below them, a snake rests in a hole all its own.

Voles spend their days tunneling through the snow. When they find a young tree, they slowly strip off the layers of bark and eat them.

Below the ground, a chipmunk snoozes for a few days at a time. Between naps it snacks on the nuts and seeds stored in its burrow.

AFTER

Here is the RT script for the section of the book shown to the left. I converted the picture book text into roles for a chorus, a narrator who is a more advanced young reader (or an adult), and five animal characters. I simplified the text in some places, added fun sound effects, and incorporated a bit of humor. Each narrator speech introduces the animal that is about to speak, so struggling readers, as well as audience members, can follow the performance more easily.

CHORUS 1: Under the snow in a field...

NARRATOR: Ladybugs pack themselves into a hole in an old stone wall.

LADYBUG 1: I like spending the winter with all my friends. It's like having a giant slumber party!

LADYBUG 2: Not me. I wish I had a little elbow room.

NARRATOR: A snake rests inside another hole in the same wall.

SNAKE: I curl up tight and fall a-s-s-s-sleep.

NARRATOR: What does a vole do under the snow?

MOLE: I tunnel through the white, fluffy stuff all winter long.

NARRATOR: A chipmunk snoozes in an underground nest.

CHIPMUNK: *Chip! Chip! Churp! Churp!* Sometimes I wake up to snack on nuts and seeds.



Home at Last by April Pulley Sayre (Holt 1998), and my books *When Rain Falls* (Peachtree 2008) and *Under the Snow* (Peachtree 2009) feature lyrical language and repeated phrases that can further enhance RT scripts.

Many books in the J570s section (ecosystems) are also perfect for RT because they describe the roles various creatures play in their environment. Some especially good choices are *Frog in a Bog* by John Himmelman (Charlesbridge 2004) and *Rain, Rain, Rain Forest* by Brenda Z. Guiberson (Holt 2004).

Crafting a Script¹

Most RT scripts adapted from fiction titles have just a few parts, but scripts based on the books mentioned above can easily include a role for every student in the class. If you are working with a small group,

some animals in the book can be omitted, or students can perform multiple roles. If you have a large group, readers can share a role.

In addition to animal character roles, a script should include several narrators to introduce the animals and provide transitions between scenes. The best RT scripts also include a few choruses—lines spoken by many or all of the performers. They help students stay focused and foster camaraderie.

While narrator speeches are usually best suited for advanced readers, animal roles should vary in difficulty to accommodate children at various reading levels. For struggling or reluctant readers, create parts that consist of an animal sound and just a few simple words. For average readers, create text that is a bit more challenging.

Don't be afraid to modify the author's text to meet your needs. Focus on parts of the book that you think will resonate with your student population, and cut sections that seem too advanced. Try adding jokes, puns, or even animal sounds to make the readings more fun. Your ultimate goal is to create lively, engaging scripts that students look forward to practicing and performing.

Melissa Stewart is the award-winning author of more than one hundred science books for children; she speaks frequently at schools, libraries, and educator conferences. You can download her science-themed RT scripts at <http://melissa-stewart.com/sciclubhouse/teachhome/readers.html>.



- 1 Before a Readers Theater script based on a published book is shared with colleagues or performed outside your library or classroom, please request permission from the author. You can contact most authors via their websites or through their publishers.

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Knowledge Quest, Publication No. 483-860, is published five times per year by the American Association of School Librarian, American Library Association, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611-2795. Annual subscription price, \$50. Printed in U.S.A. with periodical class postage paid at (Ohio). As a nonprofit organization authorized to mail at special rates (DMM Section 424.12 only), the purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes have not changed during the preceding twelve months.

EXTENT AND NATURE OF CIRCULATION

("Average" figures denote the average number of copies printed each issue during the preceding twelve months; "actual" figures denote actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: May/June 2009 issue). Total number of copies printed average 8,800; actual 8,800. Sales through dealers, carriers, street vendors, and counter sales: none. Mail subscription: actual 8,535. Free distribution actual 200. Total distribution average 8,800; actual 8,800. Office use, leftover, unaccounted, spoiled after printing average 250; actual 265. Total: average/actual 8,800. Percentage paid: average 97.85; actual 97.87