

# Reader's Theater Exercise VII: Building Expressive Reading Skills

## Overview of Key Elements to Expressive Reading:

**BREATH** – Without proper breath control, vocal variety is nearly impossible. When students read aloud without prior instruction, they often take shallow breaths resulting in a weak, flat sounding voice. To read expressively, children need to breathe from their diaphragm or “stomach breathing.” To teach them proper breathing, have the students stand up and put their hands on their stomach. When they breathe in and down (not up or their shoulders will lift up), their stomachs will expand. Have your students practice “stomach breathing” until it feels natural.

To help students learn breath control, which impacts the kinds of sounds they make, give each child a 5 to 6 inch piece of string. They're to hold the string in front of their face about 2 inches from their mouth. Ask them to take a “stomach breath” and as they exhale count aloud slowly from one to ten. The thread should flicker with each spoken number. They most likely won't reach ten on their first attempt. With practice, the goal is to be able to say aloud more numbers before completing the exhalation.

**POSTURE** – Good posture supports “stomach breathing” and enhances the sound produced. The key to good posture is standing straight. The shoulders are centered over the spine with the head and neck relaxed and straight. Legs should also be relaxed and the knees not locked. Children have a tendency to either slouch (heads dropped, shoulder curled forward, back swayed back) or lean (bodies bent forward at the waist and muscles tight). Both postures restrict “stomach breathing.” Have your students practice proper posture while standing and reading aloud.

**VOCAL VARIETY:** volume, pitch, rate, duration, tone, articulation, and intonation or emphasis.

**Volume:** Volume refers to the loudness or softness of the voice sound such as whispers to indicate fear or shouts to convey happiness.

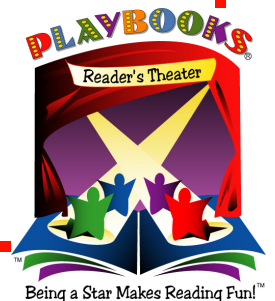
**Pitch:** Pitch signifies the highness and lowness of the voice sound such as a shrill to project surprise and a growl to show anger. Within a word, the pitch can also be changed. The voice can remain level, go down, or go up such as to indicate a question.

**Rate:** Rate applies to the speed at which a sentence or passage is delivered. Typically a higher pitch is delivered at a faster rate and a lower pitch requires a slower rate. A quick rate can be used to imply excitement, anxiety or fear. Pauses are a form of rate. They are periods of silence between words and phrases and serve to separate ideas or hold attention. Punctuation is a cue for pauses.

**Duration:** Duration refers to how quickly or slowly a word is said and where the accent is given to a particular word. Stretching out the sound of a word can imply deliberate playfulness or seriousness. Shortening the word sounds may indicate certainty or anger.

**Tone:** Tone conveys vocal quality and gives the emotional color to a voice such as fullness, nasal, breathy, screechy, whiny, solid. It mirrors the reader's thoughts and feelings. The primary cause of negative voice quality is tension, so controlling tension is critical to improving voice quality. When students read a role, they need to choose the tone that best expresses the ideas and emotions in the text being read aloud. To be convincing, they wouldn't read a strong male part with a soft whispery feminine tone.

**Articulation:** Articulation refers to how a student pronounces individual words and how clearly they create the speech sounds. If words are mumbled or suppressed, the reader will not be understood. Clear articulation requires accurate formation of the sound, use of proper breath control, and completely finishing the sound.



## Reader's Theater Exercise VII (continued)

**Inflection:** Inflection is where the reader puts emphasis on a word or phrase. With proper use, it can subtly change the meaning of a sentence.

**GESTURES** – Gestures let the student use their face, hands, and body to paint a picture about the words. They are an extension of the voice and help punctuate the feelings and ideas of the character. It's important that gestures support the reading exercise rather than become the focus.

**EYE CONTACT** - As students become more familiar with their character parts, they will be able to look up occasionally as they read. Eye contact with the audience helps engage the listener and holds their attention. Repeated oral reading is the key to students feeling comfortable with establishing brief eye contact.

### EXPRESSIVE READING ASSESSMENT

An integral part of the oral reading experience is receiving feedback. Using Reader's Theater in small groups allows students to receive constructive feedback from their peers in a safe environment. After students have read aloud their assigned character parts for the day's assignment, other members of the group give feedback on how the text was read using the expressive reading skills.

Students should be instructed on how to give proper feedback that encourages the reader to listen and want to reread their part. Their feedback to the reader should follow the P.Q.P. method (Polette, 2005): Praise, Question, Polish. For example, on a discussion about vocal variety, the students may state, "Your volume changes were great, especially when you read the sentence, "You bugs are all bad! Bug off, go away! You read the words 'Bug off' real loud. That caught my attention." (Praise) Next, the listeners ask questions about the reading, "Why did you raise your voice when you said the words 'good', 'nice' in these two sentences 'I am good! I am nice!'" (Question) Finally, the students might offer suggestions or revisions to the vocal variety skills used by the reader such as, "You might want to stretch out the word 'best' in the sentence, 'The bee is the b—e—s—t!' to make your point." (Polish) As students learn to give this type of feedback, they are developing critical listening skills. They are listening to how the meaning is conveyed and how to improve it.

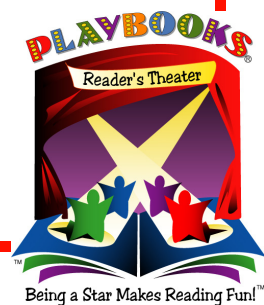
Evaluating reading fluency can be challenging, as it is often subjective. You can use the above skills to create a form to evaluate the expressive reading performance of each student. Each skill is a specific part of the evaluation form and is assigned a point value. The form is equitable, because it lets the students know precisely how they will be evaluated and it reduces the subjectivity.

To help students know how they are being evaluated, discuss the evaluation form before you start the Reader's Theater lesson. Make a poster of the oral reading skills and display it so the students are reminded of what they need to do when they read aloud and how they should listen to their peers read.

Reader's Theater is an excellent tool to help your students practice the required skills to read with expression. They will be fully engaged in the process and enjoy the experience. As your students master expressive reading, you will witness a significant improvement in their reading fluency and comprehension.

To consult past articles for more complete explanation and exercises on the various expressive reading skills, please visit the archive on our website at the following link:

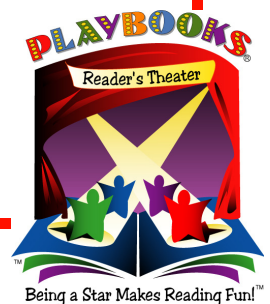
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## READER'S THEATER READING WITH EXPRESSION REMINDERS

### Remember to:

- ❑ Breathe deeply from the stomach
- ❑ Be relaxed
- ❑ Hold your head straight (not bent forward)
- ❑ Stand with your shoulders straight (not leaning forward or lifting up)
- ❑ Change your volume (loud and soft)
- ❑ Vary your pitch (high and low)
- ❑ Adjust your rate (speed up and slow down)
- ❑ Find places to pause (punctuation)
- ❑ Stretch out some words
- ❑ Use the best tone of voice (nasal, firm, whispery, somber, etc.)
- ❑ Emphasize key words
- ❑ Pronounce all words clearly
- ❑ Make facial expressions
- ❑ Use hand and body gestures
- ❑ Make some eye contact



## EXPRESSIVE READING EVALUATION FORM

Student Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Story Name \_\_\_\_\_ Character Part \_\_\_\_\_

**POINT VALUE:**    **2 = YES**  
                           **1 = SOMETIMES**  
                           **0 = NO**

SKILL	YES	SOMETIMES	NO	POINTS
Reads words in proper phrases				
Reads at smooth pace (not struggling)				
Reads words accurately (decoding)				
Misses few words				
Breathes from the stomach				
Has proper posture				
Changes the volume (loud and soft)				
Varies the pitch (high and low)				
Adjusts the rate (speeds up and slows down)				
Uses effective pauses (punctuation)				
Stretches out some vowel sounds				
Uses an appropriate tone of voice (firm, nasal, screechy, somber, high pitched, whispery, etc.)				
Emphasizes key words (inflection)				
Enunciates words clearly				
Makes facial expressions				
Uses hand and body gestures				
Makes some eye contact with audience				
<b>TOTAL POINTS</b>				

**COMMENTS:**

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