



# REACHING NEW HEIGHTS THROUGH READER'S THEATER

PRESENTED BY ZACHARY HAMBY

EMAIL: [zachary.hamby@gmail.com](mailto:zachary.hamby@gmail.com)

WEBSITE: [www.mythologyteacher.com](http://www.mythologyteacher.com)

## Biographical Information

Zachary “Zak” Hamby has only been a teacher for five years, but in this short time he has learned the educational value of Reader’s Theater. After being saddled with the burden of teaching a mythology course with an inadequate textbook, he developed a series of Reader’s Theater plays that, in essence, brought the stories to life for his students. Now he spends his time incorporating Reader’s Theater into the other courses he teaches—as well as flying halfway across the country to tell other teachers about his successes with this technique. His mythology materials have been published in the form of a textbook, *Mythology for Teens*, by Prufrock Press. His next book of mythology entitled *More Mythology for Teens* will be released in 2011. Even though publication has been exciting, his biggest accomplishment is still his ten-month-old son, Luke. Zak teaches and resides with his wife and son in the Ozark Mountains.

## Introduction

Not everyone likes Literature. For those of us who do, it’s a hard fact to swallow. But the truth is: some students will never be able to picture a story in their mind vividly enough to enjoy it. When *we* English teachers read a story, we can visualize it, we can hear the voice of each character, and we can imagine ourselves within the action. Some students—in fact, *many* students—lack this ability. Yet there is a way to bring Literature one more step closer to the real world: Reader’s Theater.

If you are looking for a way to motivate resistant readers, Reader’s Theater could be your secret weapon. Without realizing that they are actually doing so, students participate in a group learning experience. Many of my students (the majority of them upperclassmen) describe Reader’s Theater as “fun.” Any time high-school students make this statement it should be considered monumental. Yet Reader’s Theater is not simply a fluff activity. As the students read the written word, they hear the words both spoken and performed. This process can only improve their reading fluency through oral reinforcement and will most definitely increase their comprehension of the course material.

Reader’s Theater sessions create an open environment where students feel comfortable asking questions. I often hear questions such as “What does this word mean? Did I pronounce this correctly? Is this story connected to the other story that we read? Why did this character do this?” Some may argue that this inquisitiveness cannot be solely attributed to the Reader’s Theater approach, yet, in my experience, it does not occur as much when the students read silently or when I am the sole reader of the text. My theory is a simple one: by giving the students a role in their own education, the students have formed a personal connection to the text.

## Reader’s Theater

There are several different definitions or styles of Reader’s Theater—not to mention several different spellings. In theatrical terms, Reader’s Theater is a play without the “frills,” no costumes, no sets, no blocking. The players must use their voices to convey the necessary

drama, and the audience imagines the action. Furthermore, since the players are allowed to read directly from the script, there is no memorization of lines as in a traditional production.

In an educational setting Reader's Theater is similar. Students perform a script orally but often not physically. Most students are given time to perform many read-throughs of the script and are familiar with its content. Educators typically ask their students to stand at the front of the class to perform. Some also allow their students to supplement their oral readings with costumes or even physical action. As a side note, Reader's Theater is often confined to the elementary level of education and rarely makes an appearance on the secondary level.

I have my own personal version of Reader's Theater, which I consider to be more efficient and more high-school friendly. In my version I present the students with a script, and they are asked to interpret it cold turkey. No practice times. No read-throughs. Every student sits at his or her desk. I assign the various parts. We perform the script, then either quiz or write over its content, and discuss—all within a fifty-minute block.

This approach may sound more cut and dry, but I have found it to be very effective with the sophomore through senior students that I teach. Students of any age enjoy to be read to, and high-schoolers are no exception. Rather than the teacher reading the text for them, Reader's Theater puts the students in charge of their own education. They are given "roles" within the text, a part in the common goal of learning, and new sense of empowerment.

Reader's Theater allows certain students to perform for their classmates. In some situations acting out would result in a classroom disruption. With Reader's Theater "acting out" is exactly what the teacher desires. If a student can make a reading entertaining, through the use of a funny accent or personal wit, then they are furthering the goal of education by helping the teacher capture the students' interest. While Reader's Theater can showcase enthusiastic readers, it can also draw out the reluctant readers, who may suffer from a lack of confidence. Reader's Theater is a great way to give these readers confidence in their own abilities.

### **My Experiences with Reader's Theater: The Depths of Hades**

The faces of the souls of the Underworld could not have been more death-like. It was five years ago, but I remember it well. In a matter of weeks, I had gone from un-experienced student to full-time teacher. Smack dab in the midst of my student teaching experience, my cooperating teacher gave me some startling news. Because of a worsening medical condition, she would be leaving soon—then it would be all me. Even more startling: four long years of college had not prepared me for the subject matter I would be required to teach—two classes, one called *World Short Stories* and the other *Mythology*. I remembered plenty of short stories from my survey literature courses, but with mythology, I was drawing a blank. In my cobwebbed memory there stood a woman with snake-hair and a psychedelic image of a winged horse—but that was it. Not to worry though. I had *two whole weeks* to prepare. I needed to fill a whole semester with mythological learning.

As any competent educator would, I turned to my textbook for aid. At first things looked promising. The book had a classy cover—black with the aforementioned winged horse

on it. Bold gold letters tastefully titled it *Mythology*. Edith Hamilton—in the same lettering—was apparently the author. Yes, my judgment of the cover was encouraging, but what I found inside was anything but.

When I opened the text to read, I quickly realized I was doomed. Edith Hamilton had written her book in code. It was the same indecipherable language used by those who write literary criticism and/or owner manuals for electronic devices. Every sentence was a labyrinth, curving back in on itself, confusing the reader with many a subordinate clause and cutting him off completely from context with an outdated aphorism. If she wasn't randomly quoting Milton or Shakespeare, she was spending a paragraph differentiating between the poetic styles of Pindar and Apollonius. It was as if Edith Hamilton was annoyed at having been born in the twentieth century and was using her writing style as some kind of literary time travel. I knew if I could barely understand her language, my students were going to be even more lost than I was.

Not only was her language a barrier but also her intent. Hamilton had written *Mythology* in the years before Cliff's Notes, and her text was basically a glorified Cliff's Note on Greek mythology. For those readers who could not read Greek or Latin, she summarizes the Greco-Roman myths for their enjoyment. Yet enjoyment was almost nowhere to be found. In the process of summarization, the voices of the characters had been lost. The drama was missing. It was all "telling" instead of "showing." For me this posed yet another dilemma: Even if the students made their way through the complicated syntax, would they find something there they deemed worth learning?

Mythology was a junior-senior elective designed for average learners—the kind of class that was supposed to be entertaining and somewhat interesting. With Edith Hamilton tied around my neck, I was going down—and going down fast. It was at this point that the stupidly optimistic part of my brain cut in. "Maybe it won't be so bad," it said. "Don't underestimate your students." My ambitions renewed thanks to this still, small voice, and I laid Edith to the side, somehow sure that everything would turn out all right in the end.

Before I continue to tell how my tragic flaw of youthful optimism led to my ultimate downfall, I should take a minute to say a kind word about Edith Hamilton. In a time when interest in the classical writings of Greece and Rome was waning, Edith Hamilton revitalized this interest by writing several works that attempted to capture the creativity and majesty of Greco-Roman civilization. The creatively titled *Mythology* was one of the first books to take a comprehensive look at the Greco-Roman myths. The popularity of mythology today owes a great deal of debt to this book and its author. Fifty years after its publication it is still the predominant text used in mythology courses throughout the country. Though it was at one time, *Mythology* is unfortunately no longer on a high-school reading level. As I mentioned earlier, Hamilton's writing style with its ponderous vocabulary and Sphinx-worthy inscrutability further alienates any but the most intrepid of readers.

My first semester of teaching mythology was a disaster. If I hadn't been so idealistic and gung-ho, I would have probably given up. Instead the new teacher within me stood up and said, "No! I'm going to do this, and we're going to make it fun! After all Greek mythology is filled with all kinds of teenage interests: family murder, bestiality, incest, etc. It'll be just like watching MTV for them."

Utilizing every creative project idea under the sun, I threw myself into the class. Somehow I was going to make it work. We drew pictures, we read aloud, we watched related videos, wrote alternate endings to the stories—yet every time I kept coming up against the same brick wall: the text. It did not matter how enjoyable the activities were. Whenever we turned to the actual stories—cracking open that dreaded book—the life was sucked out of my students, and I was staring at their Underworld faces once again.

At last I resorted to giving lectures that summarized each and every story. Even that was better than actually reading them. One student, possibly sensing I was seconds away from cracking, made the comment, “I didn’t know mythology would be a bunch of notes. I thought it would be fun.” Here was a student who genuinely wanted to learn, and I was giving him nothing.

When I look back on that semester, I realize that I failed a whole batch of students. They came and went thinking that mythology was no fun, that it had no influence on the modern world, and definitely no relevance to their own lives. Perhaps the failure of that first experience would not have been so stark if a sudden success had not come along the next year.

## **The Heights of Olympus**

The second time through the class, I was determined to not repeat the mistakes of the past. There must be some way of avoiding the text—relating the stories without actually reading them. But then I thought, “Isn’t this supposed to be an English class? If we don’t actually read, can it be called English? What has this outdated text driven me to?”

When I looked into the stories, I could see excellent tales trapped behind stuffy prose. How could I get the students to see what I saw: that there *really was* a good story there? How could I set those stories free?

On a whim I decided to try my hand at rewriting one of the myths. I had dabbled in creative writing in college, so I was sure I could spin one of these tales better than Edith Hamilton had. I decided to give it a shot. The idea of dividing the story into parts struck me as a good one. Maybe that would foster more student involvement. Also, it would not be only my voice droning on for a whole hour. As I rewrote the myths, I made sure that the original story stayed intact and that the characters I created were congruent with the ones from Greek mythology. In the textbook Hamilton’s summarization had left them voiceless. I was simply giving them a voice. A few hours after beginning the process, I had created my first Reader’s Theater script.

At the time I had no idea that there was an actual term for this type of play, or that there was sound educational research behind reading aloud. Part of me was excited. The other part was skeptical. “These kids are high-schoolers,” I said to myself. “They’ll never go for this.” I looked at some of the elements I had included in my script: overly-dramatic dialogue, sound effects, cheesy jokes. What was I thinking? Since I had already spent the time and energy, I decided to give it a shot.

There are those grand moments in education when something clicks, and those moments are the reasons that teachers teach. My script clicked. It clicked quite well, in fact. The students loved reading aloud. They were thrilled beyond belief to not be reading silently or

taking notes or even watching a video. They performed better than I ever dreamed possible. They did funny voices. They laughed at the cheesy jokes. They inhabited the characters. They even did the sound effects. They became the voices of the characters.

As I looked around the room, I noticed something that was a rarity: my students were having fun. Not only that, but they were learning everything that Edith Hamilton could have offered them—and more. When the script was done, I encountered a barrage of questions: “Why did Zeus act like that to Hera? What were *insatiable loins*? Why did Aphrodite choose to marry Hephaestus? Did the Greeks have *any* respect for marriage?” Did my ears deceive me? Intelligent questions—questions about character motivation, vocabulary, and even historical context? I couldn’t believe it. I was also struck by another startling fact: they were asking about these characters as if they were real people. After the questioning then came the obligatory quiz over the subject matter. Result: nearly all the students scored 100%.

On that first day I didn’t realize the reason behind the script’s success. On further analysis I pinpointed it: the students were able to treat the characters as real people because real people had inhabited their role. Zeus was not some dusty god from 3,000 years ago. He was Joe in the second row doing a funny voice. Something had come from the abstract world of mythology and become real. And when something becomes “real,” it gains weight and relevance in the minds of the learners.

On top of all this, the class dynamic had changed. Before they were a group of isolated learners. If they had a question about the text, they were too bashful to ask it. Using the Reader’s Theater script, the students experienced the story at exactly the same time. They heard the questions of other students. And in this environment they were not afraid to ask their own. They also heard the pronunciations and intonations of other students, mentally correcting or reinforcing their own. The class had become more like a team—laughing and learning together.

After the success of that first script, I realized I had created some kind of teaching drug. I had just had an incredible teaching experience, one that I wanted to create over and over again. I wouldn’t and *couldn’t* go back to the old world of bland reading. So I didn’t.

The great moments of Greek mythology flew from my keyboard, and I created play after play. Despite my overweening enthusiasm, I knew that too much of a good thing could definitely be bad, so I chose stories that would spread out the read-aloud experience. We would still use Edith Hamilton in moderation. After all, a few vegetables make you enjoy the sweet stuff all the more.

Over the course of that semester, I discovered a new enthusiasm in the students and myself. They enjoyed learning, and I enjoyed teaching. I had students arguing over who would read which parts—an unbelievable sight for juniors and seniors. Laughter was a constant in the classroom. The students could write effectively about concepts such as Heroism, War, Love, and even National Identity, using the characters of mythology as their guides. As the Greeks would say, it was a golden age of learning.

## The Muses Make a Class Visit

While I had immediately noted the change in student retention and interest, I had not anticipated the effect that the scripts would have on the students' ability to write creatively about the characters of mythology. During the Trojan War unit, a unit I had recently infused with new Reader's Theater scripts, I asked my students to write a series of formula poems that captured either the essence of a certain character or the Trojan War as a whole. They could use one of three poetic formulas: haiku, cinquain, or tanka. The results were astounding. Students that had previously produced lackluster writing were suddenly creative, insightful, and ultimately good at poetry. Through the use of the scripts, the students had come to inhabit the characters, to understand them on a whole new level. Because of this, they were able to write about them in a new and moving way.

One student deftly captured the agony of a dying warrior with his haiku.

*It covers his face  
And trails down a river's way  
His blood, his last breath*

In her cinquain another student tapped into the despair that the Trojans must have felt when they saw the fall of their great leader, Hector.

*Daylight  
Neglects damp space.  
Anxious stares request hope,  
Looking to the fallen leader.  
Darkness*

Wit was now no stranger to their writing. One student saw the comedy in the nymph Thetis, the over-protective mother of Achilles, who attempts to render her famous baby boy invincible by dipping him in the River Styx. Unfortunately, she forgot to dip the heel by which she held him.

*"Thetis"*

*Lady of the Sea  
Who dips her child in greatness  
You have missed a spot*

Students who barely understood imagery were cranking out excellent images—images that showed a real connection to the story and its characters.

*Sweat gleams on his brow  
Dull, dry blood cakes his spear's edge  
Death comes from behind*

The final and most impressive example came from the most unlikely of poets, a student who had never shown any interest for anything but sports. Yet he produced an edgy and witty poem. He chose for his subject the cowardly Trojan prince Paris, who runs away from battle more often than he confronts it.

*"Paris"*

*Just like a weenie  
He has to be protected  
By a small Trojan*

In short, my students' writing had definitely improved.

Since the mythology scripts had worked so well for me, I decided to pursue publication. I sent them to a variety of publishers. With each submission I included a write-up of my own adventures with the plays. One publisher was kind enough to publish my materials—with a few additions, of course. They didn't want a collection of plays; they wanted a textbook featuring those plays. *Mythology for Teens* was the result.

It was around this time that I discovered the term *Reader's Theater*. Apparently, there was a whole area of drama devoted to this concept. Vocal acting with limited sets, costumes, and props was not a new idea. I was amazed.

As I began writing my textbook, I looked at the progression of events that had led me to this point. What would have happened if I had never tried something different? What if I had given up? What if I had let Edith Hamilton beat me? Now I was creating my own textbook—one that I could fill with my own particular brand of teaching. It was a dream come true.

And I owe it all to Edith.



## Did We Really Hit a Homer?

At the end of the course each year, I give my students a chance to comment on the class through an anonymous survey. One of the questions that I often pose is "Do you enjoy the use of Reader's Theater?" Below are some of their responses. Keep in mind that these are students who do not typically read for enjoyment. Many of them find reading silently frustrating. Note: I have allowed them to retain their own voice by not editing their spelling or grammatical errors.

"I prefer reading from a Reader's Theatre script because by using different people as different characters, it helps me visualize the story much easier rather than trying to keep them straight in my head."

"It gives the story more emotion."

"It can become quite historical."

"Reading aloud because I can comprehend it better. When I read silently I may have to re-read it a couple of times to actually understand."

"I understand them better as if they were in the room speaking."

"You get a feel for how the character's personality played out in 'real' life."

"It is much more interesting and it helps me tie a face to a person in the story."

"I prefer Reader's Theater because at least it has a few laughs and jokes other people bring out different perspectives of the characters. Plus it makes you remember them better."

"Because it is more interactive."

"Its like watching a play."

"It helps us learn and have fun at the same time, because we can actually be the characters."

"There is a lot more energy in the class."

"People are laughing at funny parts which means they're listening and paying attention. Its good, it gets the class involved and working together."

"Makes it easier to retain the information."

"The classroom dynamic is good because others might have the same questions or thoughts as you and as a class you can discuss what had happened."

"It makes the story seem real."

"I can see it all in my head."

"The characters are understood in a deeper way in the plays because we are the characters."

"They are involved in the story and have the ability to step into someone else's shoes."

"I think we discuss the story a lot more this way."

"It's like there actually alive."

Of course, reactions are not always favorable. Some students, who are excellent readers, sometimes find it frustrating to adapt their pace to the pace of others. Some students, who are naturally bashful, dislike reading in front of others. Yet, overall, these objections are minimal.

### **What about *Huck*?**

My experiences with mythology had presented a unique problem—but did the solution have to be an isolated success? When dealing with an inadequate text, Reader’s Theater had proved to be an excellent way to transform it. But what about when dealing with an adequate or even a revered text? Could Reader’s Theater aid in the understanding of such a work?

To experiment I decided to incorporate some Reader’s Theater into the other courses I taught. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is one of America’s finest novels, and the dialects found within beg to be read aloud. Therefore, I took one of my favorite portions of the novel, a conversation between Jim and Huck concerning “King Sollermun”, and broke it into speaking parts. For the first time, my students had the chance to give voice to Twain’s characters, to hear the comic interplay between them, and to visualize perhaps more fully what was transpiring in the scene. I repeated this process with several scenes from *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* as well as another required novel, *A Separate Peace*. I also discovered that Reader’s Theater can not only be applied to fiction but to non-fiction as well. Dividing his famous letter into lines, I asked the students to orally present Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” We found that King’s words, like Twain’s, gain even more life and power when spoken aloud.

### **Students Create Their Own Reader’s Theater Scripts**

Even though I had always been the one creating these scripts, I realized that my students would greatly benefit from writing some Reader’s Theater scripts of their own. They could go through the same process I had. First, they would read the source material, paying close attention to the details of the story. Secondly, they would map out the events of the story, deciding what should remain narration and what should be turned into dialogue. Thirdly, they would write the narration and dialogue in a way that they felt matched the source. Or they would choose to depart from the source and add their own style to the text. Fourthly, they would assign parts and act it out for their classmates.

I found this practice to be an excellent activity. The students enjoyed performing their own work and spent much more time than I expected on choosing just the right words and practicing their scripts. It was also satisfying to see that they understood the basics of Reader’s Theater and gained a deeper appreciation for the source material.

### **Other Educators and Experts Weigh In**

I found the Reader’s Theater technique to be successful, even without knowing why. As it turns out, there are many well-documented reasons why RT is such a powerful tool for engaging students from elementary to high school. Here follow some quotes from some of RT’s biggest proponents.

As children's book specialist, Instructor columnist, and RT advocate Judy Freeman states, "If you want to get your kids reading with comprehension, expression, fluency, and joy, there's nothing more effective than Readers Theatre" (qtd. in Prescott 2). "Students who were usually reluctant to express themselves orally blossomed in the Reader's Theater arena," says Rick Swallow, a Reader's Theater veteran (qtd. in Prescott 5). "RT is a hands-on approach that honors different modalities...honors those kids who need a different way of expressing themselves," says Linda Cornwell, educational consultant and former teacher (qtd. in Prescott). Violet J. Harris and Ann M. Trousdale also make an important statement: "For those students who do not function primarily according to their linguistic intelligence, watching a dramatic interpretation of a literary work provides ways of seeing into literature through means other than the medium of print alone" (11).

### **Benefits of Incorporating Reader's Theater into Your classroom**

- Oral reading can improve fluency.
- Oral reading can promote confidence in reading ability.
- Reader's Theater allows students to express themselves.
- Reader's Theater allows students to loosen up and have "fun."
- Reader's Theater often increases comprehension and retention.
- Reader's Theater breaks up the monotony of silent reading.
- Reader's Theater allows students to work on their oral reading skills.
- Reader's Theater is a great way to bring a story to "life."
- Reader's Theater is a quick and effective means of dramatizing a story.

### **Ways to Incorporate Reader's Theater into Your Classroom**

- Transform a scene from a fictional work into a Reader's Theater script
- Assign students the task of creating a Reader's Theater script from a fictional work
- Divide a poem into speaking parts and read it aloud
- Convert an entire short story into a Reader's Theater script
- Assign students the task of writing a Reader's Theater script that depicts a scene that they feel should have been a part of a fictional work
- Divide a speech into speaking parts and read it aloud
- Write an original Reader's Theater play for students to perform
- Assign students the task of writing and performing a Reader's Theater monologue from a certain character's point of view
- Locate Reader's Theater scripts online or in publications to use in your classroom
- Assign students the task of writing a Reader's Theater dialogue between characters from different fictional works
- Assign students the task of writing a Reader's Theater dialogue between two historical figures

## Writing Process

I always encourage educators to develop their own Reader's Theater plays. There's nothing more invigorating than seeing something that you have created bring about a genuine learning experience. Below I have highlighted the various steps of transforming source material into a Reader's Theater play.

- Step One** Choose your source. RT plays aren't required to be created from "stories" necessarily. Your play could be a dialogue between the founding fathers or a series of monologues given by famous historians, mathematicians, scientists, writers, or athletes.
- Step Two** Adapt the source by adding dialogue. Once again, it doesn't have to be a masterpiece. Identify your students' current comprehension level and challenge it, but keep the language from growing too daunting. When they encounter your script, they will be reading it for the first time. Avoid extremely hard-to-pronounce words, or add a phonetic pronunciation after the word. If you are translating something that already has dialogue, you may need to tweak it slightly, adapting it to your students' level.
- Step Three** Almost every script should have a narrator to give details through description. In a Reader's Theater play there should be no stage directions. The narrator describes what happens when a character is not speaking. (*The teacher should perform the part of the narrator to be involved in the play with the students.*)
- Step Four** If a certain line demands a certain emotion, give a small direction at the beginning of the line. For example: (*passionately*), (*angrily*). Also, in any part that would require one, insert a sound effect. For example: (*whoosh*), (*ka-pow*)
- Step Five** If your play contains multiple characters, creating a cast list at the beginning is a good idea. This will help you remember which parts to assign. It's also a good spot to give preliminary information. For example: **Arthur** *King of All England*
- Step Six** After you have completed your script, don't look back over it and think, "This is stupid." Students will latch onto anything that is different from the norm. Worksheets, lectures, and textbooks fill their education. This will be something different, and they will enjoy it.

- Step Seven**                   Distribute scripts. Highlight, and assign parts. You are the director in this step. Select students that you perceive to be stronger readers for larger parts, but do not neglect other enthusiastic students. Small parts are a great way to give everyone a shot. Assign the sound effects as a certain part, and by doing so include a student who may not be a strong reader.
- Step Eight**                   Read. Make sure that the students who do not have a part are following along. The combination of auditory and visual reception of the words builds better reading comprehension in some students.
- Step Nine**                   Enjoy *yourself*. If the students perceive that you are enjoying the play, it will only motivate them to do the same. This is a time for you to experience material along with your students. Eat it up.
- Step Ten**                   Go back, and fix the problems. Revision only makes things better. Add sound makers, sets, or costumes to your script to spice it up. Do *anything* and *everything* to make the material exciting.

### **Texts, Links, and Other Resources**

<http://teacherweb.nixa.k12.mo.us/~zakhamby/>

This is my classroom website. If you ever have to teach mythology, I have several activities here that have been successful with my students. These include: informational sections about ancient Greece and Rome, a Theseus multiple-pathways adventure, Mythological Barbie, and guidelines for a semester-long local legend project. There is also a link to several free Reader's Theater scripts.

**Hamby, Zachary. *Mythology for Teens*. Waco: Prufrock Press, 2009.**

This is my textbook. The chapters within the book focus on a specific topic such as the Hero, Battle of the Sexes, Beauty, Fate, War, and National Identity. Each begins with a Reader's Theater script from Greco-Roman mythology. Historical and cultural commentary, creative projects, discussion questions, and suggestions for follow-up activities accompany each script. For ordering information visit [www.prufrock.com](http://www.prufrock.com)

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