

Using Performance of Literature to Engage Minds and Bodies Pre-Reading

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In the high school English class, students study many different types of literature and genres. While many activation and engagement strategies exist, when it's time to dive into the text, performance of literature during pre-reading can give students an opportunity to embody a text and actively get a feel for the mood, setting, and conflicts in a text.

Activating students' bodies and voices by using a small adaptation of the beginning of a story or of a small piece of a story can provide background knowledge and can increase engagement and buy-in for reluctant readers and students.

So, instead of beginning the next story by having students read it silently or even with a passionate reading by the teacher, get kids up on their feet and let them see what the story is all about.

Below is a sample adaptation of the first few paragraphs of Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron." In the past, I used to photocopy these first pages and have students read and annotate the text, looking for details about the country in the year 2081. They would share what they found and talk about it. Sure, they caught on to the fact that the world was different. There's nothing wrong with starting the story this way, but a quick performance can get kids brains working and can achieve the same goal.

First, assign parts and get the students up on their feet. There are many options for reading the script:

- Take volunteers to play the roles. Assign roles and the other students listen, watch the performance.
- Divide ALL students into groups. Give them the script. Within their groups, let them choose/assign roles and create a performance. Each group performs for the class. Post performance, discuss similarities and differences between the different group performances. The students have now "read" and heard the beginning of the text two or three times, so they are read NOW to really jump in and close read. They have the background knowledge and context of the story.

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Sample Adaptation of "Harrison Bergeron" by Kurt Vonnegut

Roles:

Voices 1, 2, and 3 - government narrators, noises
Diana Moon Glampers
George
Hazel
Ballerinas
Prima Ballerina

1, 2, 3: The year was 2081.

1: And everybody was finally equal.

2: They weren't only equal before God and the law.

3: They were equal

1, 2, and 3: Every which way.

3: Nobody was smarter than anybody else.

1: Nobody was better looking than anybody else.

2: Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else.

3: All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution.

Diana Moon Glampers: And to the unceasing vigilance of the United States Handicapper General.

1: Some things about living still weren't quite right, though.

2: April, for instance still drove people crazy by not being springtime.

3: And it was in that month that the H-G men too George and Hazel Bergeron's fourteen year old son, Harrison, away.

George: It was tragic, all right, but George and Hazel couldn't think about it very much.

Hazel: Hazel had a perfectly average intelligence.

1: Which meant she couldn't think about anything except in short bursts.

George: And George, whose intelligence was way above normal

2: Had a little mental handicap radio in his ear.

George: He was required to wear it at all times. It was tuned to a government transmitter.

3: And every twenty seconds or so

1: The transmitter would send out some

1: (overlapping and really loud, shrill and annoying) Sharp noise!

2: Sharp noise!

3: Sharp noise!

George: To keep people like George from taking

1, 2, and 3: Unfair advantage of their brains.

Hazel: George and Hazel were watching television.

George: There were tears on Hazel's cheeks.

Hazel: But she'd forgotten for the moment what they were about.

George: On the television screen were ballerinas.

1, 2, and 3: A buzzer sounded in George's head!!

Hazel: That was a real pretty dance they just did.

George: Huh

Hazel: That dance. It was nice.

George: Yup. He tried to think a little about the ballerinas. They weren't really very good.

Ballerina 1: They were burdened with sash weights

Ballerina 2: And bags of birdshot.

Prima Ballerina: And their faces were masked.

1: So that no one, seeing a fee and graceful gesture

2: or a pretty face

3: would feel like something the cat drug in.

George: George was toying with the notion that maybe the dancers shouldn't be handicapped.

1: But he didn't get very far with it before (loudly, screaming, crazy) another NOISE!

(Overlapping)

2: NOISE!

3: NOISE!

1, 2, and 3: NOISE in his ear radio scattered his thoughts.

George: (in pain) George winced.

Ballerina 1 and Prima Ballerina: So did two of the eight ballerinas.

Hazel: Hazel saw him wince. Having no mental handicap herself, she had to ask George what the latest sound had been.

George: Sounded like somebody hitting a milk bottle with a ball peen hammer.

Hazel: I think it would be real interesting, hearing all the different sounds, said Hazel, a little envious.

George: Um

Hazel: Only if I was Handicapper General, you know what I would do?

George: Uh

Hazel: If I was Diana Moon Glampers, I'd have chimes on Sunday. Just chimes. Kind of in honor of religion.

George: I could think if it was just chimes.

Hazel: Well maybe make 'em real loud. I think I'd make a good Handicapper General.

George: Good as anybody else.

Hazel: Who knows better 'n I do what normal is?

George: Right, said George. He began to think glimmeringly about his abnormal son who was now in jail, about Harrison...

1, 2, and 3: (loudly, screaming, banging desks or stomping with whatever you can or with whatever props you have) BUT A TWENTY-ONE GUN SALUTE IN HIS HEAD STOPPED THAT!

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Ok! This could be where you stop the performance and discuss, reviewing the basics of plot, character, setting, mood, and conflict. Students can react and share what they know from the performance or what they felt performing their parts.

Instead of cold reading the beginning of the text, they have a taste of the world of the story. The performance engages bodies and builds background knowledge.

Where you decide to stop the adaptation is up to you. You could keep going until a later moment in the story or make this intro performance shorter than it already is. It's up to you, and the kids will be engaged regardless of the stopping point.

Your instruction of the text can continue on from here! This strategy of adapting a small part of a text can be used at any point, but as a pre-reading strategy, it definitely makes the first days with a text more fun and engaging. Also try out having students perform scripted poems before digging in to the details. The more they hear, read, see, and feel the words, the better the analysis later on.