

STORY DRAMAS

FOR GRADES 4–6

*A New Literature Experience
for Children*

by Gretchen Courtney & Sarah Jossart

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FOREWORD

Dear Colleague,

We have written this book to introduce you to a new and exciting literature response, Story Drama. Section 1, **Introduction to Story Drama** explains how story drama is an instructional strategy that teaches literature by asking students to participate with the characters in the text, explore the setting, and otherwise involve themselves in the action of the story. Students at this level enjoy becoming actors in their own reading. The creative exchange in story drama exposes students to good literature, enhances their comprehension of story elements, and facilitates understanding through active participation. This technique reinforces teaching in the major content areas when the selected text complements themed units, further immersing students in the topic. The overall intent of this book is, however, to provide models of story dramas written for different text genres. Included at the end of Section 1 is a sample story drama script with a discussion of the connection between story drama, reading instruction, and your overall curriculum.

Section 2, **Warm-up Activities** includes exercises that help prepare students who may not have had prior drama experience. These activities are intended to relax the students and stimulate the imagination.

Section 3, **Story Dramas** is the heart of this book, compiled by genre. Here we have written actual dramas for you to use as models and included helpful hints learned along the way. Follow-up activities are provided to give you various ways to connect the drama experience to other creative responses.

Section 4, **How to Construct Your Own Dramas: A Step-by-Step Guide** follows. The detailed instruction provided in this section will help you create your own dramas for both literature selections and content area texts. We discuss writing extensions as part of story drama and share a variety of writing ideas.

Finally, in Section 5, **Assessment and Evaluation** we have included information on how to evaluate student performances using story drama as an assessment tool.

So take on the role of one of King Arthur's knights and visit the magical castle of Camelot. We can only imagine what possibilities await you and your students.

Gretchen and Sarah



SECTION I

INTRODUCTION TO STORY DRAMAS

Definition of story drama. Story drama is an interactive dramatic student response to the stories, poems, and content area texts they hear and read. The written text— whether poetry, fiction, fantasy, historical fiction, or nonfiction— provides the spark for student improvisation, and further expansion and exploration of text. These are accomplished through imagery, problem-solving, questioning, writing, and art. Through such expansions and explorations of text, students gain a deeper understanding of the many elements of literature, including setting, tone, mood, and plot, as they become characters within the text or create new characters. By visualizing the story, students see the richness of the literature come alive. Story drama as a teaching strategy enhances student comprehension of both literature and content-area texts.

Implementing story drama. The success of story drama depends on active student involvement. Students must speak and they must listen. As students explore the characterization, setting, plot, and mood of the text and participate in the improvisations of their peers, they may need to adjust or expand their own roles and use new ideas to solve a problem. You will often find children expanding their roles and/or ideas by incorporating ideas from others in the class. Group interaction and self-exploration are enhanced as students examine literary elements of text and solve problems. In the process, they draw on past experience, discuss cause and effect, use critical thinking skills, and learn cooperative group decision-making skills. Story drama calls upon and encourages students to exercise creativity in interpreting the text, playing various roles/characters, and arriving at a solution to a problem.

Risk taking will be a crucial part of any story drama experience and you may need to facilitate a couple of dramas before all students are willing to take the risks involved. Be a risk taker yourself! Extended modeling by the teacher will greatly enhance the students' performances. Also, warm-up activities before a drama will help students become more comfortable with the drama experience.

The teacher/leader provides the following functions:

- *Guides the students through the development of the drama by reading the text and stopping at appropriate places to allow students the chance to explore and expand



- * Highlights the literary elements of text to enhance comprehension
- * Models new situations, characters, feelings, and observations
- * Models various questioning techniques, including open-ended questions that expand on students' ideas about the text
- * Establishes a problem to be solved within the context of the story and helps students to integrate the problem into real-life situations
- * Models the acceptance of all ideas and guides the students into this acceptance
- * Encourages every student to share and leads all students into active involvement
- * Plays a role/character, and engages along with the students in all aspects of the text

The Jack tale, "Jack and the Beanstalk," which follows, is one of the simplest drama guides. It is a good example of how familiar texts and stories can be expanded into story dramas.

A STORY DRAMA EXAMPLE BASED ON "JACK AND THE BEANSTALK"

TEACHER AS A POLICE INVESTIGATOR, OFFICER VINE: My name is Officer Vine. I work for the (name of town) police department. I am new on the job and this will be my first investigation. I have been sent out into the field to investigate your neighborhood. My assignment is to find out a little more about the unusual occurrence at one of your neighbor's homes and to write up a report. Before I ask you any questions about this neighbor or the strange event, I need to find out something about you. Tell me who you are, where you live, and what you do in the neighborhood.

The teacher sets the stage for the drama. The only script is that for the teacher's role, (Officer Vine,) which the teacher is encourages to adlib. The teacher begins by modeling an introduction of his/her character.

Students volunteer to introduce themselves to the group in-character, telling who they are, where they live, and what they do.

The students quickly become active participants. They are speaking and listening as well as creating their own characters.



TEACHER AS OFFICER VINE (*questioning students in their roles*):

How long have you lived in this neighborhood?

What is the name of this street?

Have you always lived here?

Are you aware of any unusual neighbors and/or events in this neighborhood?

If so, please give me a description.

Is this a safe neighborhood? Why or why not?

The teacher helps students expand their characterizations by asking additional questions and linking those questions to the upcoming text.

Read aloud the following text:

Once upon a time there was a boy whose name was Jack. He lived with his mother in a little house. They were very poor. Jack's mother earned her living by spinning, but Jack was so lazy he would do nothing but sit in the sun. One day, Jack and his mother found themselves penniless and had to sell their cow for money to buy food. Jack's mother sent him to town with instructions to sell the cow for a good price. Along the way, he met an odd man who traded Jack three magical beans for their cow. When Jack returned home, with no money and only three ordinary looking beans, his mother angrily threw the beans out of the window. The next morning, Jack and his mother awoke to find a large beanstalk growing in the very spot where the beans had landed.

The text comes "alive" as the students and teacher begin to incorporate the information into their role playing; this sparks further imagination of the drama.

TEACHER AS OFFICER VINE (*questioning students in their roles*):

Do you know the woman who lives in the house with the beanstalk?

Could someone point out her home?

What does her home look like?

Do you know her son Jack? What is he like?

What can you tell me about the enormous beanstalk growing next to the home?

When did you first notice the beanstalk?

What have you observed going on at the house?

Have any of you talked to the family? What did they have to say?

What questions would you like to ask them?



The teacher models questioning; through questioning, the text is expanded and explored. The literary elements of the text shape the students' responses. Often a response will spark a new question. The question sets accompanying each reading are just the beginning of what might be discussed during the course of exploring the drama. Open-ended questions give all students the chance to continue participating in the drama. Accept all responses, allowing students to take risks and stay involved. Pay close attention to the roles students chose. Ask specific questions of students in these roles. For example, some students may have chosen to be relatives of Jack and his mother. Ask them specific questions that focus on that relationship. In contrast, what would a police officer or garbage collector say about the family? Give students authentic chances to practice their own investigative skills by having them go around the group and ask questions. This allows them to expand on their ideas and add to their roles.

TEACHER AS OFFICER VINE: Officer Vine here again. I have returned to follow up on the large number of phone calls we've received concerning the beanstalk. Due to the unusual nature of this problem, I will be asking all of you for your assistance. Get together with a small group of neighbors and decide what it is you would like the police and the village to do with this oversized plant. Write down your ideas so that I can take them back to the chief of police for his decision. I will be coming by shortly to take down your information.

The group is presented with a problem to be solved, one that will give students practice in applying various problem-solving techniques. Students draw on past experience, discuss cause and effect, and do some critical thinking as they arrive at a solution.

Students in small groups make a list of ideas to offer as a solution to the problem. Each group shares its ideas.

Students are involved in both large- and small-group interaction during the drama. They are writing for an authentic purpose. And, they are learning and applying cooperative group decision-making skills.

Read aloud the following:

Jack took it upon himself to climb the beanstalk into the clouds, where he found the castle of a giant. He was taken into the castle by the cook and discovered great riches there. Even though the giant was fearful and dangerous, Jack succeeded in bringing many wondrous things down the beanstalk to his home.



TEACHER AS OFFICER VINE: This beanstalk is truly something extraordinary. I am rushing to get my report on the chief's desk. Let me ask you folks just a few more questions about some things that I am curious about. (*questioning students in their roles*):

How would you describe this beanstalk?

How do you think it got here?

What will happen to the beanstalk?

Have you ever seen anything like this before? Where? When?

What do you think the family will do with the beanstalk?

What did you see Jack bring down the beanstalk?

As the drama continues, the teacher provides a link between information from the text and the dramatic responses students have made. Students are examining text and all of its elements in order to derive meaning from the situation.

Read aloud the following:

On his final visit, Jack woke the giant while taking a new treasure and had to flee for his life with the giant in pursuit. When Jack reached the bottom of the beanstalk, he quickly cut the stalk down, plunging the giant to his death.

EXAMPLES OF FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

Ask students to

- Dramatize a short group scene that depicts a phone call to the police station, this time reporting the appearance of the giant and the cutting down of the beanstalk.
- Write a follow-up newspaper report. This report should follow the format of a news story telling who, what, when, where, why, and how.
- Read other "Jack" tales, such as "Lazy Jack."
- Write their own "Jack" tale.
- Illustrate the beanstalk they imagined during the drama.

Several follow-up activities are suggested. The students may be asked to write, illustrate, cook, perform, and so on. These activities cover a wide range of abilities and thus are not labeled for a specific grade level or age span. Each teacher is free to select the activity or activities appropriate for his or her group of students—be they special-needs students, gifted students, or somewhere in between. Select what you know your students can do or, possibly, allow students to select their own activities. Don't be afraid to try a new activity! Model the activity, then work through the activity as a group. As you stretch and challenge these readers and writers, you will be amazed at what they can do.



THE CONNECTION BETWEEN DRAMA AND READING INSTRUCTION

Story drama is reading instruction. Students are listening to and reading some of the best children's literature, including poetry, fantasy, fiction, and historical fiction, in trade books as well as their own textbooks.

Story drama is vocabulary development. Students are exposed to and try out new and interesting vocabulary, some of it cross-cultural, in a variety of contexts.

Story drama integrates writing activities. Students are given opportunities to write for many reasons and for many different audiences. Writing occurs during the course of some dramas and as a natural outgrowth of others.

Story drama is understanding a character's point of view. Students play the roles of story characters or roles of other characters that could be a part of a story. In so doing, they experiment with many points of view.

Story drama is working with setting, plot, and theme. Literary elements guide students as they involve themselves in roles and problems to be solved based on the text.

Story drama is questioning and answering. Students have many chances to make inferences, draw conclusions, compare and contrast, evaluate, and interview during the story dramas.

Story drama is a lesson in prediction. Students predict characters' responses, solutions to problems, and story outcomes. Predictions go beyond the text as students create additional character roles.

HOW STORY DRAMAS ENHANCE YOUR ENTIRE CURRICULUM

Story drama teaches the content of different curricular areas. Story dramas can be created with social science, science, literature, health, and even mathematics texts. The active participation, critical thinking, and written or oral responses involved help students understand and remember the information presented to them in particular curricular areas.

Story drama is schema-based instruction. Students are required to draw on prior knowledge and incorporate new information as they participate in character roles and problem-solving situations.

Story drama is critical thinking. Students make inferences, draw conclusions, compare and contrast, and evaluate as they answer questions posed to them by the teacher and by their peers.



Story drama is a medium for reaching all students at all learning levels with all types of learning styles. Group activities, in particular, allow students to share their special strengths and give them the satisfaction of having participated.

Story drama is acting, pretending, role playing, dramatization, mime, and pantomime. Ideas generated by the students are performed or presented for the class as a whole or in small groups, giving students a variety of experiences.

Story drama enhances imagination and creativity. Students have the opportunity to develop new characters, solve problems, and respond to literature through illustrations and writing.



SECTION 2

WARM-UPS

We recommend warming-up for a few minutes before getting started. This helps students become comfortable with drama responses, especially if students have not had much experience with creative dramatics before. Warm-ups also allow the teacher opportunities to understand how their students think, and get the students accustomed to working with the teacher to construct meaning. Through warm-up activities, students experience the open-ended nature of story dramas, which prepares them to be active participants. Warm-up activities also give students practice in becoming risk takers. Warm-up time can be used, among other things, for a discussion of appropriate responses within an open-ended activity.

You might begin a warm-up session with a discussion about playacting/pretending by asking this question: How many of you have playacted? (Make sure you raise your hand too.) Inform students that playacting lets us express ideas and emotions, and try out different personalities. To confirm that at one time or another everyone has playacted/pretended, ask students the following questions: What have you pretended to do? Who or what have you pretended to be? Where have you pretended to be? As students share answers to these questions, point out that their examples show that they have playacted by being different characters, imagining they were in various settings, and pretending to do a range of actions. Explain that playacting involves characters, settings, and actions. We can playact each separately or together in any combination. As you begin each new drama, it may be helpful to remind students of the three ways they can role-play/pretend. It may also be useful to inform students before creating a drama, which types of playacting the drama will require, as well as the appropriate parameters for character creation. Animal or alien characters, for example, pets or space monsters, are not the best responses unless the drama provides for those types of characters. These types of characterizations do not allow students to successfully solve many of the problems presented in story drama.

EXAMPLES OF WARM-UP ACTIVITIES

1. Hand out an object (golf tee, pen, Frisbee™, hall pass, stick of gum, etc.).

Divide the students into small groups and have them make a list of all the possible uses of that object. Have them select an idea from the list, develop a story around that object, and act it out.