

essential

# THEATER

A PAGE-TO-STAGE, K-12 GUIDE FOR SCHOOLS AND HOMESCHOOLS



BETTYANN HENDERSON



*Essential Theater: A Page-to-Stage, K–12 Guide for Schools and Homeschools*

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\*Classical educators often break the grammar, logic, and rhetoric stages at different grade levels.

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1. For your ease of use, the illustrations that are relevant to any theater production are included in the text, when mentioned, and also at the back of the book.



# Publisher's Introduction

Many of us are aware that Aristotle, that great father of philosophy, wrote a book on rhetoric (Aristotle's *Rhetoric*) and a book on poetics (*Poetics*). In fact, they are often sold bound together. This is because the ancient world understood them as siblings. Both books were possessed with the same sorts of concerns—comfort with delivery, memory, and audience persuasion. One evolved as a directly important work and influence in law and politics, the other in literature and entertainment. Thus their distinctive applications may have obscured their relations—both are classified under aesthetics (i.e., a definition of the beautiful) in the Aristotelian system of metaphysics. You may ask, “What does this have to do with me, when all I want to do is to establish a theater program?” In the following text, you will discover how understanding this relationship between rhetoric and poetics can grow, refine, and enhance the theater program experience.

Classical rhetoric has major divisions or canons: invention, arrangement, style, delivery, and memory. Students learn how to gather material for their arguments, discern the issues at hand, and select the best “lines of argument” (invention). They then learn how to arrange these selected lines of argument in a meaningful, compelling order—including an arresting introduction, a contextualizing narration, a positive confirmation, a refutation of key objections, and a consolidating conclusion (arrangement). Students also study style by learning to imitate many schemes and tropes—or figures of speech (style). They also learn the various techniques that constitute good delivery—eye contact, gestures, voice pitch and modulation, projection, posture, and dress (delivery). Finally, students learn how to memorize their speeches well so that they are free to deliver the speech effectively, without the distraction of reading from or consulting notes too frequently.

Drama, as you can see, overlaps with rhetoric considerably, especially the canons of delivery and memory. Actors memorize lines so that they can freely and dramatically represent a character on stage. An actor who memorizes well is able to concentrate on good delivery. Actors spend a tremendous amount of time both memorizing their lines and practicing techniques and skills that make for excellent delivery on stage. This makes drama an excellent preparation for and training in delivery and memory work. Actors who perform in great plays, such as Shakespearean works, also enjoy the privilege of learning valuable stylistic techniques simply because such plays contain many schemes and tropes, and the actors learn by performing them and committing them to memory. While rhetoric in and of itself adds layers of analysis and classification to these schemes and tropes, actors nonetheless receive training in the performance and thus benefit from the direct experience of such figures of speech (Shakespearean plays are replete with them).

As you can see, the distinction between these disciplines is somewhat artificial. We might say that drama is the experiential, or poetic, mode of rhetoric. The recovery of the classical method sheds light on the fact that most of our disciplines do not have the artificial separation and fragmentation that they appear to have



in contemporary times. Speaking and writing well are actually a united purpose and stem from a common skill set. Thinking deeply about characters, human relations, and motivations, as well as about the pattern of plotlines that our lives tend to follow, is entirely relevant to anything we have to say and to any persuasion we hope to affect. To that end, Classical Academic Press has created the Writing & Rhetoric series, which teaches writing, beginning in third grade, and which operates on the same principle. The acts of speaking and writing while thinking about stories work together to produce eloquence and a depth of reflection in language that would not be present without the cooperation of these two skills in the context of storytelling. In fiction, we witness how character and action work themselves out consequentially.

All of our ideas must be tested against the reality of who is the human being. Aristotle's views defend representational art, poetry, and tragedy on the grounds that, while it cultivates our emotions and moves us, it is only clarifying and ordering what our lives naturally do. This makes for elegant, effective, and emotive rhetoric.

Most people intuit that theater provides an opportunity to put on a mask, to walk a mile in someone else's shoes, to look at motives, to speak powerfully to an audience, to consider the voice and character we need for a certain persuasion. *Essential Theater: A Page-to-Stage, K-12 Guide for Schools and Homeschools* helps you to understand how many of your natural educational and daily activities, starting as early as grammar school, already participate in rhetorical training. This guide deliberately provides this kind of rhetorical training to students from their first year in school through the end of high school. This book describes curricular and cocurricular activities down to the details that make such endeavors flourish.

After years of running a successful and abundant theater program in a small, private-school environment, Bettyann Henderson now shares her valuable expertise in this text. She describes how to develop rhetorical skills at an early stage and how to practically provide students with training and venues. This process creates not only theater productions but also relationships, community, and rhetorical prowess. Henderson's blend of getting down to brass tacks, establishing curricular goals, and enjoying high-minded fun will delight you and your students alike.



# Prologue

Classical education emphasizes the art of communication, which serves our students well during their school years and beyond. Whether from the podium or the stage, students share the experience with the audience. Wisely chosen words from poetry, prose, and dramatic literature speak to the heart of the human condition; they entertain and instruct us, finding a language adequate to experience. It is through community that we learn to understand each other and our purpose—theater greatly aids the building of such a community.

Theater is a compelling incarnational art form. It blesses artist and audience. It teaches us to seek, comprehend, and share. The actor who knows how to develop a character from the page has acquired a lifelong personal ability to understand the way people interact in the real world. When a cast breathes life into a script, beautifully written words affect the hearts and thoughts of the audience as well as the actors, long beyond curtain call. Literary theorist and polymath George Steiner urges readers to bring the text to life as often as possible in their reading experience—recitation, making art in response to art, and theater are all ways of enacting the liveliness of a written text.<sup>1</sup> Theater is also a natural avenue to train young people in the practical arts necessary to produce a play, such as making costumes and sets, salesmanship and promotion, and a variety of technical skills.

In this book, each chapter deals with specific aspects of working from page to stage. Included are parent-student forms and photographs, calendars and character worksheets, scheduling suggestions, and instructions for compiling the production script.

The style of theater described in these pages is best applied to the intimacy of a small theater space. This is a choice, not a compromise. An audience of less than fifty benefits directly from proximity to the loveliness of costumes and the actors' naturally projected voices. A small audience means more performances—an immediate educational benefit to the actors. The communal nature of live theater is enhanced a hundredfold as audience and actors share the same light and space. At Shakespeare's Globe, the reconstruction of the Elizabethan playhouse Globe Theatre, matinee performances are conducted in the sunshine—and, as it is located in London, inevitably the rain. Evening shows are lit to resemble the daylight, just as they were in Shakespeare's time. All of the advice in this book applies to larger groups as well; however, my experience has proven the benefits of the smaller theater space.<sup>2</sup>

My hope is that *Essential Theater: A Page-to-Stage, K–12 Guide for Schools and Homeschools*, gleaned from forty years of experience, will equip you—in purposeful and practical ways—to train your K–12 students to winsomely communicate. The text provides a school-wide plan for developing rhetorical skills in a classical school environment. This kind of activity brings a community together, builds wonderful memories, and provides ample opportunity for mentorship at every level.

This book includes the following resources:

- An overview of a curriculum for each stage of the classical trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric)
- Chapters that examine and outline the practical needs of theatrical productions—script selection, performance details, budgetary requirements, community opportunities, and more
- Handouts, illustrations, examples of forms, and charts for classroom or production use
- Recommended scripts and additional resources

The book you hold in your hands is written for the energetic teacher, parent, or community organizer with limited resources. This has worked for me—you can do this, too!

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1. George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), n.p.

2. See Suggested Readings for titles recommended for further study on such diverse skills as stage makeup, building sets, and creating historically accurate costumes. See also the Annotated List of Recommended Scripts for recommended plays; this should help you sort through myriad potential theater productions from which to choose.



# Part I: WHO





# Chapter

# 1

## The Grammar Stage (Grades K–6)— *Six Years of Oratory Training*

### OVERVIEW

#### Objectives

- learning to listen
  - up close, engage in conversation
  - in class, take turns reading
  - in a large room, listen to a presentation
  - in a theater space, watch a play
- learning to speak, to read aloud, and to recite
  - up close, engage in conversation
  - in class, take your turn to read aloud
  - in a large room, recite a poem or memorized passage
  - in a theater space, act a part

#### Tasks

- speaking in class
- delivering a memorized poem
- class presentations for an audience
- short plays
- developing a character
- fielding questions
- Shakespeare scenes

#### Skills

- **Stage Presence.** Sharing thoughts with and without words.
- **Your Public.** Learning to serve others.
- **Pacing.** Giving the listener time to hear, process, and connect.
- **Pausing.** Giving the audience time to understand and think about the words.
- **Projection.** Sending a small voice farther.
- **Impersonation.** Fielding questions with poise and confidence.
- **Preparing Your Audience.** Learning to be an attentive audience.
- **Pronunciation.** Enunciating carefully.
- **Pitch.** Using lilt and inflection to give life and personality to the words and sentences of the passage.
- **Performance.** Making an individual contribution while learning to become interdependent.

Observing, exploring, studying—children are natural learners. An infant begins to recognize familiar voices and everything goes into the mouth for the taste-and-texture test. To the toddler, everything is new. That ever-present *why* is our cue to rejoice at the child’s curiosity. By the time they are ready for first grade, children have been constantly acting in and reacting to their world and experiencing everything within their reach.

From first grade to senior year, students channel that energy in many ways. Mastering the art of communication through words and body language serves them well during their school years and beyond. A classical theater curriculum begins at the early grammar stage with wonderful poems and monologues, puppet shows, and class presentations. Children memorize and recite, learning to share through trained speech and nonverbal communication skills. Their imagination is boundless and their bodies naturally are in tune with what they are saying. We have all had the experience of seeing Winnie-the-Pooh, with his delightful hums and whimsical observations, transform from the printed page into something *real* as his character’s lines are read aloud to children.

The art of elocution and communication happens everywhere in the early years of a classical education. One significant early brush with it is reading aloud. After everyone experiences the process of checking out his first library book, the school or local children’s librarian models how to confidently share the words and illustrations with appropriate voice projection by reading slowly, inserting pauses, and using a variety of vocal pitches—all while taking time to pace the reading for the rapt children’s ears, and to watch their faces light up with pleasure. Pleasure is an important part of the learning process; because these students have experienced the delight of a good reader, they are more inclined to be attentive to some of the techniques that created pleasure for them when it is their turn to read or recite.

In fact, many people choose homeschooling to have the luxury to concentrate on reading often and aloud. Many homeschooled students reflect fondly on these years together with family—reading during the morning with breakfast, around the woodstove in the afternoon, or even after the written work for the day is complete. Parent and sibling reading aloud with expression is an essential skill, in particular for understanding the essence of stories’ characters.

## FROM THE LIBRARY TO THE CLASSROOM

When a book leaves the library tucked under the arm of its temporary owner, it may only be destined for quiet reading. Or it could be read aloud for a teacher to assess the student’s ability. Hopefully, it will also be shared when the child reads aloud to his mom or dad. These are all important rhetorical milestones in early education.



But reading or speaking aloud to an *audience* calls for a different set of skills. Students can be trained to deliver thoughts and words through sound and sight—verbal and nonverbal communication. Speaking to a group is about giving and receiving, about sharing.

From kindergarten through twelfth grade, our goal as parents or teachers is to develop wise and eloquent learners. There are many steps along the way to ensure that the words they choose to use carry the full meaning of what it is they want to say.

### *Stage Presence*

One such step that has worked well in my school is regular, low-pressure performance from an early age. The second graders sign up each Monday morning to perform something for their classmates: a poetry reading, a piano

piece, a little song. I am invited to the classroom to give a few pointers on public performance. As their teacher, I enthusiastically explain why I am now in *their* territory, and I intentionally botch my entrance in a variety of typical and all-too-familiar ways—all nonverbal evidence of the need for good stage presence. Second graders really like my bumbling, and they learn a lot in a short time, as I “perform” this exaggerated negative modeling. Taking entirely too much time to arrive at the front of the room, I show reluctance and an utter lack of confidence by tugging at my clothes, making repeated efforts to control my hands, scratching at my face and hair while distractedly looking everywhere but in the direction of my audience. They know it’s just an act. After we get the laughter under control, we resolve *never* to laugh at a fellow student who might look as though he is afraid. Then I return to the back of the room, and this time I model a more correct entrance: Moving at a natural pace, with a smile and a glance at my audience, I make my way to the front of the room as a speaker who is confident and prepared to share something she enjoys.



Small groups of two or three are asked to come to the front of the class and face their peers. They know what they are *not* supposed to do—but do they know what they *need* to do? The eager audience is told to watch for a friend who is showing good stage presence, and I point out the successes: “See how Rebekah took the time to put her chair back in place quietly, and Jonathan is smiling as though he’s got something *very* interesting to say?”

After everyone has had a chance to practice, I ask for volunteers to go it alone. A few hands go up. Good—that shows confidence and a willingness to share what they’ve learned. Adam, who raises his hand without theatrics, is chosen first. Every second grader watches him leave his seat, stride up to the front, and prepare to speak.

“You did a good job, Adam; I thought you would. You didn’t tug at your clothes. You kept your hands still,” I remark, reinforcing the kind of performance I’m looking for.

“Who’s next?”

Up go a forest of hands and I hear a chorus of voices.

“Well, I can’t really call on anyone who makes a lot of noise. All right—Mariza, give it a try.”

**C**reate a special evening with guests invited for dinner or dessert. *Audience* is the emphasis, whether the event is casual or formal. Holidays are also natural times to integrate the homeschool curriculum with real-life family celebrations throughout the three stages of the **Trivium** (grades 1–6 in grammar stage, grades 7–8 in logic stage, and grades 9–12 in rhetoric stage). The Trivium is a classical approach to education that is both content-focused and developmentally focused on methods of teaching and learning suited to age group (for a complete description, please take a look at *An Introduction to Classical Education* by Christopher Perrin). A lovely January program might include grammar-stage siblings starting the performance by singing “This Little Light of Mine” to introduce their logic-stage classmate’s history report about the Civil Rights Act of 1964, after which the rhetoric-stage student delivers Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. As a celebration of a February birthday, high school students could shop for ingredients and prepare the refreshments, middle school students could create and send out invitations, and elementary school-age siblings could decorate the celebration area.

Mariza tries, succeeds, and receives a polite ovation. Stage presence is practiced this way: confidence and enthusiasm for sharing something we like with other people we respect and enjoy. Like many talents, stage presence can be a gift—some folks just seem to have it, effortlessly. Happily, like many artistic skills, it can also be learned. Confidence grows when we have something of value to share with others.

## FROM THE CLASSROOM TO THE CAFETORIUM

While the younger children learn the basics of public recitation, in the upper grammar school, the fourth-grade class prepares to present a class assembly. At our school, Constitution Day in September seems to be

a perfect time to share what they are learning about American colonial history with an assembly. They only have two weeks to prepare, so they ask me to help. I arrive in the classroom to teach how to read aloud and speak s-l-o-w-l-y, to e'nun'ci'ate care'ful'ly, and to...pause...frequently. The students want to get their scripts so they can rush home and begin to memorize their lines. But I warn them of the dangers of such *precipitous* action. (Children love a big word—as long as you use a lot of short words to define it!)

### ***Your Public***

With brand-new, unmarked scripts in their eager hands, the students first will learn that speaking a memorized part is not the same as reading aloud. Children quickly understand the difference, and most take pleasure in learning the new skills. For a good portion of their lives, they have been encouraged to read naturally in a conversational tone. As children are taught to read, they are trained to read aloud and to speak fluently. Whether at home or in a classroom setting, they look *down* at their books. Someone else is usually silently reading along.

The assembly presentation is a much more complicated task, requiring a new set of skills. Class presentations usually take place in a large room, with or without good acoustics. The large room is filled with fellow students and many distractions. The room is even bigger than the classroom, and it is filled with many more people—students from other classes and even family members—from fussy infant siblings to grandparents with hearing loss. How can students maintain their own concentration, as well as that of their audience? Learning to “play to the house,” or to address the audience based on a knowledge of that audience in particular, is an essential means of community.



**A**nother great way to practice pacing at home is to listen to several good audio recordings of simple stories. Choose one that will enlist the abilities of your young students and “fit the action to the word, the word to the action.” This will help them learn to establish a reasonable pace in anticipation of the higher skill—to deliver memorized words.

### ***Pacing***

When it comes time to share a memorized passage aloud, it is essential for the young speaker to realize that this new task requires a new skill. The key to being understood begins with slowing down, relishing and sharing each word and phrase together for an audience—the listeners. The speaker needs to give the listener time to hear, process, and connect. But not *too* much time. Slow speech can become monotonous. Speaking too slowly may communicate boredom or disrespect for the message and the audience. Usually, however, the problem in pacing occurs with students speaking too quickly. Students should be commended for the amount of time they have spent with their material. After much study, the material becomes familiar to the students. But their intended audience members (listeners), who are hearing it for the first time, will need the words and phrases to be carefully enunciated and delivered at a pace that allows comprehension and invites reaction.

### ***Pausing***

A class of fourth graders is learning the dates of the Constitutional Convention—when it began, how long the deliberations lasted, and how much time passed before it was ratified by the states. The audience isn't expected to remember the specific dates, but if the students share this information in



a winsome fashion, those listening may understand the many hours the delegates remained in the stifling Philadelphia heat. The first narrator attracts the visual attention of the audience by stepping forward. She has chosen which words to emphasize, and she pauses very carefully so as to center the listeners' attention on the next word. (**The pauses are indicated by bolded commas with space on both sides.**)

“The convention began in *May* , of seventeen eighty-seven. It was a long , hot , summer!”

Then the audience listens and watches as George Washington, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton present items discussed and motions made, such as Benjamin Franklin's call for morning prayers:

“I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth: , that God governs in the affairs of men. , And if a sparrow cannot *fall* to the ground , without his notice , is it probable that an empire can *rise*, without his aid?”

After each child has delivered his part—carefully pacing and pausing as rehearsed—the audience has lived vicariously through that “long , hot , summer.” They are ready to hear the next date from the second narrator:

“It was a lot of work , but , on *September 17*, seventeen eighty-seven , the new US Constitution , was *finished!*”

Memorization comes more easily as students choose and practice meaningful pauses. Deciding when to pause helps students understand the phrasing that best delivers the meaning to a listener and helps her to understand the context. It also gives the audience time to listen, to understand, and to think about the words. As much fun as an assembly can be—with all the costumes, colorful artwork, and props—even young students know it is the *message* that gives their hard work the most value.



### ***Projection***

To equip students with practical and strong vocal skills, do not provide microphones. Even a small voice can be heard and understood in a quiet room. This requires breath support and projection, which can be taught. One of the reasons for the frequent pause is to give a speaker time to take in the air needed to support his little voice. Instead of asking the children to speak “LOUDER,” challenge them to send their voices “farrrr-ther.” To enforce this lesson, demonstrate how annoying, and even humorous, it can be to just holler—speak in an obnoxiously loud tone that is nothing more than yelling. Then, after giggles subside, tell the students to instead try to “send” their strong voices to the person behind the person in the back row. If a child's first best effort reaches only the second or third row, ask her to send her voice to the person across the street. Most kids think this is a fun activity and are surprised by how far they can send their voices once they understand the vision, take enough breath, and speak with authority and a positive attitude.

### ***Impersonation***

During the winter, a class of fourth graders might create a Living History Hall of Fame. Each student chooses an American hero and, after weeks of preparation, a parade of costumed reenactors is introduced to a large audience of their families and fellow students. After the formal presentation from the front of the

auditorium, these living heroes position themselves around the room so visitors can move throughout the “gallery.” In one corner, Charlie and John have set up their bicycle shop as Orville and Wilbur Wright. In a leather-fringed jacket, Alyse shoulders her rifle and, as Annie Oakley, strides over to the opposite corner of the room, regaling folks with recollections of the famous traveling Wild West Show. Cassie’s Clara Barton answers questions about medical conditions during the American Civil War. The students field questions from visitors and answer with ease in a conversational tone. This calls for poise and confidence, which they have been practicing now for several years. This training, begun at the grammar stage, will prepare them for formal debate during the logic stage, and culminate in their senior year for their rhetoric-stage project.



In addition to what they learn about vocal presentation in different physical spaces, the students may come to appreciate costumes and hairstyles of different times. The student reenacting George Washington can better understand the value of the woolen jacket, restrictive neckwear, and leather boots worn during the bitter winter at Valley Forge or during the crossing of the Delaware River on Christmas night when he has actually worn these items. The girls may enjoy wearing petticoats and bustles, but they must learn to move slowly through the halls and over the wet gravel to the auditorium. Give students an opportunity to sit down in a variety of chairs in their period-style clothing and, using images of portraits from various times in history, teach a lesson on how changing furniture styles accommodated changing fashions. Suddenly, social history becomes relevant and concrete to them.

## FROM THE CAFETORIUM TO THE CONTEST

### *The Annual Speech Contest*

Everyone enjoys tradition and continuity. When an annual event is offered to young children, it marks the passage of real time—a year is a substantial percentage of time in the short span of their lives—and presents the pleasure of familiarity.

A speech contest can be organized through a homeschool co-op, the local library, or even in the neighborhood. Invite a representative from a community theater group or Toastmasters (an international club that helps members improve their communication, public speaking, and leadership skills) to be a celebrity judge. Meet with parents and discuss possible venues, certificates, and—of course—snacks and refreshments.

There are many good projects a school can develop to celebrate this happy sense of tradition. An annual speech and poetry contest is a natural. Each student is required to choose, memorize, and present a poem, a dramatic reading, or a passage of scripture. Class time is spent learning and practicing oratory skills. When the big day arrives, trained volunteer judges award points on a standardized form. Each child’s accomplishment is rated in areas such as stage presence, voice projection, and comprehension. The winners are congratulated with specific comments related to the skill of their performance, and they eventually perform again in an all-school assembly so everyone can listen to the best of each class.

Because the speech and poetry contest is conducted in each classroom, every student is also a member of the audience for all the other children in the class. This gives each student as many opportunities as there are members of the class to learn from the successes and mistakes of their peers. When Jason gets good scores for stage presence, all the other third graders learn from his success. If he comes in third place because he spoke too fast, they can take note and slow their own speedy delivery. Whatever lessons they learn by observation and however they score *this* year, they get to do it again next year—and hopefully grow in their speech-giving skills and confidence. And then again the following year, and so forth.

### ***Preparing Your Audience***

Over the years, I had many opportunities to coach students for these kinds of events. In one such case, I was asked to help the third graders practice their memorized poems for the annual speech and poetry contest. This was a genuine competition—their first one with real judges sitting in the back of the room with score sheets!

“What is your selection?” I ask Ashleigh, who is leaning forward in her chair with her hand raised and her eyes begging me to call on her.

“It’s that holy thing,” she answers.

I blink. Is she unprepared, not even knowing the title? Or worse, is she being flippant? No, this is Ashleigh. I called on her because she is reliable and confident—the type of student I choose to be the first student example.

Noting my hesitation, Ashleigh comes through. She smiles, repeats slowly, and enunciates carefully, “My poem is ‘That Holy Thing’ by George MacDonald.”

I chuckle at my initial reaction. I couldn’t have planned a better introduction to my lesson if I had worked all night to prepare.

“Thank you, Ashleigh. I haven’t heard this poem before, and I didn’t recognize the title. But I love the work of George MacDonald. When you first answered my question, you spoke quickly without much expression. You have shown us exactly what might happen if your audience is not familiar with this special poem. They might be confused, as I was at first, when you quickly and softly said, ‘that holy thing.’ I wondered if your poem was about something that has a lot of *holes* in it. Then I thought maybe you had chosen something that was about religion but you couldn’t remember the title!”

We have a good laugh and I remind the students to include the name of the author with the title of each speech.

### ***Pronunciation***

Such coaching provides contact with all kinds of students and instructional needs. When Anna—petite and shy Anna—volunteers to practice her literary selection before the entire class for me to critique, the more empathetic of her third-grade classmates stir in their seats. Because she is a careful scholar, we are sure Anna will pace and pause and pitch correctly, but everyone knows Anna has a teeny-tiny voice. Will she be able to project? Her friends need not worry. Anna has a Scottish mother who has consistently taught her girls to enunciate carefully. I’ve heard her instruct them to observe the difference between a *d* and a *t* in words such as “little” and “ladder.” When Anna speaks, even with her naturally quiet voice, she can be understood very clearly all the way to the back of the big room. I tell Anna in front of the whole class that she has shown us an excellent example of the importance of careful enunciation. And Anna happily reports to her mother that everybody heard every word.

## Pitch

Beginning readers know that when a question mark is used at the end of a sentence, the voice should go “up” in pitch. Poetry, especially, can be illuminated with pitch variety, or it can become a monotonous singsong, predictable with repetitive ups and downs.

There are many ways to demonstrate *pitch*—the lilt and inflection that give life and personality to the words, the sentences, the passage. It is enjoyable and instructive to demonstrate the different pitch and lilt patterns of regional accents. In the American South, cultured people often punctuate and end a sentence with an upward lilt that indicates a polite invitation for the listener to respond. An aristocratic British accent often does the opposite, ending very much on a downward pitch, which can sound—especially if there’s a slight pause—a bit pompous. Listen for the pitches at the beginning, middle, and end of a sentence. Read a short passage aloud and see how simply changing the pitch could alter the intended meaning.

**P**urposefully choose the readers of your audio books, especially if the text requires the use of foreign accents. Try this fun activity: Choose your family’s favorite book and make an audio recording with the entire family. Pay close attention to voice choices, and enjoy getting into character. What a great gift for grandparents that would be!

## FROM THE CONTEST TO THE CLASS PLAY

By first working on individual tasks within the classroom, and then by sharing class presentations with other students and family members, students develop oratory skills. Each student memorizes a part and takes a turn, usually standing in one designated spot on the platform. Adding a short class play to the annual curriculum is a fun way to apply the skills learned throughout the school year.

In a stage production, a cast of characters brings memorized words to life. Instead of standing safely in one spot (as students did during the contest), students move about freely in the world of the play. And it can feel—no matter how many hours of rehearsal—as though each performance is fresh and new. These words, these actions, are the *first* time this has happened in the *history* of the world!

Each student makes an individual contribution, yet the students are interdependent. They become a team, a community of characters. The audience shares the story in time and space with the actors, enlarging this community. Because each audience is different, each performance is unique. Multiple performances before small audiences (of fifty or fewer) maximize the students’ learning.

## Performance

There are many advantages to having each grade present the same script each year. One kindergarten play might be *The Gingerbread Man Meets Mother Goose*. The five-year-old actor who runs away from the Little Old Man and the Little Old Woman meets Little Red Riding Hood, Jack Be Nimble, and a host of familiar characters, including the Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe. The kindergartners might perform for a relatively small audience—their families. Later in the year, with their newfound appreciation for the dramatic arts, the kindergartners could be the audience for the opening performance of the first graders’ production of *Beatrix Potter’s Peter Rabbit*. The first grade, in turn, might attend the premiere of that year’s second-grade performance, *Alice in Wonderland*, and second graders watch *Tom Sawyer*. And so it goes, up by grade level, as each class play coordinates with the advancing level of the curriculum.

This plan ensures that each student, during the course of their kindergarten-through-sixth-grade curriculum, has participated in seven plays. As students advance through their school years, you will find that high school students reminisce about who, in their long-ago childhood, played the squeaky garden gate or a blond-headed cornstalk in Mr. MacGregor’s garden, and which of their friends had the title role. “Remember when Paul was Peter Rabbit, but he lost both his two front teeth the day before we did the play?!”

This repetition also helps the teacher and students build a viable, reusable collection of the costumes, props, and set pieces needed for each class play. Here again, because it is an annual feature, students can look forward to coming productions with anticipation, and look fondly back at previous ones.

The most natural choice of script material for the lower elementary grade level can be found in the good literature that is already a part of the class curriculum—familiar stories from Aesop’s Fables and the Brothers Grimm, familiar characters such as Alice in Wonderland and the Ugly Duckling. The upper elementary grades can adapt short stories and epic tales. Much of this classic literature is public domain and can be developed into a script directly from the printed page. Students are the *dramatis personae*—the characters or actors in a drama, and the ones who have a prominent influence over the production’s direction. The dialogue provides the spoken lines and many of the stage directions and actors’ motivations are right there in the text.

An excellent example of this is found in chapter 2 of Mark Twain’s 1876 great American novel, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, which is a wonderful mix of dialogue and action. It’s a spring Saturday in Hannibal, Missouri. Tom Sawyer has been sent by Aunt Polly to whitewash the fence.

BEN. (*watching every move and getting more and more interested.*) Say, Tom, let me whitewash a little.

TOM. No—no—I reckon it wouldn’t hardly do, Ben. You see, Aunt Polly’s awful particular about this fence. It’s got to be done very careful. I reckon there ain’t one boy in a thousand, maybe two thousand, that can do it the way it’s got to be done.

Simple sets, simple props, and simple costumes work well for this play. Kids in Hannibal go barefoot. No committee can build a better set than your audience can imagine. A set of room dividers can serve as Aunt Polly’s weathered fence; a collection of wide wooden brushes gives an actor a prop to use with emphatic gestures that tell something of his character’s personality.

As Shakespeare invites us,

Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them  
Printing their proud hooves in the receiving earth.  
(Henry V, chorus)

This approach works well for home as well: The next time your children want to play dress up, encourage them to choose a familiar story and design a “mini” production, complete with costumes and props. Help them with the dialogue, and rehearse for several days. When they have something worthy of an audience, set the date and give out free tickets.

Keeping the exterior devices such as costumes, makeup, props, and sets to a minimum increases the concentration of your actors and your audience on the story.

## SIXTH-GRADE SHAKESPEARE

As seventh graders, students will be eligible to audition for their first extracurricular production, the annual Festival of One-Act Plays. They accept the teacher’s challenge to graduate from *Tales from Shakespeare*, the excellent introduction to Shakespeare written by Charles and Mary Lamb, and act out complete scenes from the *real* Shakespeare scripts for a spring assembly. Their sixth-grade teacher chooses several age-appropriate scenes from *Much Ado About Nothing*, and as they read through them, each student chooses a favorite character to portray. Some prefer to be the villain, the prince, the handmaiden, or the sheriff. But many want to be the lead, so there will be several Beatrices and several Benedicks. In a twenty-first-century twist on the Elizabethan ban of women on the stage, some of the girls choose to be Benedick. Students perform not in costume but wearing their school uniforms. As the first Benedick enters, he dons the character-identifying hat as student narrators introduce the scenes, and the presentation delightfully advances through the play.

Because they aren't producing the whole play, the sixth graders can take time to learn how to interpret and develop a play one scene at a time, and the audience has the benefit of seeing a variety of character interpretations. Being a member of the audience, the drama instructor will get excited to get this advance notice of the enthusiasm and ability of the up-and-coming seventh-grade actors—anticipating their first

formal auditions next fall. It's a great time to introduce yourself to the students and their parents to begin building the relationship that will last throughout the next six years of theater experiences.

Students educated this way are well prepared for entering the logic stage next fall, when the annual festival of one-act plays begins a new cycle of before, and now, and next year!

