

**Wallflowers in a Wind Tunnel**  
**Or**  
**How to Turn a Shy Group of Bookworms into Enthusiastic Public Speakers**

Public speaking and story development skills for 2<sup>nd</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> graders  
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**Reading Group Curriculum:**

This curriculum is designed for working with children age 7 to 12, in order to help them realize their strengths in reading, writing and presentation of ideas, both in a small group format, and in front of an audience. The curriculum takes 20 to 40 minutes per week of class time per group.

Note: This curriculum can also be used as the foundation for writing a play and performing a play. This is a topic I plan to address in a subsequent paper.

My goal is to facilitate children speaking confidently and competently, when presenting their projects, their writing and their ideas to others.

I believe that when people are fearful and unfamiliar with using their voice, they are reluctant to share their ideas. I feel that by teaching comfort, in sharing thoughts and opinions, to young children, they will grow with that muscle memory, and as teenagers and adults will be effective communicators, and much more engaged in their own education and lives.

I have created a learning approach that targets children still young enough to role- play without inhibition, and I engage them using their new love of reading. The focus is mostly on story telling. I assume most kids will beg for attention, if others around them are getting an audience. I use the natural competition to be heard, as a way to motivate them to hone their speaking skills, so others will listen.

I work in small groups of established comfortable friendships. These children are already quick to respond to each other. I do exercises to make sure they are speaking audibly, and to make sure they are politely listening. Occasionally I will lecture on story structure and comic delivery. We read and perform plays for reader's theatre, and ultimately write our own play.

I have collected my notes into a series of games, plays and lessons to be used as a reference for myself and other parents and teachers interested in improving the presentation skills of their children and students. I am primarily concerned with empowering kids and modeling ownership. When they are doing it all themselves, they will direct each other, compliment each other and strategize and problem solve together. I believe that the teaching of these skills is vital because clear communication allows a person to be heard. Without a voice a person is significantly less engaged. Repeatedly I have been astounded and gratified to see the children rise to exceed my expectations.

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## **Topics and Skills:**

The following topics of discussion are separated and defined to address different aspects of the process of creative performance. The skills are organized more or less by skill level and they form a series of lessons, designed to be completed one at a time, over several work sessions.

### Work Session Topics

1. Story development and structure: We read stories, plays and poems and we discuss what elements make the story progress. We change the boring parts; we then perform them, working the roles until a fresh audience provides the desired response.
2. Character development: I ask the children after we have done several plays, which character they enjoyed the most and what kind of character they would like to play next. I share what I believe are the strengths from their last performance and then I have them write a short back-story and self-portrait of the new character. I have the children talk to each other in character and have them write down what they say.
3. Poetry, content, rhythm and pacing: I think kids respond very well to poetry; usually all we have to do is slow it down and put emphasis on the key words. I've always wanted to bring in a metronome or a stand up bass.
4. Vocabulary, sound and meaning: When we are really scrutinizing the material, there is always a word, at least one person doesn't know, I tend to over do it, but I talk about the word, synonyms and different contexts, and it makes the children comfortable with not knowing all the words, and just trying them and moving on. If I can, I read the hard words first for everyone before we start reading.
5. Enunciation, inflection, dialect and character voices: Within the children's patience and interest level, I read and re-read passages, until the passage really delivers. For the most part, they are intrigued by the effect funny voices have on an audience.
6. Choral reading: This seems to be a lost art except in church. I think it teaches the children a common culture of sound. They become accustomed to hearing and feeling a body of literature, as a group, and physically in their own bodies.
7. Comic delivery: Timing, Timing, Timing! I cannot begin to express how rewarding this is. When a shy child tells a joke and everyone gets it and laughs, the world opens up to them, and they start looking for that hit again, the possibilities are endless. I mostly use those "101 jokes about etc" books. A

child's sense of humor is very personal, sometimes it is only in his or her own head, and you just have to be there.

8. Informational speaking: The process of delivering a speech, or a book report, or a research project seems really straight forward, you just stand and talk, right? I find people feel really exposed and stage fright is really common. This is really a two-part process, after the child has finished preparing the topic, he must do a coached presentation, as a separate step. This usually takes about an hour because it is so hard to present personal experiences. Exposing one's own voice up for public scrutiny, takes a kind of personal commitment to the material. Outgoing children with a love of a popular book, may still find it hard to perform and be seen in that light (for example - a reader and a lover of pigs, "Charlotte's Web"). I mostly focus one on one, getting the child to remember his excitement for the material, and then I work on volume, projection, and microphone technique. Then I go back and work on enunciation, inflection, and phrasing, because we don't want people laughing in the wrong places.
9. Ensemble: This is about learning one's role in the group. I find when everyone cares about the outcome of a performance; all the roles are open for discussion. Everyone actively contributes opinions until the roles and the rules are defined. The end result is everyone knows his or her piece in the puzzle.

This curriculum is designed to facilitate children who have learned to read to become audible public speakers. It is also designed to increase vocabulary and familiarize children who read, with the sound of larger words in print.

I spend a good deal of the time examining favorite literature and discussing why we love it so much. I encourage the kids to really imagine what they would like to contribute to the world of literature and I remind them that every author starts out as a lover of story. A strong desire to communicate helps a lot too. I believe if one is comfortable speaking their ideas, then they work harder on being able to clearly communicate, and they work harder on content and social acceptance of their work, this skill allows them to see themselves as a contributing member of a community.

## GETTING STARTED:

I like to work in pairs, with either four or eight children, six seems like it should work but sometimes two groups of three will emerge, and three is a hard number for children.

The beginning exercises are similar to acting improvisation games, the kind used in large groups, for breaking the ice and getting to know one another. I find it works best to work with children, already friendly and comfortable with each other. I have had success working with groups made up of best friends, the children are already comfortable playing in fantasy role playing, and they will talk louder, get into character, and argue points of events much faster.

I have made a questionnaire for sorting kids into reading groups. I sort by taste in literature, shyness and friendships. Sometimes I will work with groups of silent reticent children, sometimes, I will work with a group of kids who are loud and hungry for the spotlight. When I've gotten to know the kids, I'll pair a fastidious wall flower with an insatiable showoff, because the tension and territory issues that arise, force the children to channel their communication talents to their best advantage (this does take patience). I'm looking for the chemistry that a casting director looks for in making a show. When the children have ownership of the project, they will do most of the work themselves. I want them to get "heated up" about what the climax of a story should be, and how the tension will be resolved. I want them, within their abilities, to get their character out of trouble and resolve the story with an ending that ties up the loose ends.

## EXERCISES:

The first two exercises use the “APPLES TO APPLES GAME” cards. This game comes in three vocabulary levels. It is often best to use the “JUNIOR” version age 7 and up in the beginning until the kids get bored, because these words mostly don't have nuances and the kids just move right along. I will use the 9 and up game to increase their vocabulary and to introduce nuances and puns. I pull out only the cards I think will add interest and value from the regular adult game. I will choose concepts the children will find racy, but not ones adults would find racy, and I'm careful not to bring too many of them, the number of kids in the group multiplied by two usually works to expand their story, but I dole them out, and if they get too distracted by the word, I take it out and give another. This is a guided learning exercise and the point is for them to rub the words together and make a fire. We talk about what story elements were really funny or really interesting. If a card belonging to another inspires someone, they can trade a card with the other player.

1. I use the cards from the apples to apples game. I deal out 12 to each child. They have to put the cards in order and take about 5 minutes to make up a story using as many of the cards as they can. They are allowed to give back up to six and be dealt six more. And have another 2 minutes. Then they tell their story to the group.
2. This exercise uses the skills learned from the first game and further teaches the kids to listen to each other. I deal each child 16 cards from the apples to apples game and then they go around in a circle adding one card from their hand, either reading just the word or adlibbing it into a sentence to further the story the group is trying to tell. The story must have a beginning, middle and an end. If the children are advanced, they must also reincorporate and tie up all the loose ends.
3. **READING COMIC POETRY:** I chose books like “Where the Sidewalk Ends” and “The Light in the Attic” by Shel Silverstein and “Vile Verses” by Roald Dahl.
  - A. I read a few verses first: I stand and speak very slowly. I hold the book flat while I look forward. I demonstrate what it would be like, if I sit and read at the table, and I demonstrate reading, with the book completely in front of my face. I ask them which way they liked the poem performed the best.
  - B. They usually know the books already and will want to choose their own poems. I will allow them all to read the same one, if they are determined to do so. The point of this exercise is rhythm, volume, timing, and presentation. I have them read until they are loud enough, and slow enough to draw a laugh.
  - C. I assign poems and have them practice for a partner before they do it for the whole group. If they have to read the same poem more than 3 or 4

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times to get their laugh, I let them try another shorter poem. I say, “ read it very slowly, and very loudly”, they usually will get a laugh first time around with the second poem. If they are very frustrated, I let them have a few private moments with a book to choose their next poem, but I have them go after only couple of kids if it is a big group. This is like that ‘if you fall off a horse ‘ axiom.

4. TONGUE TWISTERS: this is similar to exercise 3., except that if they can do it loud and slow, I then allow them to go as fast as they can while still able to articulate the words. I use Dr Seuss “Fox in Sox “, and “Oh Say, Can You Say?”.
5. TELLING A JOKE WITH A PARTNER: I get a stack of kids joke books and I look for the “Did you hear the one about?” variety. I flag a few pages of these and partner up the kids, I isolate them and get them to rehearse, and then, they do a little “stand up” for the group.
6. CHORAL READING: I want to teach the kids to be able to read in unison. I have had some luck with poems for two voices, but I think I will try jump-rope rhymes. The Pledge of Allegiance could be helpful here.
7. PACING: People are taught how to weight the rhyme in a poem. It is cultural and it has to do with how words are pronounced. I teach the kids to drum with their fingers while saying a poem. Every syllable is one drumbeat, after it becomes a chant; I have them read it as they would normally. Old kid’s hand clap rhymes work well here, i.e.” Three sailors went to sea sea sea”
8. LIP SINC: Working in pairs, have one child read from the book and the other child mouths it front of everyone. The have to be able to do it together and even memorize a little.
9. READING A CHILDREN’S BOOK: I find this works best with a short picture book for ages 3 to 5. Funny, rhyming, and unexpected twists in the plot are important aspects for a book for this project. The child sits or stands in front of the group and holds the book for all to see. They read upside down a little, they glance at the page and remember what they read before they say it and then they do a voice for each character, and they add sound effects.
10. READER’S THEATRE: I choose scripts that have close to the number of roles, as I have children in the group. I like gender-neutral roles like animals the first few times. I use a dice for casting. High roller chooses the role they want to read first. The second time through the play everyone just passes his or her script. We read through the play until everyone has read through the play as every character. We perform for the kindergartens until everyone has been who they like being, at least once. If the ensemble has chemistry we keep that casting configuration and perform for our class, or the first grades.

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At this point I might work on grooming a role, i.e., "speak up," or "read, don't physically act it out," or "that voice you're using is funny, but no one can understand you." I'm very careful not to criticize. **THIS IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT.** I will ask the actor for what effect they're hoping; I'll ask the group if they think he's close; we'll talk about ways to improve our presentation. We don't perform until everyone is audible and we're getting laughs in the right places.

11. **CHARACTER BACK STORIES:** Each child must describe in writing one or two favorite characters. They must also write a back-story for the character explaining how he came to be that way.
12. **THROWING YOUR VOICE:** There are many exercises for voice projection these are just some of them.
  - A. Stand as far away from the children as is possible, use the cafeteria or the gym if possible. Talk in a whisper. Ask them what they heard you say.
  - B. Make it silly, speak louder, and ask them what you said. Make them speak loud enough that you can hear them.
  - C. Tell them what you said, using a very projected voice. (Visualize your voice hitting the back wall with a bounce) Walk while still speaking up to the children so they can hear how loud you are actually.
  - D. Have them match your volume. Teach them to breathe and use their legs and open their throat.