

LETTERS

A READER'S THEATRE SCRIPT BY
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CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE

Introduction

Letters is a thought-provoking and character-driven look at war through the ages told through letters.

Synopsis

During many wars, letters home were the only form of communication between soldiers and their loved ones. This play brings those letters to life. *Letters* shows characters writing to and receiving letters from soldiers of various wars: The American Civil War, WWI, WWII, Korea, Vietnam and Iraq. Some put all their heart and tears into what they write. Some know the truth is impossible to share. How do you write about death? Survival? How do you tell someone that war has changed you? How do you survive when life back home changes without you? How do you connect the front lines to trying to cope at home? Do you share the horrors of war, or hide them? There are no answers or easy conclusions in this play. The letters present emotions in the moment: love, sorrow, regret, pride.

Reader's Theatre Format

Reader's Theatre is a dramatic reading of a text in front of an audience. Students stand with their scripts, usually at music stands so their hands are free. There are no sets, lighting effects, costumes, movement, or memorizing of lines. Reader's Theatre is always presented simply, with the emphasis on reading the text aloud. But it's important to emphasize that it's not just a reading. It is a 'dramatic reading' with defined characters, ensemble work, and attention paid to the sound of the piece.

Because this piece bounces back and forth so quickly between time periods and different wars, it makes sense to focus on the aural qualities of the script. The text features oral elements such as overlapping speech, unison speech, and repeated patterns. The words speak for themselves.

Characters (and what war they are connected to)

Sarah: [W] WWII, at home writing to her brother

Darla: [W] Iraq War, mother of a soldier

Katie: [W] WWII, at home writing to her boyfriend

Harriet: [W] Civil War, nurse

Megan: [W] Iraq War, writing to a soldier

Kristin: [W] Iraq War, writing to a soldier

Iris: [W] Iraq War, writing to a soldier

Janice: [W] Vietnam, writing to her boyfriend

Shauna: [W] Vietnam, at home

Tammy: [W] Vietnam, at home

Marie: [W] Korea, writing to her fiancée

Elsie: [W] WWI, nurse

John: [M] WWII, soldier

Robert: [M] WWI, soldier

Lewis: [M] Civil War, soldier

Billy: [M] WWII, soldier

Ben: [M] WWII, soldier

Caleb: [M] WWI, soldier

Richie: [M] Vietnam, soldier

Michael: [M] Korea, soldier

Jim: [M] Civil War, soldier

Themes

War, death, love, memory, morality, personal responsibility, self-image

Pre-Read Questions

- ★ In your opinion, what is the purpose of war?
- ★ Is war necessary? Why or why not? Has war ever been necessary in the past? Why or why not?
- ★ Do you have family members or ancestors who have taken part in a war? Do you know anything about their experience?
- ★ What do you think it would be like to fight in a war? Do you believe in fighting for your country?
- ★ What is Reader's Theatre? When and why would you use Reader's Theatre instead of fully producing a script?

Pre-Read Activities

Reader's Theatre

- ★ Ask students: What's the difference between a play and Reader's Theatre?
 - » Reader's Theatre is a dramatic reading of a text in front of an audience. The text could be from a play, but is just as likely to be from a novel, poem, original short story, or other literary work. There are no sets, lighting effects, costumes, movement, or memorizing of lines.
 - » Reader's Theatre is always presented simply, with the emphasis on reading the text aloud.
 - » It's important to emphasize that it's not just a reading; it is a 'dramatic reading' with defined characters, ensemble work, and attention paid to the sound of the piece.

- » There are a lot of questions you can ask about the aural qualities of a character: What do the characters sound like? How do you vocally interpret the characters? What kind of vocal expression will they have?
- » There are a lot of questions you can ask about the expression of the text: What images are created through the words? Do the aural qualities influence the plot (e.g.: fast short sentences during a climatic moment)?
- ★ Ask students: What does it mean to read with expression?
 - » Reader's Theatre is not just a reading; it's reading with expression.
 - » Expression: the power of expression in words.
 - » Sample expression elements:
 - › Tone: How does the text sound? Is there an emotion being expressed?
 - › Pacing: What is the inherent pacing in the text? Emotion is often reflected in the structure of a sentence — length, punctuation, contractions. All of these elements hold clues to the pace.
 - › Pauses: Readers need to breathe. So do audiences! Pauses can be used to great effect in Reader's Theatre. They can offer a rest after a dramatic moment. They can reflect a character making a difficult choice.
- ★ Ask students: If there's no movement in a Reader's Theatre piece, how can you incorporate physical action?
 - » While there is no blocking or movement in Reader's Theatre, there are some physical elements to note. Will the readers stand in a line? Stay seated? Will they keep their backs to the audience when not speaking? How will students give focus to the speakers? Will students hold the scripts or have them on music stands? Music stands leave the hands free for gestures. Any actions need to be simple and easy.

- » Any action should be simple and not interfere with the sound of the reading. It's important not to ignore the physical aspect or students will fidget and draw focus when they're not talking. Make the experience theatrical within the confines of the format.
- ★ Divide students into groups. Give students a small piece of text to turn into Reader's Theatre: a short story, a poem, a small section of a novel. This is an exercise, so you want something students can work on and present within a limited time frame.
- ★ Emphasize to students that they are to demonstrate reading with expression, and incorporating physical action (remember that this is not standard blocking).
- ★ Groups will discuss how they're going to read the text and how they're going to include physical action.
- ★ Groups will rehearse and present.
- ★ Discuss the experience. What was it like to present a piece using this form?

Choral Speaking

- ★ Give the class a poem and have them try to read it in unison. This is a great exercise in active listening. The aim is to say the poem in one voice.
- ★ Discuss the experience afterward. Who had trouble staying with the group? Did they hear others speaking too fast or too slow?
- ★ Use the same poem and this time, play with pace.
- ★ Divide the class into smaller groups. Have the first group say the poem very, very slowly. So slowly that it's hard to comprehend the words.
- ★ Then have each successive group say the poem a little faster, and a little faster, and so on.
- ★ Discuss afterwards which pace worked the best. Which pace hindered comprehension?

Vocal Expression: Emphasis

- ★ Read a sentence multiple times, as a class, emphasizing a different word each time.
 - » E.g., Who do you think you are, I don't care what you think, Billy gave me an earring for Christmas.
- ★ Discuss the experience afterward. How does the meaning of the sentence change when you change the emphasis?

Vocal Expression: Change the Emotion

- ★ Have five or six students come up to the front of the class.
- ★ Have everyone say a sentence in unison with no emotion.
 - » Example sentence: My Aunt Bertha is coming to live with us.
- ★ Have each student say the sentence with a different emotion.
 - » E.g., happy, bored, angry, scared, disgusted, joyful, sad
- ★ Discuss the experience afterward. How does the sentence change as the emotion changes?

Write a Letter

- ★ The letter is an art form. With the increasing use of digital platforms, there aren't many people these days sitting down to communicate with pen and paper.
 - » **Note:** You want students to actually engage with the act of writing a letter, so you will need to provide envelopes and stamps so you can follow through with the exercise and mail the letters.
- ★ Explain to students that they are going to write a letter to someone. It can be a family member like a grandparent, or a friend who lives far away. They will need to bring in the address for this person, as at the end of class, they will put their letter in an addressed envelope and you will mail them.

- » Some of your students may have never addressed a letter! You may need to show them how to write an address so that it arrives where it needs to go.
- » Emphasize to students that at the end of class, you will mail their letters.
- ★ Have students get out a pen and piece of paper and write their letter.
 - » Writing a letter is a different experience than writing an email or a text. Remind students to write in complete sentences. If you want, have them include salutations in their letter.
 - » You may want to discuss what to write about in a letter and the purpose of communicating in this way. What are students going to share?
- ★ Hand out envelopes and have students address them. Make sure they are addressed properly. Students will put their letter in the addressed envelope and seal it. Collect the sealed envelopes.
- ★ Discuss what it was like to communicate with someone in letter format as opposed to how they normally communicate.

Research Project: Soldier experience

- ★ The play covers a wide variety of wars from the American Civil War to the Iraq War and focuses on the experience of soldiers, nurses, and those at home.
- ★ In groups students will research the soldier experience in one of the wars from the play. What was it like for a soldier to fight in a specific war? What was it like when they returned home? Focus on the experience of the soldier in the war, rather than having students research the war itself.
- ★ After completing their research, students will create a presentation in which everyone in the group must take part. It can be:
 - » A live oral presentation with a visual component such as a slide deck
 - » An original scene theatricalizing their findings
 - » A recorded presentation (filmed scene, or oral presentation with visual component)

Connection and Communication Moment

- ★ Discuss with students: How do you connect with others? How do you communicate? Are you a good communicator? Do you ever leave things out when you're telling a story because of who you're talking to? Are you always truthful when you share a story of something that's happened to you? Why or why not?
- ★ Divide students into groups. Based on the discussion they are to create a one-minute theatrical moment that visualizes connection and communication.
- ★ Groups will choose a form for their moment: tableaux, spoken word, movement piece, original scene, song, or film.

Close Reading Analysis Questions

Close reading is an analysis tool. Students read a text multiple times for in-depth comprehension, striving to understand not only **what** is being said but **how** it's being said and **why**. Close reading takes a student from story and character to drawing conclusions on author intention. Close reading prompts students to flex their thinking skills by:

- ★ Teaching students to engage with a text.
- ★ Teaching students to be selective. We can't highlight everything in the text, only the most important elements.
- ★ Teaching students to make educated decisions. All conclusions and opinions must be backed up with a text example.

Have students analyze *Letters* individually or in groups, using the following text-dependent questions:

Read One: What is happening?

1. What is your first impression of the play?
2. What is the date on Jim's letter?

3. Finish this sentence: "Fighting is the most horrible noise and the most horrible _____."
4. Who says, "War is no place for a woman" at the same time as Elsie?
5. What war is Sarah referencing in her letter?
6. Is Tammy for or against war?
7. Does Richie lie or tell the truth about his experience?
8. Finish this sentence: "I smell _____ all the time."
9. Who is Darla writing to?
10. What is Caleb afraid of?
11. What does Marie tell Adam?
12. Who saved Michael's life?
13. Who asks, "Why is war good?"
14. Do you have any questions about the play?
15. What is the key idea of the play?

Read Two: How does it happen?

1. Why do you think the playwright chose to use the Reader's Theatre format with this play?
2. Analyze the unison speaking in the text. What impact would it have on an audience?
3. Based on Caleb's language, what can you infer about his personality?
4. Based on Katie's language, behaviour, and personality, how would you costume this character? What war is she a part of?
5. What is the significance of the line, "And the rest of us were happy. It wasn't our house"?

6. What is the significance of the line, "I can't read your letters anymore"?
7. What is the significance of the line, "There are some things... sometimes I think it would be better not to know"?
8. While the majority of the text is serious, there are moments of humour (such as Caleb's monologue). What is the purpose of including comedy in a play about war? In your opinion, why has the playwright done this?
9. Are there any words you don't know? Identify and define them.
10. What is the main conflict in the play?

Read Three: Why does it happen?

1. In your opinion, why is the play called *Letters*?
2. What is the playwright trying to say about war? Cite the text to support your answer.
3. What is the playwright trying to say about truth vs fiction? Cite the text to support your answer.
4. What is the play trying to say about connection? Cite the text to support your answer.
5. Compare and contrast how you communicate and connect with people to what happens in the play.
6. How does the playwright want you to respond to this play?

Post-Read Questions

- ★ What is one question that you still have about the play?
- ★ Which character resonated with you the most and why?
- ★ Do you recognize yourself in any of the characters?
- ★ Did any scene make you think about your relationship with war?

- ★ Is war necessary? Why or why not?
- ★ In this play, letters are the only form of communication. How would you feel if you could only communicate through letters? What would that be like?
- ★ Some characters in the play didn't tell the whole story. Were they right to do so? Why or why not?
- ★ Some characters realized they made the wrong choice. Have you ever been in a position where you were sure you were right, but it turned out you were wrong?

Post-Read Activities

Character Costume Design

- ★ Choose a character and design their costume.
- ★ Based on their personality, what would they wear? What pieces of clothing define them? What colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour costume rendering.

Set Design

- ★ Students, individually or in groups, will discuss and decide how they would design the set for this play, if there were one. Based on the themes in the play, what colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour set rendering or write a two-paragraph description of the set.

Poster Design

- ★ Based on what you've read, design a poster for the play. How would you visualize the play in a single image that would attract an audience? What font would you use for the title? What information other than the title would you include?

Sound Design

- ★ Students, individually or in groups, will discuss and decide how they would create a sound design for the play. Based on the themes in the play, what sounds, pieces of music, or styles of music would they use? How would the era each war was in influence their music choices?
- ★ Create a playlist for the play.

Letters New Scene

- ★ This play uses the letter as a form of communication and connection. Ask students: How would you add 21st-century forms of communication and connection to this play?
- ★ Divide students into groups. They will write a new scene, using a different war or one of the wars in the play, and have the characters communicate and connect using only 21st-century forms. Students will decide on those forms and how the scene will be presented.
- ★ As students work, emphasize that the goal of the scene is connection and communication. That doesn't mean characters will tell the truth, or tell the whole truth — they just have to share their story using a 21st-century communication platform.

Reader's Theatre Scenes

- ★ Divide students into small groups and assign each group a scene from the play, or a short moment within a scene.
- ★ Give students time to rehearse their scene in the Reader's Theatre format, including vocal expression and physical action.
- ★ Each group will present their moment.

Playwright Process

Playwright Evelyn Merritt talks about her process writing Letters. Have students read and then discuss/reflect on how their perception of the writing process compares to the playwright's.

1. Why did you write this play?

I attended many Memorial Day and Veterans Day assemblies. Often students would read aloud real letters and that's where the idea started. As the play grew, it became clear how similar the letters were, whether from the Civil War or World War II or any of them — people want to connect with each other. Sometimes they are good at writing, and sometimes they are not. Sometimes they need to get out their anger and frustration, and sometimes all they want is to hear about the normal things happening at home. Sometimes it is those at home who are frustrated. It's heartbreaking and heartwarming.

2. Why did you choose the Reader's Theatre form?

I knew I wanted to have letters from wars across the years. Reader's Theatre, which does not emphasize costumes or sets, was the best format for this. Because the idea came from seeing letters read at an assembly, I never really thought of it being fully staged! Reader's Theatre makes the most sense.

3. Are any of the characters or letters in the play real?

No. Although I did do a lot of letter reading! It's amazing how much you can learn about the Civil War, for example, by reading the letters of the young men smack dab in the middle of the experience. I spent a lot of time reading letters for each of the wars portrayed in the play and from that, I created characters.