

# Putting on a play

## Introduction

When preparing to put on a play based on your Reader, the journey is often as important as the final result. Preparation involves the whole class in a huge variety of tasks, such as analyzing the characters and story, allocating roles, adapting text, deciding on stage directions, designing costumes and sets, rehearsing and so on. These activities teach children to work together as a group, help them to enjoy English lessons and give them more confidence.

It is important to note that young children who are just learning to read or cannot yet read are also able to work together as a class to produce a Reader-based play. Children can understand the story with the teacher's help in storytelling classes, and they can perform the play, speaking and miming in the same way as older children. In addition, younger children are often more creative than older children when producing materials such as masks and props.

Staging the actual play in front of an audience, such as parents or children from other classes, can be a very rewarding experience for children of any age and level of English. As well as providing enjoyment, it brings the language to life and helps children to develop as individuals. Children feel that they are contributing to their own learning, and that their individual skills are valued. All round, it's a great experience for children. But it does take careful planning. Here are some tips to help you stage a successful play.

## Choosing a suitable Reader

Here are some things to bear in mind when selecting a Reader to turn into a play.

- The language should be appropriate for the level and age of children.
- For older readers, it is important to choose a Reader that has plenty of dialogue, either in the form of speech bubbles or as quotes embedded in the text. For children who are unable to or just starting to read English, choose a Reader with plenty of actions which can be mimed. A chant can also be useful when performing a play with younger children.
- The plot should be fairly simple, and should not involve too many props or changes of scene.
- The play should have plenty of speaking parts if it is for older children, as well as opportunities for parts like extras and narrators.
- The play shouldn't be too long. For example, an eleven-page story from *Macmillan Children's Readers* can be turned into about four pages of text, stage directions and sound effects. This script will take between twenty minutes and half an hour to perform. For the higher-level Explorers, some scenes may need to be omitted.

## Involving all the class

It is important to involve all of the class in some way.

- Children who don't have individual speaking parts can say the narrator's parts together in a chorus.
- Children can also be used to introduce the different scenes, to welcome the audience, and to help find or make props, scenes, masks and costumes.



The director of the play will usually be the teacher. But it is important to involve the children in decision-making. For example, children can choose the music, contribute their ideas for stage directions, design the invitations for the play and so on.

If the text needs adapting, try to let children adapt some of it rather than presenting everything to them as a completed script. However this may not be possible with lower-level classes. In higher-level classes, you may wish to adapt part of the text yourself to speed things up, giving other parts to the children to adapt. See the information on adapting text earlier in this guide.

### Understanding the story

In order to act confidently in a play, children need a good grasp of the events in the story. Here are some suggestions to help children understand and remember key story events.

Use the audio frequently when preparing for a play, to ensure that children have a good sense of what the story is about. Frequent audio use can:

- Help children who are auditory learners, or who may have problems with reading due to dyslexia.
- Model good pronunciation.
- Help children understand the emotions of the characters by listening to the way they say their lines.
- Take the burden of reading off the class.
- Encourage children to visualize the story, without relying on the illustrations.

You can use the audio to:

- Listen to the story and read at the same time.
- Just listen, with books closed.
- Listen with books closed, then open books and read.



**Listening to audio is a key part of the preparation.**

### Using real objects (any level and age)

**Aim:** to get children thinking about the themes of the story.

- 1 Before children begin the Reader, collect items that are related to the story in some way, such as maps, images from the Internet or other objects. Bring these things into the classroom and place them around the room.
- 2 Ask the children to walk around the classroom and examine the different objects.
- 3 Discuss how each object might contribute to the story.

You may wish to repeat this activity at different points in the story. Real objects can be used to remind children of things that have already happened, or to get them to predict the next part of the story. Older children can also do their own Internet research.

### Researching a historical period on the Internet

(developing and confident readers, aged 6–12)

**Aim:** to help children understand the context of a historical story and the world in which the characters lived.

Some Readers are set in a specific historical period, such as [The Adventures of Odysseus](#) (*Explorers*, Level 4) or [Kings and Queens: King Alfred and the Cakes](#) (*Macmillan Children's Readers*, Level 3). Internet-based research can help children understand the historical period and prepare for longer drama activities.

- 1 Prepare a list of simple questions that children will be able to answer based on their Internet research.
- 2 Find websites which give simple information about the historical period and which children can use to answer your questions.

**It is very important to check websites carefully and give specific web references in order to make sure the content is suitable for children.**

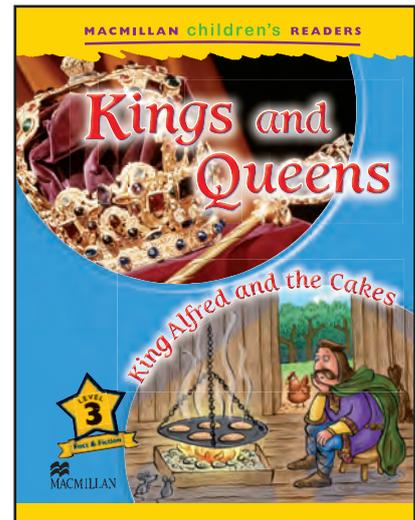
- 3 Most websites will contain information which is too difficult for children to understand. Ask them to concentrate on things like the pictures, maps and headings in order to answer questions.
- 4 Discuss the historical period, asking children to tell you how life was different at the time, how people dressed, where the characters in the story lived and so on.

**Snap** (any level and any age)

**Aim:** to remind children of each character's role in the story.

- 1 Write the names of the story characters on large pieces of card, and put these in an envelope.
- 2 Write sentences about each character on separate pieces of card. For example, these could be things that the characters do or adjectives to describe them. Shuffle these up and put them in a separate envelope.
- 3 Nominate two children to come to the front of the class, and give each child one of the envelopes.
- 4 The two children at the front take it in turns to pull cards out of their envelopes. They should hold up their cards and read out the information or names on them, while the rest of the class listens. The class calls out 'snap' if the character's name matches the information.

You may wish to do this activity in pairs, using a separate pair of envelopes for each pair.



**Events ordering** (any level and age)

**Aim:** to help children to memorize key events of the story.

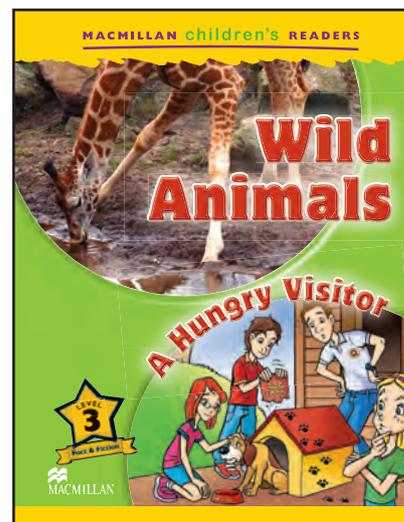
The worksheets and end-of-book activities in *Macmillan Children's Readers* often contain exercises in which children order events in the story. Other Readers may not have a ready-made activity, but it is very easy to produce one.

1 Write events from the story on a large piece of paper, then photocopy it enough times to give out to groups in your class. For example, events from the story in [Wild Animals: A Hungry Visitor](#) (*Macmillan Children's Readers*, Level 3) could include:

- Mr Fraser and the children go into the forest.
- The children have breakfast.
- The children give Max his breakfast.
- Max's bag of dog food is empty.
- Charlie takes some photos.
- Mr Fraser and the children go to the campsite shop.
- Charlie finds footprints.
- The children see a family of cats.

2 Cut each piece of paper into strips, shuffle the strips and put them in an envelope. Give each envelope to a different group in your class.

3 Ask children to put the strips in the correct order, without checking back in the story. If there is a suitable place in your classroom, ask each group to stick the strips on the wall.



**Key words** (developing and confident readers, aged 8–12)

**Aim:** to remind children of the story plot using key vocabulary.

1 After you have finished the Reader, write key words from the story on the board. These can be taken from the Teacher's Notes for *Explorers*, or the Picture Dictionary or Bilingual Dictionary at the back of *Macmillan Children's Readers*. Put them in a grid format, as in this example from [Snow White](#) (*Explorers*, Level 5).

mirror	apple	queen	beautiful
dwarf	Snow White	seven	sleep
cottage	poison	old woman	comb
ill	prince	eat	friends
jealous	king	wedding	wake
bed	hate	stepmother	lie

2 Children look at the grid in pairs and try to make connections between the words. They should do this by drawing lines between words. Children can draw as many lines and think of as many connections as they like.

3 Ask children to come to the board and draw lines between words. Ask the class to decide why the child at the board has drawn the line. For example, in the grid above:

*There is poison in the apple. The mirror never lies.*

## Understanding the characters

In order to act 'in character', children need a good understanding of who the characters are and what their personalities are like. Here are some suggestions to help children understand the story characters.

### Matching characters to icons (beginning and developing readers, aged 4–7)

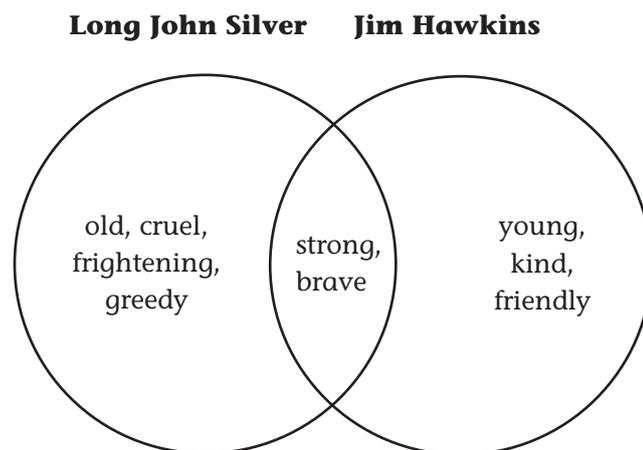
**Aim:** to help children understand key story characters and their emotions.

- 1 Draw simple round icons of faces on pieces of paper. Each icon should represent a different emotion, such as anger, happiness, sadness, fear, etc. Icons for emotions such as these (often called 'emoticons') are widely available on the Internet.
- 2 Stick the faces up around the classroom walls.
- 3 In storytelling and drama lessons, ask how each character is feeling at different points in the story. Children point to the icon which represents that emotion on the classroom walls.

### Venn diagrams (developing and confident readers, aged 8–12)

**Aim:** to help children understand the similarities and differences between key story characters.

- 1 Draw a Venn diagram on the board, making sure the two circles overlap. Write the name of a key character at the top of each circle. Here is an example of a Venn diagram for two characters in [Treasure Island](#) (*Explorers*, Level 6).



- 2 As a class, brainstorm adjectives that describe each character. Ask children to come to the front of the class and write their adjectives in the correct place on the Venn diagram. Remind them that only the adjectives in the overlapping space apply to both characters.

### Character interviews (very confident readers, aged 10–12)

**Aim:** to help children understand the motivations of different people in the story; to get children used to acting ‘in character’.

- 1 Tell children they are going to interview key characters from the story. Write characters’ names on the board, leaving enough space to write questions under each name.
- 2 Brainstorm questions that children would like to ask each character, such as asking why they did something in the story. Write the questions that children have suggested under each character’s name on the board.
- 3 Ask children to work in pairs and discuss how the characters would answer each of the questions.
- 4 Ask for volunteers to play the parts of the characters on the board. The rest of the class will ask them questions. After a time, change the actors for each character.
- 5 The actors should answer their questions ‘in character’, pretending to actually be that character. With a weaker class, children should only ask the questions on the board. With a stronger class, encourage children to ask follow-up questions as well.

### Practical considerations

There are many aspects to preparing for and performing a play, and we will look at these below. You may also like to read [Lights, Camera, Action! On Location](#) (Macmillan Children’s Readers, Level 4) with children when you are preparing for the play. This story is all about children in a class who are preparing their own filmed production. Reading it will help raise children’s awareness of the different stages involved in putting on a performance.

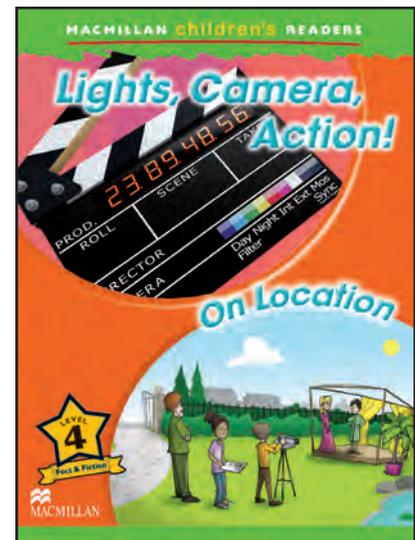
#### When to start

It’s important to start preparations for a play at the right time. You need enough time for children to learn the story, rehearse properly, and create any props, masks and costumes. However, starting too early may cause children to lose interest.

As a rough guide, if you can rehearse twice a week, you should aim to start a ten-page script about five or six weeks before the final date. Shorter plays, such as two or three-page scripts, can start later. Be aware that if you plan to have costumes and props, then even a short play will require a minimum of three weeks to prepare. This ensures that everything is produced in time.

#### Rehearsals

It is important not to try to do too much too fast. Concentrate on helping children get the words right first, and then focus on stage directions as the performance approaches. If children are given too many things to remember at the same time, their performance will suffer.



### Freezing

One useful technique for helping children focus on their performance is called 'freezing'.

- 1 Explain that during a rehearsal you may call out the word 'freeze'. If children hear 'freeze', they should stop acting and stay still – as if they were frozen – so that everyone can stop and look at the scene.
- 2 Practise freezing until children are used to doing this. You can call 'freeze' if you want to focus children's attention on:
  - Issues to do with stage directions.
  - Facial expressions and body language.
  - Characters' thoughts and feelings at a particular point in the play.

### Weaker actors

Inevitably, there will be some children who have difficulty remembering lines and stage directions. However, focusing too much on these children in general rehearsals may frustrate other, more confident, performers. It may also place unnecessary pressure on the weaker children. Allow time in your schedule, outside of normal rehearsals, to give extra help to weaker actors.

### Breaking up the lesson

Young children in particular have difficulty concentrating for long periods of time, so it is important not to rehearse too much in one go. Take frequent breaks, during which children can do other things. For example, a lesson spent preparing for a play might have the following stages:

- A quick 'warm-up' at the start of the lesson, such as playing a game.
- A two- or three-minute 'calm down', such as quietly listening to the audio from the scene that you are going to rehearse.
- Fifteen minutes spent rehearsing the scene.
- A five-minute energizer for tired children, such as a chant or a song.
- Another fifteen minutes spent rehearsing the scene again.



**Children will need frequent breaks from rehearsing.**

### Costumes and props

Making full costumes for a play can be time-consuming and expensive, so you will need to get help if you choose to do this. Talk to parents at an event like a parent-teacher meeting and find out how willing they are to spend time creating costumes for a play. You may find parents who are talented at these things and have done them before. Make sure that costumes don't place an unwanted burden on parents – or lead to rivalry between children over the best costume.



Costumes do not have to be full outfits.

#### Simple masks can be made.

Often a single item of clothing such as a hat, glasses or wand can be a quick and easy way to represent a character in a story. For example, a king or queen can wear a simple crown, along with regular school clothes. Another good alternative to making costumes is helping children to make masks. You may wish to work together with the art teachers at your school, enabling children to make props in their art classes.

It is important to introduce costumes and props at the appropriate time. The use of costumes too early in rehearsals can be an unnecessary distraction. As a general rule, introduce props that are actually referred to or handled by children in the play first, as these will help children to rehearse their parts. Introduce costumes and non-essential props in the last week before the performance.

### Scenery

You may wish to reproduce scenery from the Reader as a backdrop for your play. Scenery can be anything from simple visual aids to a fully painted backdrop. Here are two suggestions:

- 1 Photocopy illustrations from the Reader or encourage children to redraw them. Stick these up on a board or wall, then use this as a backdrop for your play.
- 2 Place drawings, pictures or objects on a coloured ground. For example:
  - To reproduce a jungle scene for [In the Jungle](#) (*Young Explorers*, Level 1), hang green cloth or green paper on a wall. Children can then draw things to attach to this background, such as leaves, tree trunks and animals. Objects such as real branches and photos of animals can also be attached to this background.
  - To reproduce the underwater background for [The Deep: The City Under the Sea](#) (*Macmillan Children's Readers*, Level 6), hang a blue cloth on a wall. Attach drawings or photos of sea creatures to this. You can also attach objects, such as sea shells or bits of fishing net.

### Music

Music can help to set the atmosphere of the play and make the production feel more professional. Since this is your children's play, it is important to involve them in the choice of music.

- 1 Remind children that cartoons and films always have a soundtrack. Tell children that they are going to choose the soundtrack for their play.
- 2 Find a few pieces of music which have different atmospheres, such as calming piano music or lively dance music with drums. You are going to play 30-second clips from each type of music on a laptop or MP3/CD player.

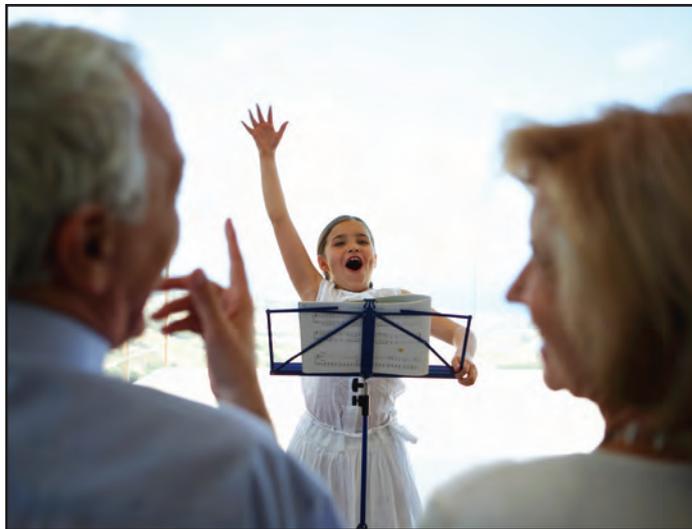
- 3 Ask children to close their eyes, then play the first music clip. After playing each piece of music, ask children to describe the music and their feelings. Discuss the play and ask children what kind of music they think is suitable for the story.
- 4 Ask children to choose the most appropriate piece(s) of music for the start and end of the play.
- 5 Give children a similar choice for music to play during the performance, but this time only play them clips with very light background music.

### **The performance**

By the time children perform the play, they should be well prepared for their roles, whether they are actors, narrators, or have non-stage roles such as welcoming the audience or producing sound effects. It is important for the teacher to sit back and let children get on with the performance, providing subtle cues only if it is really necessary.

In order to allow the children to really shine, the teacher needs to take a back seat and be practically invisible. Naturally, you want everything to go well, so this can be quite difficult to do. When a child momentarily forgets a line or fails to pick up a prop, it can be very tempting to intervene. But it's important to give children a little time: they will probably put the performance back on track themselves without any intervention. The key is confidence. If you know that your children are well prepared, and you believe that they are capable of putting on the performance without your help, you won't feel tempted to step in as soon as there's a minor hitch.

Performing a play can bring children many rewards, including personal development, learning to work in a group, becoming more active in class and gaining confidence in English. But the greatest reward is the huge sense of achievement that children feel at the end of a successful performance. 'If I can do this,' children think to themselves, 'what else can I do?'



**Performing brings a huge sense of achievement.**

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