What is this phenomenon known as Reader’s Theater? Linda Cornwell categorizes Reader’s Theater as readers reading a script adapted from literature, and the audience picturing the action from hearing the script being read aloud. It requires no sets, costumes, props, or memorized lines. Instead of acting out literature in a play, the performer’s goal is to read a script aloud effectively, enabling the audience to visualize the action. Performers bring the text alive by using voice, facial expressions, and some gestures (Cornwell).

What does Reader’s Theater have to do with librarians? Glad you asked! Read on.

THE “DRAMA QUEEN” BRINGS READER’S THEATER TO THE CLASSROOM
I have a long and storied history with both teaching and drama. For a variety of reasons, I stepped away from the classroom for a time and used my dramatic skills in the role of the resident “drama queen” at my daughters’ elementary school. In my years at the school we produced several major productions, several of which were based around the various social studies curricula and several which were art for art’s sake.

Due to a sudden and drastic change in the economic climate, I had to return to the classroom for the first time in a number of years. I saw firsthand the challenges teachers face helping students from diverse backgrounds and home situations to improve their reading skills. With the highly structured environment of teaching to the standards, I missed being able to work with students creatively. I did implement Reader’s Theater scripts into my reading instruction from time to time, but missed doing it more often. My district had required materials to be used in reading instruction, and the Reader’s Theater scripts were a rare treat.

The students clamored for more, but we were trapped within the constraints of our assigned curricula. As luck would have it, I was hired as a long-term substitute for a library media specialist on maternity leave and immediately fell in love with the library. What I most appreciated were the opportunities it afforded in supporting student reading in dynamic and creative ways.

A RATIONALE FOR READER’S THEATER
I next happened upon a position within the library science program at the university where I am finishing my degree. As I worked my way through coursework, I gobbled up every librarian magazine I could get my hands on. Article after article discussed integrating arts into the library program, and many promoted Reader’s Theater as a great fit for the library. Children’s Literature to Readers Theatre (2010) by Elizabeth Poe documents how a group of second graders performed a Reader’s Theater piece for a group of kindergarten students, and the subsequent interactions that followed. Poe states,

Educators have embraced this dramatic form for its myriad educational benefits and adapted it for a variety of purposes. Many teachers and reading specialists, who regard it as a tool for teaching reading skills, have students read from prefabricated scripts. This activity is widely lauded as an effective means for increasing reading fluency as students practice reading aloud with others for the sake of a performance. It can also familiarize students with a literary text and deepen their comprehension of the text because successful reading aloud generally involves understanding what one is reading. It follows that understanding what is being read can lead to reading expressively.

The intent of Reader’s Theater is to give students room to grow and improve, but not to overwhelm them so that it no longer is a fun activity.

USING READER’S THEATER TO BUILD FLUENCY
As part of an independent study project, I approached the library media specialist at my daughters’ elementary school about doing a Reader’s Theater project. When I explained to her that this was to be a project investigating the efficacy of Reader’s Theater in improving students’ fluency, she became very excited. Prior to our meeting, she had met with the principal regarding the need to improve the fluency levels of the readers, particularly in third grade.

It was suggested that I work with a third grade teacher, and it just so happened to be my youngest daughter’s class. We worked out a tentative schedule to work with the students once a week for their language arts period. I found out that my daughter would likely be in my group as she had been struggling with fluency since first grade. I wanted a script based on a familiar story to strengthen the literary connection and found a Reader’s Theater script for Jon Scieszka’s The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs.

During our first meeting, I proceeded to read the book to them with full dramatic flair. I then reread the first few pages of the
book modeling poor fluency, and asked the students if they noticed any difference. Being third graders, they had no problem pointing out that the second reading was boring, and not fun to listen to like the first one was. I introduced to them the term fluency, and explained that the second time I was not modeling reading with good fluency. I then asked them if they thought that this was the first time I had ever read this story out loud. My daughter (of course) said, “No, you’re a teacher and a librarian, you’ve read that book a hundred times.”

I explained to the students how fluency improves with practice, and I had, indeed, read that book many, if not hundreds, of times to my students; and that they were going to practice reading this story aloud, with the intention of having a performance for the rest of the class in a few months. Everyone was excited, and we began the first session with a round table read-aloud. I noted the students’ strengths and weaknesses and began thinking about which roles would best suit them. The intention was to give them room to grow and improve, but not to overwhelm them so that it no longer was a fun activity.

The next week, I assigned roles and began practicing in earnest. Again, the scheduling was the most challenging aspect, and finding a place where we could practice privately as the students were developing their confidence. One time, a kindergarten class happened into where we were working, and I had the students keep going. They bravely read on, although several confided to me later that they were very nervous performing in front of an audience. They did well, and the kindergartners were entranced. After that I made it a point to invite small non-threatening groups to hear us practice to get the students acclimated to performing in front of an audience. The students were always eager for “Reader’s Theater Day” and have never once complained about having to read “the same thing” over and over again as we see so often in our remediation work with students.

The costume accommodations were minimal. I chose to do a numbered hat for each narrator, with the very popular animal caps for the pig and the wolf. The wolf cap was actually a dog cap to which I made a few minor modifications. As expected, when I re-tested the students’ fluency levels after eight weeks, all experienced a rise in fluency rates, some substantially. More importantly, they were exhibiting improved self confidence when reading aloud, as well as a better attitude toward reading in general.

Inclusion in the Reader’s Theater project was more like a badge of honor for students who so desperately needed one. Increased air of confidence. Since that performance, every time the students see me, they ask when we are going to do another Reader’s Theater performance. Other students ask if they can be included next time. Inclusion in the Reader’s Theater project was more like a badge of honor for the students who so desperately needed one. Since Reader’s Theater is easily implemented, flexible, and well received, it can be easily incorporated into a library media program (see resources).

In traditional theater, the focus is on the “end result” a.k.a. the big performance. In Reader’s Theater, the focus is on the process; kind of a “journey rather than the destination” philosophy. What a perfect fit for a media specialist interested in promoting literacy within their library program.

**Inclusion in the Reader’s Theater project was more like a badge of honor for students who so desperately needed one.**

**A BADGE OF HONOR**

The final performance was attended by the principal, assistant principal, reading specialist, parents, and classmates. The readers were nervous but excited. Of course, they did a wonderful job, and afterwards carried themselves with an increased air of confidence. Since that performance, every time the students see me, they ask when we are going to do another Reader’s Theater performance. Other students ask if they can be included next time. Inclusion in the Reader’s Theater project was more like a badge of honor for the students who so desperately needed one. Since Reader’s Theater is easily implemented, flexible, and well received, it can be easily incorporated into a library media program (see resources).