THEATER, DRAMA & READING

Transforming the Rehearsal Process into a Reading Process

Judith Freeman Garey

Foreword by Sheridan Blau

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Contents

FOREWORD xi
Sheridan Blau

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS xvii

PREFACE: RETHINKING THE DYNAMICS OF READING xix

INTRODUCTION: CONNECTING WITH DRAMA 1
Drama and Language Arts 2
Drama and the Common Core State Standards 5
Drama in an Online Environment 6

I **Reading as a Theater Artist** 9

CHAPTER 1 Reading as an Actor 11
Building Characters' Lives
Step 1: Search for and Record Evidence of Character from the Text 12
Step 2: Generate Character Biographies and Relationships 13
Step 3: Fill in Any Time Gaps in the Story Line 15

CHAPTER 2 Reading as a Designer 17
Constructing Context
Step 1: Search for and Record Evidence of Context from the Text 18
Step 2: Visualize the Context in the Classroom 19
Step 3: Create a Representation of the Context in the Classroom 21

CHAPTER 3 Reading as a Director ... 23
Generating Action
What Are Physical Action and Verbal Action? ... 24
Step 1: Search for and Record Evidence of Physical and Verbal Action from the Text ... 24
Step 2: Conceptualize the Physical and Verbal Action ... 25
Step 3: Transform the Action into Concrete Reality ... 27

CHAPTER 4 Reading Collaboratively ... 29
Building Characters' Lives, Constructing Context, and Generating Action Together
Step 1: Divide the Class into Three Groups and Assign Each Group a Worklist ... 30
Step 2: Designers and Directors Collaborate to Envision the Context and Action ... 30
Step 3: Directors, Designers, and Actors Collaborate to Create the Enactment in the Context ... 30

II **Application in the Classroom** ... 35
Front-Loading ... 36

CHAPTER 5 Application of the Actor's Process ... 43
Building Characters' Lives
Students Build Characters' Lives with "Oranges" ... 43
Students Build Characters' Lives with "Thank You, M'am" ... 53
Building Characters' Lives with Novels ... 62
Building Characters' Lives in an Online Environment ... 63
Wrap-Up ... 64

CHAPTER 6 Application of the Designer's Process ... 65
Constructing Context
Students Construct Context with "Oranges" ... 65
Students Construct Context with "Thank You, M'am" ... 76
Creating Context with Novels ... 83
Creating Context in an Online Environment ... 84
Wrap-Up ... 85

CHAPTER 7 Application of the Director's Process ... 86
Generating Action

Students Generate Action with "Oranges" 86
Students Generate Action with "Thank You, M'am" 97
Generating Action with Novels 111
Generating Action in an Online Environment 112
Wrap-Up 113

CHAPTER 8 Application of the Collaborative Process 114
Building Characters' Lives, Constructing Context, and Generating Action Together
Students Collaborate on "Oranges" 114
Students Collaborate on "Thank You, M'am" 132
Collaborating with Novels 148
Collaborating in an Online Environment 149
Wrap-Up 150
A Concluding Word on the Reading Strategies 150

III **Additional Classroom Drama Strategies** 153

CHAPTER 9 A Production Team Approach to Studying Dramatic Literature 155
Why This Approach to Dramatic Literature? 155
Introducing the Strategy 156
Size of Production Teams 156
Engaging Your Librarian 157
Instructions for the Presentation 157
Time Management 160
Optional Components 161
Adapting This Strategy to Other Literary Genres 162
A Production Team Approach Online 163
Wrap-Up 163

CHAPTER 10 Other Interactive Approaches to Engage Students with Text 164
Role-Playing, or Enactment 164
Tableau 165
Hot Seat 166
Good Angel/Bad Angel/Subtext 167
Mantle of the Expert 167
Teacher-in-Role 168
Writing in Role 168

Using These Strategies in an Online Environment 169
Wrap-Up 169

APPENDIX 171

REFERENCES 189

INDEX 193

AUTHOR 197

Introduction

Connecting with Drama

Although the words *drama* and *theater* are often used interchangeably, they come from separate etymological roots, which can help us understand how they are different. The word *theater* comes from the Greek *theatron*, which means "seeing place," whereas the word *drama* is derived from the Greek *dran*, which means "to do." We can think of theater, therefore, as "that which is seen," and of drama as "that which is done."

If theater is "that which is seen," then it requires an audience, and in its simplest form it is created in the unique transaction between performer and audience as both participate in a shared experience. Moreover, "that which is seen" is presented to illuminate an audience. A theatrical production team begins with a written text, then shapes and focuses it into a production through a rehearsal process that makes it visible and meaningful for an audience.

In educational environments, drama is generally regarded as theater—a discipline or field centering on the study of dramatic literature and its production elements, including the integration of these elements into stage productions prepared for an audience. Middle schools and high schools often employ drama teachers, and colleges maintain drama departments with faculty who teach the crafts of theater and work with students to create theatrical productions for an audience. Educational drama programs typically focus their work on creating a product for an audience, thus centering what they do as theater, or "that which is seen."

However, drama can also be viewed through a different lens. If we view it as "that which is done" and consider it as independent from "that which is seen," then it can be thought of as the *discovery process* that develops and creates the theatrical presentation. In this view, drama is not the finished product for the audience but the generative process that *makes* the text visible and facilitates the understanding of it.

As a stage director, I have always been aware of how effectively drama facilitates learning, and specifically how the rehearsal process consists of strategies that unpack the meaning of text. Over the years, I often marveled at how thoroughly my community college students grasped the meaning of a piece of lit-

erature when they participated in creating a stage production of it. They hadn't "studied" the text as they might have in an English class, but because they had participated in the rehearsal process, their comprehension of the text was profound.

How was this possible? What had they done in the rehearsal process to illuminate the text? What I realized was that they had not *studied* the text—they had *inhabited* it, constructing meaning at the intersection between written text and lived experience. They knew the meaning of the dialogue because they had used the words to achieve their characters' objectives; they understood the era in which the play was set because they had embodied its style, mannerisms, and customs; and they realized how the sequence of actions in the story built from the inciting incident through the rising action, the climax, and the denouement because they had experienced it. Through rehearsal, they had participated in a discovery process in which they were creative agents, using the text as a foundation on which to create meaning. Recognizing how comprehensively the rehearsal process had facilitated their learning, I realized that in the same way theater practitioners use a rehearsal process to transform text into meaning for an audience, students could apply a similar process to reading in order to transform text into meaning for themselves.

Drama and Language Arts

As a classroom practice, drama has been applied to the language arts curriculum in many ways and has been given a variety of descriptors by practitioners, including *process drama* (O'Neill, *Drama Worlds*), *drama pedagogy* (Edmiston), and *action strategies* (Wilhelm, *Deepening Comprehension*), to name just a few. This application of drama refers not to creating a presentation for an audience but to using or applying drama strategies in the classroom to help learners strengthen affective skills and translate abstract text into concrete and visible reality. It includes activities such as role-playing, physically enacting stories, portraying characters from history or literature, creating tableaux or still images to symbolize ambiguous concepts or characters, answering questions or approaching writing as characters, and numerous other active and engaging strategies for teaching and learning. By establishing a learning environment of meaning construction rather than one of information reception, classroom drama generates an approach to learning that involves intellect, physicality, empathy, and imagination. As a result, it guides students to see the real world with more clarity in light of what is revealed through the imagined one (Wagner, *Dorothy Heathcote*

227). In the same way that a theatrical performance enlightens its audience, participation in drama informs the students who participate in it.

John Dewey, a founder of the progressive education movement in America, articulated many of the underlying principles that support drama as pedagogy. Dewey argued that active and social engagement is essential to the learning process and that a child's development grows naturally out of meaningful educational experiences. Dewey expressed the importance of interaction for learning in his influential publication *Experience and Education* (41), which also emphasized the role of the educator in shaping education so that learners can derive meaning from the learning experience (35).

However, it was Dorothy Heathcote, a British professor of drama in education, who built a solid foundation for drama as a learning strategy. Heathcote emphasized that drama for learning is oriented not toward an audience but toward the participants, thus creating a generative activity and providing a way to make the implicit explicit (Wagner, *Dorothy Heathcote* 147). One example is her "mantle of the expert" approach to teaching and learning, which grants students the mantle or responsibility of an expert in a learning situation. By positioning students as "servicers" of knowledge rather than "receivers" of it (Heathcote and Bolton 32), Heathcote used the classroom to construct an imaginary enterprise in which learners *apply* knowledge to accomplish a goal. Central to this strategy is the notion of the "teacher-in-role" (Wagner, *Educational Drama* 227)—that is, the practice of the teacher participating along with students within the circumstances of the imaginary enterprise as a mentor or coach to help them apply information and accomplish their goals. Using this strategy effectively, as Heathcote did, involves the teacher's assuming a role to develop and heighten student involvement, yet coming out of it when it is necessary to achieve distance and objectivity (Wagner, *Dorothy Heathcote* 128).

Heathcote illustrated both the mantle of the expert and the teacher-in-role strategies through her classroom practice. For instance, following a study of medieval monasteries, students "became" monks, Heathcote "became" the abbot, and together their task was to explain to those in another community how to establish a monastery (Heathcote and Bolton 45). Thus, instead of simply receiving information, they were framed as responsible individuals who engaged with knowledge, treated it as evidence and source material, and used it to accomplish a goal. By asking students to assume the responsibility for both discovering and applying knowledge, this approach takes an active and purposeful view of learning in which knowledge is not merely taken in but operated on (Heathcote and Bolton 32).

This learning strategy, a robust example of Vygotsky's concept of the "zone of proximal development" (84), demonstrates how the social dimension of learn-

ing and the presence of an empowering adult (in this case, the teacher-in-role) creates an environment within which learners can reach beyond their current capacity toward continued development (86). This dynamic way of applying drama to the learning process is woven throughout the content of this book in the strategies of reading as an actor, reading as a designer, reading as a director, and reading collaboratively, thus demonstrating anew the distinction between memorizing isolated facts and transforming them into meaning.

The work done by Heathcote has been extended by others in the field of language arts. Educator James Moffett, who articulated the relationship between drama and English in *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*, argued that drama and speech are not peripheral but central to a language curriculum (60). Advocating for the value of dramatic enactment to link words with actions and motives, Moffett defined drama as a way to help readers understand and perceive action in a text (63). Further emphasizing drama as an important part of the teaching of language arts, Moffett and Betty Jane Wagner's *Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading K–13* built a compelling argument for the use of drama in the learning process by illustrating how physical action creates concrete images for written language (42).

Heathcote's work is also drawn on extensively in "*You Gotta BE the Book*" by Jeffrey Wilhelm and *Imagining to Learn: Inquiry, Ethics, and Integration through Drama* by Wilhelm and Brian Edmiston, which address drama in terms of curricular design and classroom research. In addition to providing well-defined examples of her mantle of the expert approach and the use of teacher-in-role, these works cite Vygotsky as well as Jerome Bruner and Howard Gardner to support using drama as a pedagogical tool. Finally, Wilhelm's *Deepening Comprehension with Action Strategies* contributes a significant treatment of methods for language arts teachers interested in using drama in ways that engage students with text.

Additional publications in the field have associated drama as a learning strategy with the important workplace skills of creativity, collaboration, and teamwork; with teaching to multiple intelligences; and with the significance of arts integration into language arts classrooms to support literacy development. Moreover, in 2020, the National Council of Teachers of English (Whitmore et al.) issued a position statement across the categories of curriculum, instruction, and literacy to emphasize contemporary research and practice regarding the multimodal nature of literacies and to call on teachers to engage learners in composing, reading, and interrogating texts through drama-based literacies.

Drama and the Common Core State Standards

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts (ELA) define broad literacy goals for students as stated in the College and Career Readiness Anchor (CCRA) Standards in Reading (R), Writing (W), Speaking and Listening (SL), and Language (L). These acronyms are used later in the book when Common Core standards are listed as they apply to various reading strategies. The Anchor Standards form the backbone of the ELA and literacy requirements by articulating core knowledge and skills that students should acquire and master in English language arts classrooms. The standards are further subdivided by grade levels that specifically define what students should understand and be able to do by the end of each grade.

Most of today's students are expected to meet the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts. These standards represent a paradigm shift (Wilhelm, *Deepening Comprehension* 6) toward instruction that focuses on critical thinking, analysis, reasoning, and problem-solving skills to prepare students for success in college, career, and life. The standards stress reading and writing based on careful analysis of textual evidence and challenge students not just to read text but also to comprehend context and grasp how concepts relate to each other. Waiting for the teacher to supply meaning for a text will no longer suffice when students move on to college or into careers where they must read and comprehend increasingly complex texts independently. If we want students to read closely, effectively, and self-sufficiently, then we need to give them strategies for interacting with text instead of colliding with it and for gravitating toward reading rather than maintaining a distance from it.

Theater, Drama, and Reading offers teachers and students an interactive approach to achieving the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, not only in reading but also in writing, speaking, listening, and language. Section I of the book introduces you to specific strategies for teaching students to read as actors, designers, and directors. Section II then guides you step by step through classroom application of these reading strategies with two mentor texts, and Section III provides additional drama strategies for engaging students with text. Using role-playing and Dorothy Heathcote's mantle of the expert approach to learning, students will reposition themselves from *receivers* of text to *servicers* of it, reading with specific tasks to accomplish and goals to achieve in order to make text visible and meaningful. They will learn to read texts multiple times for multiple purposes, deepening their understanding each time they read, and they will be challenged and asked questions that push them to refer back to what they've read, closely and attentively analyzing text in a way that will help them

understand it. Drawing perceptive inferences from textual evidence, they will learn to analyze word choice; evaluate how complex ideas develop throughout a text; and understand the relationship between characters, context, and action. Meanwhile, teachers will participate in role, coaching students through the process from within it and guiding them toward achievement of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts.

These reading strategies can be applied to any type of literature and can be implemented individually or collectively, in whole or in part, in a short amount of time or over a longer interval. As you read through each process, think of how you can adapt the strategies to your students and the literature you use in your curriculum to help your students achieve the ELA Common Core standards. These strategies use drama to shift the focus of reading from information reception to knowledge construction and give students a way to interact with text, think beyond words on the page, and transform text from abstract concepts into concrete representations. By making students responsible for understanding not only the words on the page but also what lies beneath and around them, the strategies challenge them to use inquiry and analysis as a foundation for reading and give them a way to transform words from print to interaction as they read.

Theater artists work toward the goal of converting text into stage productions. ELA students can learn to apply many of the same strategies to transform text into meaning, thus refocusing reading to the inquiry, analysis, and problem-solving skills they need in order to meet the Common Core State Standards and become successful and self-sufficient readers.

Drama in an Online Environment

In a changing world, you may find yourself in a new and different educational realm where many things you have taken for granted—for instance, brick-and-mortar classrooms, collaborative communities of learners, and close contact with your students—have also changed. You may be teaching completely online, synchronously or asynchronously or both, and your time in a physical classroom may be a transformed experience. What you once did in your classroom, you can't do any more. Or perhaps it's not that things can't be done, but that they will need to be accomplished in a different way.

Drama, by its very nature, is a face-to-face activity. Its history in the classroom has always taken the form of a classroom experience and a social interaction. If you find you are no longer in a physical classroom, can you still use drama?

Absolutely.

Remember, drama as we have defined it is not the finished product for the audience but the generative process that makes text visible and facilitates understanding of it. I invite you to think of drama not as a performative endeavor but as a constructive and highly effective approach to learning and reading comprehension. Yes, it is a teaching and learning method with roots in the conventional classroom experience, but Dewey's advocacy for interaction in the learning experience and Dorothy Heathcote's mantle of the expert approach—not only gathering information but also applying it—can certainly transfer to a remote environment. What matters is not so much the mode of instruction, but the ability to implement the core principles of these reading strategies: reading interactively; reading in role; applying information to achieve goals; and drawing intelligent, imaginative conclusions from textual evidence by building characters' lives, constructing context, and generating action.

Online learning platforms and applications give you the capacity to facilitate interaction with an entire class or have students work in small groups. Students can also share documents, edit each other's work, create graphics, and communicate across great distances, working both synchronously and asynchronously. Therefore, while descriptions of classroom application in this book are taken from physical classroom experience, all of the reading strategies can be adapted to remote learning.

At the end of each classroom application chapter, I include suggestions for using the strategies in a virtual environment. Please feel free to use these suggestions as is or adapt them to your specific circumstances. Think creatively about how you can apply or modify any of these reading strategies to the learning environment in which you find yourself. By bringing students together to think imaginatively, collaborate, and solve problems, drama offers you a powerful approach to learning and building community in any classroom environment.

1

Reading as an Actor

Building Characters' Lives

Actors read and transform written text through a generative process by using a series of steps designed to create, build, and develop a story's characters. Although fictional characters are conceived by the writer, it is the actor's responsibility to give their personalities and individual behaviors a concrete form. Actors undergo rigorous training to learn this craft. They study movement, voice, and script analysis and continually practice their skills through rehearsal and performance. We will focus here on how actors read and use text to build characters' lives. When actors read, they know they have responsibilities and goals to achieve. Regarding text as source material, they read and reread, building on what they find in the text to reach their goal of bringing characters to life.

Reading is an essential component of the actor's rehearsal process—typically, a six- to eight-week developmental endeavor for every production. The rehearsal process begins with a collaborative oral reading and continues through many weeks of exploring the text to learn characters' lines; create the story's action; and discover the implications, insinuations, and subtexts that help give both the words and actions their meaning. As actors read and reread the text, they study both the denotations and the connotations of the writer's words, searching for nuances that define each character's personality and behavior. They deconstruct, paraphrase, and reconstruct language to understand why the writer has chosen specific words, and they build on the text to construct elements of a character's life not specified by the writer, thus giving characters continuity and depth. Finally, they compare choices, consider options, and ultimately choose specific vocal, physical, cognitive, and affective qualities that will express each character's unique personality and the writer's meaning to the audience. By the end of the rehearsal process, each actor has read the text and analyzed specific parts of it many times over. If actors stopped the reading process after the initial read-through, they would never achieve the depth of understanding needed to express the significance of the characters and the story to an audience.

While there is no need for ELA students to engage in the demanding training and rehearsal methods of an actor, specific steps of the actor's process can help

them read with greater depth. In this discussion, the actor's rehearsal process is condensed into three steps that students can follow to improve their grasp of literary characters, their relationships, and the continuity of their lives:

Steps of Reading as an Actor

1. Search for and record evidence of character from the text.
2. Generate character biographies and relationships.
3. Fill in any time gaps in the story line.

I always provide actors with a worklist detailing their specific tasks and reading goals. You will see examples of the actor's worklist in action in Section II, Application in the Classroom.

Step 1: Search for and Record Evidence of Character from the Text

Actors begin with a focused reading of the text to uncover all of the facts that the writer has supplied about the characters; they are searching for specifics such as age, place of birth, physical characteristics, family background, education, language use, and significant events that have shaped characters' lives. Insight into characters' lives and personalities may be embedded in the text in a multitude of ways: how they are described, what they say in conversation, what other characters say about them, how they behave in various situations, and the ways in which they interact with other characters.

Similarly, as ELA students read to find character evidence, they must take notes to record what they discover. They can write directly on the text, record notes on a separate paper or a screen, or use worksheets to record everything the writer has supplied regarding characters' backgrounds, relationships, and behaviors. Worksheets for the actor are provided in the appendix.

Applicable Common Core Goals

CCSS.ELA-Literacy. CCRA.R.1

Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy. CCRA.R.6

Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Step 2: Generate Character Biographies and Relationships

Actors then *apply* what they have discovered in the text, make inferences, and draw conclusions to create a *biography* of each character and develop the character's *relationships*. Students can do the same, which engages them in developing and using more sophisticated reading and thinking skills.

A character biography gives a complete account of a character's life. It should begin with the character's date and place of birth and include all events that have shaped the character into the person found in the story. Remind students that they can readily accomplish this task because they can certainly write their own autobiography. Just as students can document their own lives from birth through the significant events that have shaped them into the people they are today, they can generate a similar biography for a literary character by finding analogous details in the text and supplementing that information through imaginative extrapolation based on textual evidence.

In addition to creating individual characters' biographies, students must investigate the text to develop the relationships *between* the characters. What has occurred in the past to create the character relationships as defined by the writer? Have certain characters known each other for a long period of time, or have they just met? What relationships are evident, and what is being concealed? How do characters interact with each other one on one, how do they interact in a group, and why do certain interactions occur? If, for instance, a character says, "I have hated so-and-so since the incident on the boat," then students must determine what the incident was, when it happened, what occurred between the characters, and what lasting effects it produced. As they engage in this process, students will discover, as actors do, that not all details of characters' lives are specified by the writer. When actors can't find information within the text, they must make inferences from the text to plausibly complete the specifics of characters' relationships. Students can do the same. While they must base all conclusions on evidence found in the text, this process gives them the opportunity to build on that evidence with their own imagination.

Creating characters' biographies and developing their relationships not only gives readers specific goals to work toward; it also turns them into detectives as they search the text for clues and piece together answers. This process of finding information and building on it asks readers to discover not only the

what of characters' lives but also the *where, when,* and *why*. Through this process, reading shifts to inquiry and analysis as readers ask questions and draw conclusions based on evidence from the text. This process is the reason that two actors' portrayal of the same character will never be exactly the same. Each actor started with the same text but supplements the fictional life of the character with individual imaginative, yet logical, conclusions based on the text.

As students engage in the same process—inferring from the text and drawing logical conclusions about events in characters' lives—they build reading and thinking skills. If a story takes place in 1945 and a character is twenty years old, the reader can conclude that the character was born in 1925 and must then build the character's formative years based on events and conditions in that time frame. As readers engage in this process, they must search the text judiciously and think events through to reasonable conclusions. Aside from giving students motivation for in-depth reading, this process creates wonderful discussion opportunities about choices that students make and why. Different students, like different actors, will come to different conclusions, and allowing them to compare their results will generate thought-provoking discussion of characters' lives as readers justify their choices.

This step of the actor's process also creates a significant writing opportunity. Students can develop character biographies and describe characters' relationships in quick-writes or more comprehensive writing assignments.

Applicable Common Core Goals

CCSS.ELA-Literacy. CCRA.R.1

Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy. CCRA.R.2

Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy. CCRA.R.3

Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy. CCRA.R.4

Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determin-

ing technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

CCSA.ELA-Literacy. CCRA.W.1

Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy. CCRA.W.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

Step 3: Fill in Any Time Gaps in the Story Line

The third step in the actor's process gives students the opportunity to delve further into the text and find another layer of meaning by filling in gaps in the story line. Writers often skip over periods of time as they tell a story, and it is important for readers to identify what occurs during this "lost time" in order to maintain a sense of continuity in characters' lives. When I work with actors, we improvise physically and verbally to create action and dialogue that bridge any time gaps left by the writer. Students can accomplish this same step through discussion or writing. For example, if Chapter 2 of a story begins six weeks after Chapter 1 ends, students must think through what happened during that interval. What activities were characters involved in during the missing time? Did relationships between characters change? How are the characters different at the beginning of Chapter 2 than they were at the end of Chapter 1, and what happened to precipitate the change? Students can also hypothesize about what occurs before a story begins and after it ends—once again drawing conclusions based on textual evidence, thus engaging with the text at a deeper level to find answers to new questions.

Applicable Common Core Goals

CCSS.ELA-Literacy. CCRA.R.1

Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy. CCRA.R.3

Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy. CCRA.R.5

Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.

CCSA.ELA-Literacy. CCRA.W.1

Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy. CCRA.W.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

Each step of the actor's process—searching for and recording evidence of character from the text, generating character biographies and relationships, and filling in time gaps in the story line—asks readers to examine characters at a deeper level and look at them from a different perspective. In this way, the actor's process engages students with high-level cognitive questions, thereby helping them develop more meaningful and multilayered insight into characters.

In the same way that theater artists engage in a rehearsal process to transform printed words into a world of people, space, sound, and action for the stage, readers can learn a modified version of this process to make text visible and concrete, unlocking its meaning. Drawing on both the production aspects of theater and the generative learning elements of drama, *Theater, Drama, and Reading* shows readers how to transform text from print to interaction, establishing a simple framework for how to read as an *actor* who builds characters' lives, a *set designer* who constructs context, and a *director* who generates action.

This significant and practical new resource for all language arts teachers details the components of these reading strategies, provides step-by-step examples from classroom practice, and clearly demonstrates how the strategies achieve the Common Core State Standards. Additionally, the book defines a unique approach to teaching dramatic literature, features a short overview of additional popular classroom drama strategies to engage students with written text, and integrates practical suggestions to convert all of these strategies to online instruction.

Retired theater professor **Judith Freeman Garey** taught in the California Community College system for more than thirty-five years and is a national scholar with the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.

"As a drama teacher and stage director, I have always been aware of how effectively drama facilitates learning, and specifically how the rehearsal process consists of strategies that unpack the meaning of text. I often marveled at how thoroughly my students grasped the meaning of a piece of literature when they participated in creating a stage production of it. They hadn't 'studied' the text as they might have in an English class, but because they had participated in the rehearsal process, their comprehension of the text was profound."

—Judith Freeman Garey

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