



Herb and Lois Walker's

SCRIPTS FOR SCHOOLS

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CHORAL SPEAKING/READING IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

Here is a short poem you might wish to use as a choir “signature verse”. It can be used as a part of the warm-up during rehearsals, used to announce the start or finish of rehearsal, used just for fun, or used during a performance to introduce a choral speaking piece:

- 1 **ALL:** Choral speaking is awesome, we know,
- 2 **ALL:** When a chorus of kids wants to put on a show!
- 3 **GIRL’S CHORUS:** We have light voices,
- 4 **BOY’S CHORUS:** dark voices,
- 5 **QUARTET:** high and low too,
- 6 **ALL:** And we all talk together,
- 7 **QUARTET:** Or talk - just a few.
- 8 **ALL:** Choral speaking is fun
- 9 **ALL:** Year-round through Decem-m-m-ber.
- 10 **SOLO:** But first find a verse
- 11 **ALL:** You’ll be glad to remem-m-m-ber!

OR

- 9 **ALL:** Year-round through Decem-m-m-ber.
 - 10 **SOLO:** So here is a verse
 - 11 **ALL:** We hope you’ll remem-m-m-ber!
- (At this point the piece is introduced and performed)

TYPES OF CHORAL SPEAKING

1. **REFRAIN** is one of the most common forms of choral speaking. One person reads the narrative portion of the text while the rest of the class joins in the refrain.
2. **UNISON** calls for the whole group to read the material together. Additional sound effects might be incorporated.
3. **ANTIPHON** calls for the class to be divided into two or more groups, with each group being responsible for a certain part of the selection.

4. **CUMULATIVE** choral reading or speaking refers to a method where groups of voices or individual voices are added to or subtracted from the choral reading, depending on the message or the meaning communicated by the selection.
5. **SOLO LINES** is a type of choral reading where individuals read specific lines in appropriate places throughout the group activity.
6. **LINE AROUND** or **CHILD-A-LINE** is more solo work where each line is taken by a different person in the group.

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR THE TEACHER

1. Select verse material with care. It should reflect student interest and preference as well as student vocabulary level. Poetry is especially suitable for choral speaking, particularly poetry that contains some repetition (e.g., ballads, narrative poetry, adventure poetry).
2. Give advance thought to interpretation. Discuss meaning and the various ways of reading the material to bring out the meaning.
3. Consider suggestions for improvements after practice readings, including suggestions for improving phrasing and diction.
4. As the students become more experienced, they will offer suggestions as to which lines may be most effectively delivered by the whole group, by part of the group, or by individuals.
5. The amount of time spent preparing a poem or other selection will vary, but it is more important to keep the enthusiasm alive than to strive for perfection (unless you are preparing for competition or performance).
6. Students who will be listening to the choral readings should be prepared for the listening experience. They should be willing to listen attentively, without distracting the speakers; they should also prepare to respond regarding the effectiveness of the speaking activity (e.g., sound arrangement, choral patterns).

CHORAL SPEAKING/READING FOR COMPETITIONS OR FESTIVALS:

Choral speaking requires a special technique of its own. A competitive speech-choir must not be “a lot of people speaking at once”, but a group of speakers who are as controlled, unified and harmonized as a choir of singers. The most important of all requirements is unity, and both a *unity of articulation and syllabification* as well as a *unity of pitch and inflection* are necessary.

UNITY OF ARTICULATION AND SYLLABIFICATION

All speakers must attach, move through, and finish their syllables at precisely the same moment. If the body of a choral speech were cut short at any point during a performance, each individual voice should be at precisely the same place in the syllable as every other voice.

UNITY OF PITCH AND INFLECTION

In spite of differing individual voice qualities, a speech choir of voices must blend harmoniously to a common unified tone. This unified tone must move as a whole through changes in *rhythm/tempo* and changes in *emotional intensity* so that the *inflection-line* linking them is also single and unified.

Note: The words of a verse give a poem *form*. A successful combination of the following choral speaking elements give the poem *life*.

VOICE QUALITY

- * The ability to combine successfully the *light*, *medium*, and *dark* voices in the choir (using these groups for their natural basic sounds and/or combining them for special effects).
- * The ability to communicate, through voice, reactions to thoughts or emotions.

NUMBER OF VOICES

- * The ability to add or subtract whole sections, banks, smaller groups, or solo speakers to increase or diminish the power or richness of the sound to better express the meaning.

BODILY MOVEMENT

- * Ability to use gesture, choreography, or other movement to enhance communication and better express meaning.

PITCH

- * Pitch refers to the variations of the voice on the musical scale and is generally referred to as *inflection*. Children generally have little problem with pitch because they use it naturally and freely.

POWER

- * Ability to use volume, force, or loudness as *emphasis* in appropriate places to better express feeling and meaning. A power build should be related to the elements of a sentence and/or growing emotion.

PHRASING AND RHYTHM

- * Ability to use phrasing and rhythm as reinforcements for each other. Each must blend together to better express the meaning of the verse.

TEMPO

- * Tempo refers to the rate of speed at which a reading progresses. The ability to balance the rhythm of a piece and the tempo of performance. Tempo should relate to the central “beat” of the poem. (Too fast? Too slow?)

STAGING

- * The ability to successfully organize and position the choir on stage or risers for maximum performance effect. The ability to stage entrances and exits which enhance the mood of the poem and performance. The ability to “costume” speakers in a way which also enhances the performance as a whole.

NOTE FROM LOIS:

The following information comes from E. Kingsley Povenmire's "Choral Speaking and the Verse Choir". This book was published by AS. Barnes and Co., Inc. in 1975. The information may be dated, but much of it regarding rehearsal procedures/techniques and the development of a Choral Speaking/Reading overview is still pertinent today. I have included some of his thoughts here:

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE VERSE CHOIR

Young Children

* As we learn more about individual differences, cultural backgrounds, disparity of earlier learning opportunities, language facility, and motivational factors we see that children of any one chronological age cannot always be fully served in a single grade level.

* Some schools find they can best serve their children by becoming ungraded, by combining several grades in one group and by varying their organizations in other ways as they find workable factors for determining groups with the greatest educational facility. A child may even be placed in classes of different age levels that match his potential in various subjects.

* It is also good practice, in using the verse choir, to give an "older" poem to a younger group, or vice versa, to stretch their abilities in the first case or to encourage them to find greater depth in the latter.

* From the very beginning of awareness of the sound of poetry, and on through the primary grades, children are attracted by its "jingle" quality. Very young children will respond to this element long before they can speak.

* The jingle quality is a combination of distinct meter, rhyme, and inflection patterns. Although we have minimized these, as such, for other age groups they are important at this beginning stage and therefore you should make the most of their intrinsic value--especially as they excite the imagination and lead into visualizing and catching the spirit of the subject of the poem.

* This enticement will help children, as they begin to speak, in their natural desire to give generous vocal expression as they become further involved in the story and characters of the poem, including the animals, trees, wind, and abstract concepts that only a child can conjure up.

* You can encourage this by an animated presentation of the poem and the "living out" of each character in your own way, extracting all the fun you can by generous facial expressions and strange and wonderful vocal changes. They will love it, and you, for doing it; and it will establish a rapport that could ease if not dissolve some stubborn problems. When the teacher "has

fun" with the poem the floodgates are open for the spirit of the children to follow; and, once under way, they can be directed to even greater heights than they thought possible. This wave of fun can carry them well past the short attention span usually expected of this age.

* Beginning with pre-schoolers and progressing through grade three, these suggestions may be helpful:

1. The most likely subjects to begin with are animals they know and love, then move from these into new and broader subjects.
2. They love nonsense words and sounds. Short words are best at the beginning, but the interest engendered by group speaking will speed up their vocabulary growth.
3. The boy-girl organization will likely work best but this can be varied by smaller groups and child-a-line arrangements.
4. Child-a-line arrangements will also strengthen individual recognition. This will help the transition from self-concern to group-awareness as the children grow through this age span.
5. Verbal perfection is not as important at the beginning as enjoyment of the poem. So accept what the children do and use their momentum for later improvement in language skills.

* When the children express a desire to, as they will say, "act out" the poem, they have an unusual opportunity to do so through the verse choir for it allows each and every child to simultaneously live each character, animal, and element as it appears in the poem. This leaves no one out, reinforces the expression of each individual, and gives the whole group the growth value of the experience. The need of this age group for physical activity is also met, to the degree each child has room to move in the group arrangement.

* Here we have another growth opportunity through a vocabulary change. Instead of the child's term "acting" or "acting out," why not introduce the more meaningful one "living out"? "Acting out" carries an insipid suggestion of artificiality and unwanted exaggeration, while "living out" keeps the experience closer to real-life values.

Springboards to Creative Dramatics:

The door is now open and the momentum is mounting to further enrich the children's experience by working out a creative dramatics treatment of the poem.

With guidance the children could participate in choosing the cast of characters from those who proved themselves to be "most like" the various characters in the verse choir experience. Several more "run-throughs" of the poem may be necessary, but this is all to the good.

Another growth opportunity is presented in the term "most like," which emphasizes the imaginative portrayal of the character, while the word "best" tends to evaluate the person. There usually is a "best" person who can garner all the richer parts, whereas a submerged individual may be "most like" a certain character and get her/his chance!

Simple scenery, properties, and other production elements will provide more creative opportunities and lead your people into other areas of learning. Simple pieces of costume that merely suggest the character are often better than fully developed outfits since they allow room for the imagination of the child to "fill it out." One boy was disappointed when his teacher brought him a crown she had worked hard to make--because he liked the one he imagined better.

Intermediate Children

* Intermediate children are in their active years, when the emerging identity is centered in physical prowess. It is also a time when the mind is whetting its appetite. Some individuals in this span are mastering subjects and concepts that earlier generations struggled with in high school--and some new ones belonging only to the present. So how do we interest them in the verse choir?

* Three approaches are suggested: The first is to capitalize on their group loyalty and introduce the verse choir as "the next thing we will do," assuming that they will all be interested. Those who aren't at first may sit in a comatose condition that will become increasingly untenable as the enthusiasm of the others mounts.

- * The second is to form an extra-curricular choir as an after-school activity or during a class period when all volunteers can be present. This depends on some initial stimulation that could be provided by a record, tape, CD, or video of a successful group, or hearing one do a live program.
- * A third way to introduce the choral speaking approach is to say "I know a poem that says this very thing" to a class that has demonstrated a vital interest in a given subject or direction of thought. It can also work with a class that needs to show a vital interest. There are poems on every subject going and in many directions, and if you do not have time to read--read--read, why not form a reading committee of the stimulated youngsters who need something more to do?

SOME DIRECTING TECHNIQUES

- * Now for directing techniques. This age level usually equates "loud and fast" with good expression or interpretation. This is best handled on your part by strong and definite actions that will keep the tempo and decibels in control.
- * Definite directing actions are necessary in giving the rhythmic beat and indicating subtleties in interpretation. These actions can be large or small to suggest loudness or softness of the sound--but they must be definite, especially for this age group.
- * You may wish to improvise a set of definite hand signals to further refine and sharpen your communication with the choir. These will be especially helpful in performance. For instance, both hands extended up at about shoulder height with palms toward the choir means "Stop--and wait for the next signal"; a finger held over your lips and your other hand beating the time with palm down would ask for less power and a more subtle treatment of the passage. Turning the palm up and using larger movements with the other hand beating the time would ask for a more spirited and larger sound.
- * The bright, lively passages may best be signaled by sharp movements of the hands and quick actions and formations of the fingers. Youngsters need to be reminded that they "may speak as fast as they can be understood." You will find many more right signals to communicate effectively with your group.