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# ENCOURAGING RECREATIONAL READING THROUGH BOOK TALKS

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Many children who have adequate reading skills rarely do any reading that is not specifically required in school. Reading-for-fun, and sometimes even required reading are frequently given a low priority when time for reading competes with sports, television, free play, music and dance lessons, etc. However, recreational reading is of critical importance for reinforcement of what is learning during reading instruction. The book talk is an excellent approach for motivating students to read outside of the classroom and during opportunities for free reading provided at school. Further, development of important oral communication skills can be fostered as well. Procedures for presenting a book talk can be described as follows:

## The Book Talk

1. The presenter introduces the book in an enthusiastic way
  - a. show the cover, give the title and author's name
  - b. write the title and author's name on chalkboard
  - c. bring props, if necessary, to add interest
  - d. provide information about the author
2. Presenter leads up to a selection to be read from book
  - a. describe main characters
  - b. set the scene (time and place)
3. Presenter reads a short but appealing selection
  - a. does not give away too much of plot or ending
  - b. changes pronouns to proper nouns where needed
  - c. ad libs bits of explanation for listeners where needed for clarification

Rehearsing a booktalk is very important for fluency. Practice helps the presenter concentrate on content and not on the process of reading. Consequently, accurate phrasing and appropriate expression would be easier to maintain.

In order to be convincing, the book talker must genuinely like the book and is not presenting it because it is a "classic" or on a timely topic. Eye contact holds the listener and makes him or her feel important and drawn into the presentation. Huck (1976) suggested that "the effectiveness of a book talk is judged by the number of children who want to borrow the book."

Students can be taught to give effective book talks to their classmates. The instruction requires that we teach oral expression as well as helping develop reading ability. Writing can be brought into the activity when students are asked to present a written summary of the book talk. A model outline might include—

#### Book Talk Outline

1. Book title
2. Author - Publisher - Date
3. Facts about the author
4. Setting of the story
5. Main characters
6. Specific pages of the book  
read during the book talk

Frequently, a book jacket will provide sufficient information about an author. Extensive information about authors of books for children is provided by Commire (1971-81, 1978) and DeMontre-ville and Crawford (1978).

Book talks can be onerous both for presenters and listeners if they are not well prepared. Foremost, the model (teacher and/or librarian) giving a demonstration of a good book talk is essential to the success of the activity by the students.

Evaluation through the use of agreed-upon criteria is basic to the process of helping students become good book talkers. Areas to be evaluated are those such as 1) lead-in, 2) enthusiasm, 3) fluency, 4) volume, and 5) eye contact. A weight of five points can be assigned to each category in order to obtain a total score and specify areas where extra work is needed. A sample format for evaluating book talks is shown here—

Student	Name of book					Total
Roy	A Penny's Worth of Character					
Lead-in	Enthusiasm	Fluency	Volume	Eye Contact	Total	
slow in calling main characters knowing setting	liked book - knew it say why he likes it 3	good fluency - no words or pronunciation problems 5	lost to back rows 2	looked at class and ceiling most of time 1	14	

The chart indicates that Roy reads well but needs help with presentation skills. He lost some of his audience because he didn't look at them. The children in the rear gave up trying to hear him and did not benefit from his presentation. Follow-up activities with Roy would involve more practice in small groups where eye contact is more easily held. Roy would gain from practice to become more familiar with the text, making it easier for him to lift his eyes from the page. Practice for increased volume is a matter of increasing the opportunity, and signals could be provided to increase volume.

A list of observations which can be incorporated into the five basic categories used on the Book Talk Chart follows:

loses word endings	lead-in vague
inadequate enunciation	poor phrasing
poor enunciation	use of slang
ignores natural pauses	reading rushed
speaks (reads) in monotone	voice shaky
lack of energy (expression)	body too rigid
unfamiliar terms used without explanation (Ex: P.O.W)	
hesitations, caused by insufficient preparation	

Deficiencies cited during presentations can be expected to become less and less evident as the student practices. Many weaknesses are caused by excessive nervousness which practice and successful performances tend to overcome. Presenting book talks in reading group usually provides a comfortable atmosphere.

A sample book talk based on A Penny's Worth of Character is presented below. The book talk outline provides the presenter with a guide. The outline, which could be done on a form or a 5"x8" card, later placed in a book talk file for future reference by the teacher and other students.

#### Book Talk Outline

1. Book: A Penny's Worth of Character
2. Author: Jessie Stuart. Publisher: McGraw-Hill. Year: 1954.
3. About the author: Jessie Stuart was born in Riverton, Ky, in 1907. He has written many books about life in the southern Appalachian part of the United States. (Use wall map.)
4. Setting: The story is set about 40 years ago in a small farm community in the southern Appalachian region
5. Characters: Shan and his mother
6. Pages read during book talk: pages 13-15
7. Why I liked the book: Shan had a problem like I had one time. I liked how he made things better.

The book talker could use the outline for the lead-in and then would use the book itself for the selected reading. With practice, most students would not have to read the introductory notes but refer to them if necessary.

Lead-in: This is a story about a boy named Shan. His family did not have much money, but usually when he sold eggs at the country store he got to keep ten cents for himself. With the ten cents Shan always bought his favorite treats, a chocolate bar and a lemon soda pop. This time though, Shan's mother said there was no extra money to be spent on candy or soda pop. Shan was disappointed. Then Shan's mother said there were some empty sacks in the smokehouse that he could sell to Mr. Conley, the store owner. He would get a penny for each sack.

(Now the presenter, with the audience well prepared, moves to the text)

He began to smile as he thought of the candy he would get at Mr. Conley's store.

Shan ran to the smokehouse and opened the door. He hurried

in and found the sacks stacked up neatly on a chair. There were more than he expected. He counted one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight--- and very slowly he counted the ninth sack. He had hoped there would be ten. Ten large sacks equaled a dime. And with a dime he could get his favorite chocolate bar and lemon soda pop.

Shan stood there thinking. Then he went over and looked at the tenth sack with a hole in it. It sure was too bad this sack had a hole in it.

He tiptoed to the smokehouse door and looked out to see where his mother was. She was walking across the yard with another basket heaped high with clothes. She was taking them to the clothes line and was on the other side of the yard from the smokehouse. He waited until she set the basket down and started pinning up the clothes. Then he put the nine sacks under his arm and started out.

He stopped; then he went back. He picked up the tenth and looked at the hole. "Not really much of a hole," he said to himself. "A pretty useful old sack if you didn't put stuff like sugar or meal into it."

He knew how Mr. Conley took the top sacks from the pile and held them up to the lighted window and looked inside to see if any light came through. But Mr. Conley was old and he might not be seeing too well. And besides, Mr. Conley never looked at all the sacks. He might look at some on the top and some on the bottom of the pile, but he wouldn't hold every one in the pile up to the light.

Suddenly Shan knew the way to fool Mr. Conley. He put a good sack down. This was number ten. Then he laid down number nine and eight. These were good sacks too. Then he put the sack with the hole in it down for number seven. He placed six good sacks on top. This would throw Mr. Conley off either way he looked. If he looked at the sacks from the top or the bottom, it wouldn't matter now.

Shan smiled as he picked up the paper sacks and held them under his arm. His troubles were over. He had found the way to get what he wanted. He could have both the chocolate bar and the lemon soda, and shucks, what did one little old hole amount to? He walked through the door and stepped onto the soft green grass.

The presenter might then close with an offer to answer questions about the book (not revealing anything critical to the story content) or by saying something such as: I really liked this book. I think you will find it very interesting, too. What do you think happened to Shan when he got to Mr. Conley's store?

Children might want to add another dimension to their book talk such as making and demonstrating a primitive tool, constructing a model, or making a diorama. Effective book talks encourage the development of reading skills, the desire to read, oral language competence, and foster numerous other language skills. Further, book talks help to demonstrate that books are highly valued in the classroom and that there exists a tremendous number of wonderful books to read. In this light, teachers need to have a broad knowledge of children's books to provide suggestions for students and for presenting book talks of their own. Excellent resources

for learning more about children's books are provided by Huck (1976), Larrick (1975), Root (1973), Cianciolo (1977), and White and Schulte (1979). Periodicals such as The Horn Book and Language Arts provide numerous reviews of current children's books.

The book talk can be a great way to broaden children's awareness of literature while developing important verbal skills as well. Teachers, too, can enjoy their expanding awareness of children's literature through the successes of their students.

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