

Readers' Theater:  
*Using drama to understand experiences  
with environmental health issues*

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## **Facilitation Guide**



**Exchange Project**  
BECAUSE OUR ENVIRONMENT AFFECTS OUR HEALTH

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## Introduction

When the environmental health of a community is threatened by some hazard, a number of stakeholders decide how to handle the situation. **Community members** experience the hazard directly and may organize to create change.

**Government officials** contribute to human and environmental health by issuing permits to industry and regulating pollution and waste. **Researchers** investigate and monitor concentration levels and health effects to establish safe exposure limits. **Attorneys** represent clients in legal processes

that seek to stop hazardous production and provide compensation to injured parties. Each group has different priorities and challenges when addressing an environmental health hazard, often complicating resolution efforts.

The Exchange Project exists to help each of these groups see the situation from new perspectives and to increase understanding of how these community and professional groups can work

together more effectively. Established with funding from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, the Exchange Project is a collaborative effort among researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, community organizations such as the North Carolina Environmental Justice Network and North Carolina Fair Share, and attorneys from the Land Loss Prevention Project.

Visit **[www.ExchangeProject.unc.edu](http://www.ExchangeProject.unc.edu)** to find more information about the actual events on which the Readers' Theater scripts are based, to download scripts, and to find additional educational materials. More information about The Exchange Project is also found on the website.

### What do we mean by "environment"?

The word "environment" often brings to mind rivers, mountains, and wildlife. However, the environment also includes things that surround us every day, including air, water, soil, and public amenities like sewer and water services.

Patrick Novotny defines the environment as "where we live, work and play" in his book by the same name. The Exchange Project highlights environmental health concerns in those places that we live, work, and play.

## Using Readers' Theater

Readers' Theater is a theatrical performance in which actors read directly from scripts while performing. No memorization is required! Either volunteer readers or professional actors may take part, and the props and scenery are simple. The audience develops an understanding of the story primarily from the dialogue among readers. The lines can either be spoken straight from the script without any movement of the readers, or the readers can speak their parts while also accentuating the dialogue with intonations, movements, and minimal props.

Readers' Theater is a technique that has been applied to a wide range of topics and settings. We chose to apply this technique to environmental health issues because it allows participants to learn about and then discuss real situations and reflect on different perspectives. Talking about complicated and potentially emotional issues through observations of readers on a stage rather than a discussion of personal actions may allow participants to understand situations in new or different ways from several points of view.

The Exchange Project Readers' Theater entwines discussion closely with the performance. Often the discussion begins with the readers at the rehearsal for the performance. The facilitator should be present for the rehearsal and ready to guide discussion from the initial questions that arise. Building upon the rehearsal, the discussion continues after the performance, using discussion questions found at the end of each script. It is critical for participants (both readers and observers) to engage in conversation and process what they have observed in the staged reading as well as what they learn from the comments of other participants.



## General Goals for Dialogue

The main goals of the Exchange Readers' Theater experience are for participants to:

1. Increase awareness of potential environmental health hazards and their associated effects.
2. Reflect upon and discuss an environmental health issue and its social justice context.
3. Develop a greater sense of respect and empathy for community members, government officials, researchers, and attorneys who often have different perspectives, roles, and challenges when addressing environmental health concerns.

### What is dialogue?

In *The Magic of Dialogue*, Daniel Yankelovich describes dialogue as a conversation among equals based on empathy and questioning one's assumptions. We believe that if community residents, researchers, government officials, and attorneys engage in reflection and dialogue with one another, they may find ways to change their interactions in order to foster greater trust and seek solutions based on common interests.

4. Discuss the institutions and practices that contribute to environmental health issues and thus could be changed to improve environmental health.
5. Empower participants as agents of change and create interest in helping to influence practices and policies that promote health and environmental justice.

## Target Audience

Our target audience includes professionals, community members, and students (upper level high school, undergraduate, and graduate). The format for the Readers' Theater session must be tailored to the specific background, needs, and interests of the group. Therefore, discussion questions may vary from a focus on initial awareness to a discussion of change in policies and practice.

## **Facilitating the Event**

As the facilitator, your role is to lead an organized, interactive conversation while encouraging participation from the whole group. You do not need to be an expert on the issue. However, learning more about the issue before the event will make you feel more comfortable in guiding the discussion. Ideally, as the facilitator, your own personal comments will only be shared when absolutely necessary.

The scripts are designed to be provocative and the questions in the facilitator's guide should get the conversation started and help you guide the group in an engaging and thoughtful dialogue. The most important thing is to get the discussion started and then listen carefully to what people are saying so that you are able to follow up with questions that encourage additional comments, deep reflection, and exchange of perspectives among participants.

Tips for effective group facilitation may be found in *Appendix A*.

## **Suggested Structure for a Readers' Theater event**

Though each performance of Readers' Theater will follow its own particular requirements, there are several steps that should be consistent across all presentations.

### ***I. Rehearsal***

Each event should start with selection of readers ahead of time who will gather at least once to read through the script. One person may be designated as a director or the facilitator might also be the director.

The rehearsal is a valuable opportunity for readers to become more familiar with the script and for the facilitator and director to get a sense for how to guide the event. Additionally, there should be some time for discussion and exploration during the rehearsal, so that the readers can begin to process the script and their roles prior to the performance. These initial conversations may generate ideas for themes to cover during the discussion after the performance.

### ***II. Icebreaker***

Using an icebreaker at the beginning of a Readers' Theater session can serve several purposes. It can help people learn more about each other and set a relaxed and open mood for the group. Additionally, it offers the chance for each person in the room to say something, thereby making it more likely that they will speak up again later during the discussion. Finally, icebreakers can offer an opportunity for the facilitator to learn more about the participants and their knowledge of the subject material. Appendix B offers several icebreakers for consideration.

### **III. Introducing the performance**

Before the performance, there are some key pieces of information that should be shared with the group, including:

- Purpose of the event and background about The Exchange Project and Readers' Theater
- Title and author of the piece
- Background about the piece
- Importance of using facilitated discussion to explore the meaning of the piece
- The value of providing feedback through an evaluation at the end of the discussion

You also may want to briefly establish ground rules for the group discussion, perhaps writing them on a flipchart for easy reference. These rules will bring the group to a similar starting point and emphasize the importance of what is shared. You may want to ask the participants for suggestions, which might include ground rules such as "Make sure everyone gets to speak" or "Respect all the opinions in the room."

A sample introduction is found in *Appendix C*.

If the group needs orientation to the topic, you may find that a few opening questions before the performance are helpful to provide a context for the script and/or to stimulate their thoughts about an issue. Several questions are listed at the beginning of each script that may help get the group thinking about the issue.

### **IV. Performance**

Let the readers take it away!

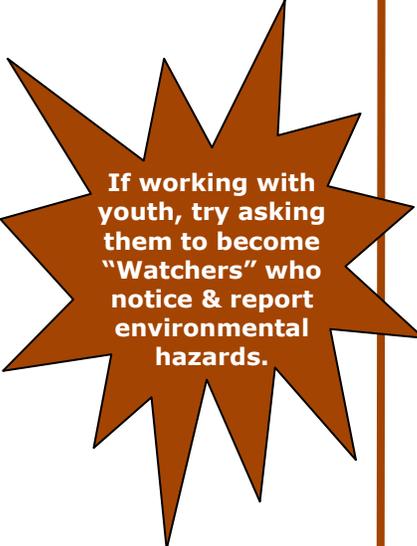
### **V. Facilitated Discussion**

After the performance, refer to the questions at the end of each script to get the discussion started. An appropriate discussion time is often about twice the length of the performance (15 minute performance, 30 minute discussion).

After each script, two sets of questions are provided. This design is intended to allow you to choose the questions that are most appropriate for the group with which you will be working. For example, the second set of questions solicits dialogue about personal feelings of identification with the characters. In some cases, personal feelings may be so strong and divided that this question prevents productive conversation rather than enabling it, and as a result, you prefer to use the alternative set of questions. If you do use the second set of questions and personal feelings are expressed, it is important to acknowledge these feelings and then direct the energy of the dialogue to potential actions.

Make sure to keep an eye on the time, and allow a couple of minutes at the end for summarizing key points of the discussion, recognizing the readers, and completing an evaluation.

If people in the discussion are interested in learning more about the environmental health issue, check out the last page of the script to find a list of related materials. These materials, or links to them, are available through the website.



If working with youth, try asking them to become "Watchers" who notice & report environmental hazards.

## **VI. Evaluation**

A short evaluation at the end of the event is a fantastic way to collect feedback and suggestions for improving future events. Evaluation can be as simple as asking a few questions and counting a show of hands; however, written evaluations are also commonly used and provide a good record of the event. Evaluation questions give participants a chance to anonymously express their opinions about the event and the use of a standard form ensures that all participants are asked the same questions. Summarizing the responses provides the facilitator with ideas that may improve the next event. A sample evaluation is found in *Appendix D*.

## Tips for Facilitating a Discussion

The role of the facilitator is critical in guiding the discussion and encouraging participation. Good facilitators actively listen to participants, drawing connections and highlighting differences between what various people say. They challenge the group to examine their own assumptions and think about different perspectives. They create a safe environment in which people can share their perspectives by demonstrating their own respect for all of the opinions in the room.

Several good books provide the following recommendations on how to facilitate discussions effectively.

### 1. Ways to encourage participation

- **Intentional silence** allows group members to formulate their thoughts more fully. It may help to count to 10 in your head so that you wait long enough for participants to speak up.
- To **make space** for quieter members of the group, watch for body language that indicates they want to speak, invite them to speak, and, if it is needed, hold more talkative members back to allow quieter ones to speak.
- **Encourage** people to participate by saying things like, "Is this discussion raising questions for anyone?" or "Let's hear from someone who hasn't spoken for awhile."
- **Balance** the conversation by drawing out opinions that may be unexpressed. Some useful questions are: "We know where three people stand; does anyone else have a different position?" or "Are there other ways of looking at this?"

### 2. Ways to help clarify what people say

- To let people know they are being heard, **mirror** their statements by repeating their words exactly — either using an entire sentence, or key phrases.
- **Paraphrase** a speaker's statements to clarify his or her ideas for the benefit of the group and the speaker. Start the paraphrase with something like, "It sounds like what you're saying is..." or "This is what I'm hearing you say..."
- **Draw people out** to help them clarify their ideas. Begin by paraphrasing, then ask, "Can you say more about that?" or "What do you mean by...?"
- Long or abstract answers might need to be followed up with a request for **specific examples** to shorten the soliloquy and help participants understand the point being made.
- If a participant makes an association that leads the group off topic, **acknowledge** that what they are saying is an important consideration,

however not the focus of the discussion. Then **recount** recent comments and either repeat the question at hand or move on to the next question.

### 3. How to juggle multiple comments

- If more than one person wants to speak at once, **stacking** can be used to give everyone a chance to speak. This may be done by verbally assigning a speaking order and making sure the order is followed. If a flipchart is available, the facilitator can also write down a list of names.
- When multiple lines of thought are occurring within a conversation, **track** the different conversations by summarizing them for the group, then ask if those summaries are correct.

If there are disagreements between participants, remind the group about **honoring all perspectives** and then open the discussion up further to see if there are any other viewpoints. Acknowledge the differing opinions and let them stand “side by side.”

#### **References:**

Schwarz, R. (1994). *The Skilled Facilitator*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers. Kaner, S., Lind, L., Toldi, C., Fisk, S., & Berger, D. (1996).

*Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*. Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers.

## Icebreakers

**One word:** Ask each person to share their name and what they think of when you say the word “environment”

**That’s me:** Ask participants to listen as you read a series of statements, and stand up when you read one that is true for them. This icebreaker is a good chance for you as a facilitator to get to know the participants in your group. Sample statements could include:

- I’m somebody who has sisters or brothers
- I’m somebody who has seen a landfill
- I’m somebody who was born in North Carolina
- I’m somebody who has been to a town council meeting
- I’m somebody who has heard of environmental justice

**Line up**<sup>1</sup>: Ask the group to divide into two teams. Tell them that you will ask them to line up in order based on different characteristics, and the team to get in order first will get a point. The team with the greatest number of points at the end could get some kind of prize or just a round of applause.

Use these instructions or add your own:

1. Line up in order by shoe size.
2. Line up in order by length of arm's reach.
3. Line up in order alphabetically by favorite color.
4. Line up in order by number of siblings you have.
5. Line up in order by age, youngest to oldest.
6. Line up in order alphabetically by first name.
7. Line up in order alphabetically by last name.
8. Line up in order by number of pets owned.
9. Line up in order by hair length, longest to shortest.
10. Line up in order by the number of bones you have ever broken.

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<sup>1</sup> This icebreaker came from <http://www.businessfundamentals.com/Icebreakers.htm>  
The Exchange Project: Readers’ Theater Facilitation Guide

## Sample Performance Introduction

*This introduction is designed to be general enough to be used with various groups. Use all or part of this introduction, selecting whatever feels natural and appropriate for a given performance!*

Good morning/afternoon/evening, and welcome to the Readers' Theater performance and discussion of *[insert name of piece]*. My name is *[insert your name]* and I will be facilitating the event this evening. Our script was written by *[see author on script]* as part of The Exchange Project which is based at the UNC School of Public Health. The script is directed by *[insert director]* and will be performed by *[insert individual names or groups involved]*.

The Exchange Project was founded by a grant from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences to increase awareness of environmental issues across both community and professional groups. Exchange seeks to help government officials, community members, and professionals understand each other's perspectives and gain ideas that will help all involved to work together to improve environmental health.

One method The Exchange Project uses to get people engaged in environmental health topics is Readers' Theater, which you will witness today. You will see a short theatrical performance and then we will talk about what you heard and saw. These Readers' Theater stories are based on actual situations that are taking place in North Carolina. Names are fictitious and characters are composites of real people; however, the dilemmas they face are real. We want to use the discussion to get you thinking about how community members, government officials, and professionals interact to address environmental issues. As you take part, we hope it will help you see things from new perspectives and allow you to share your experiences with others.

This script is intended to be a dramatic representation of a community experience. As such, some statements by the characters may represent controversial beliefs that warrant further examination in discussion sessions. Whenever possible, to further inform the dialogue, the Exchange Project will provide additional information on the issue or links to other sources through their website: [www.ExchangeProject.unc.edu](http://www.ExchangeProject.unc.edu)

Our goal is to get you thinking and talking about environmental health issues. The scripts are just a way to get things started. Therefore, this is not a full theatrical production. Our performers tonight will be reading directly from their scripts and using minimal props. We hope that you find what they present to be engaging and a good starting point for discussion.

Before we get started, it would be a good idea to establish a few ground rules for our conversation. What suggestions do you have for guidelines we should follow? *[It may be helpful to start by giving an example; common suggestions include a commitment to listen respectfully, not dominating the conversation, provide constructive contributions, be honest, keep all comments confidential.]*

After the discussion, we'll be passing out evaluation forms so that you can tell us what you think about this event. Please take a few minutes to complete the evaluation. This is one of the best ways that we can learn about your reactions to this experience so that we can improve our future sessions.

Now I'd like to share some background about tonight's performance. [*Read background paragraph from the beginning of the script*]. Now, we present [*insert name of piece*].

**Evaluation**

Name of event: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Using a scale of 1-4, please share your impressions of the Readers’ Theater performance and discussion. (Please circle a number)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I gained new insight about environmental justice by listening to this script reading.	1	2	3	4
The discussion afterward increased my understanding of the issue.	1	2	3	4
I would like to participate in other events promoting discussion about environmental justice issues.	1	2	3	4
I can do something to improve the environmental health of my community.	1	2	3	4

2. What did you like about today’s Readers’ Theater session?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Describe how we could improve the Readers’ Theater performance or discussion.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. I would like to know more about...

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

5. Do you have any other comments or questions?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**THANK YOU!**

## Resources for classroom activities related to environmental health

**The Hydroville Curriculum Project** leads students to break up into groups to investigate an illness outbreak, taking on the role of physicians, epidemiologists, industrial hygienists, and toxicologists. A product of Oregon State University. Sample curriculum materials are free upon registering with the website; the entire curriculum be purchased on the same website. Activities of particular relevance include the Water Quality series and the Pesticide Spill series.

<http://www.hydroville.org/>

**The National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences** maintains a website with environmental health resources for teachers and students (K-12). This includes classroom activities, fact sheets, interviews with scientists and researchers, curriculum materials, and links where students can explore environmental health topics. Some relevant activities include "Toxic Tic-Tac-Toe" (Follow link to EHP Science Education Lessons at <http://www.ehponline.org/science-ed/2006/tictac.pdf>) or "Tackling Toxic Waste" from the 1999 NIEHS Summer Institute binder.

<http://www.niehs.nih.gov/science-education/home.htm>

**The Partnership for Environmental Education and Rural Health** provides environmental health-related activities for science and non-science middle school classrooms. Each lesson explores a historically-based mystery related to environmental health that students must solve in the course of the lesson. Developed by Texas A&M University. Activities relevant to toxic waste and its effects include "Tut's Revenge," about ground water contamination during the construction of King Tut's tomb, and "Hard River Escape," about industrial pollution in the Ukraine. <http://peer.tamu.edu/>

**My Environment, My Health, My Choices** provides lesson plan materials related to issues such as acid rain, environmental health policy, and water pollution. Developed by the University of Rochester. "Dangers Seen and Unseen: Water and Environmental Health" is particularly relevant to the issues discussed here.

<http://www2.envmed.rochester.edu/envmed/ehsc/outreach/curriculum.html>

**Breaking the Mold** is a video and lesson plan that addresses the effects of indoor air pollution on health and leads students through the scientific process. Follow up lesson plans include activities such as conducting an asthma survey or examining sources of pollution in their own environment. Created by Maryland Public Television and the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

<http://enviromysteries.thinkport.org/breakingthemold/>

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