

Bozeman Teaching American History 2004 Summer Institute

Prof. Mary Murphy: Group Project/Readers' Theater/Oral History

Readers' Theater is a type of theater that emphasizes the text over action or drama: called "Readers'" theater because typically you have your text right on stage with you and read from it to the audience. It is an ideal way to present the results of an oral history project since students play the role of a character--the person they or someone else interviewed, but the production is minimal. The idea is to emphasize the text of your interviews. A readers' theater production can be done very skeletally, without scenery, costumes, lighting, or much expense, or you can add extras as time, energy, and money permit.

Things to Consider

Who is your audience? Will you invite the people who you interviewed and their families? Your classmates? Colleagues?

The Script: While readers' theater is not elaborate drama, it is dramatic and therefore demands that your script tell some kind of story--that is, have a beginning, a middle, and an end. You have lots of wonderful material in your interviews. The challenge is to pull it together in some kind of narrative form. First decide how long you want your performance to be, and that will dictate the length of your script.

Your first step should be for each of you to read as many of the interviews as possible. As you read, sketch out possible outlines, scenarios, or topics that you think should be included in the play. For example, you might read several interviews and see that there are lots of stories about how dangerous work was--that could be a "scene" with characters relating their experiences; another might be about how people got their jobs; another may be the stories about livestock trains, snowstorms, the experience of women working on the railroad.

You should decide whether you want to have a narrator in the play. You could choose to not have one, merely having all the characters present material directly from the interviews. You could even use a narrator to introduce topics and to give some background material based on your primary research or from other materials lent you by the narrators.

Structure of the Performance: You can do readers' theater without any props, but you might decide you want some background. A tape of appropriate music, a poster board with photographs or xeroxes of photos you borrowed from your narrators, art work, etc. all serve well as background materials. You might also want to wear some kind of simple costume.

An initial group meeting should decide the length of the production, your ideal audience, and the main themes or stories of the play and a target date for the performance. Then each of you need to take responsibility for drafting a section of the script and set a schedule to complete the work.

[Railroad voices](#) Sample ten page reader's theater script