



A guide to picture book drama

Adapting picture books into
plays and drama productions

Age 3-11

CFE Levels 1 and 2

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About this resource

The aim of this resource is to help you to make drama productions out of picture books. The resource focuses on the process of turning ideas into a structured “retelling” for performance, in which everyone has a particular role to play. Children at any stage of primary school can develop picture books into a presentation for an audience of their choice- parents, peers or younger pupils.

To accompany these notes there are three kit lists for picture books that have proved particularly popular for turning into drama: *Monkey Puzzle* by Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler; *Lullabyhullabaloo* by Mick Inkpen; *Jack and the Beanstalk* by Richard Walker and Niamh Sharkey. The kit lists can be found in the learning resources section of the Scottish Book Trust website.

The activities in this resource link to these CFE experiences and outcomes:

LIT 2-01a, LIT 2-02a, LIT 2-09a, LIT 2-16a, ENG 2-03a, ENG 2-14a, ENG 2-19a, ENG 2-31a, EXA 2-01a, HWB 2-12a, HWB 1-19a.

Right at the start

Choose the right book for your class

- Find a story with plenty of action/movement sequences which the children will enjoy playing out again and again. Don't worry if there are only a limited number of characters. There are lots of ways of taking part, so everyone is involved in the final production.
- Consider the impact of the language in the story. How will it sound? Does it suggest different ways for children to use their voices?
- Look for stories in rhyme, stories with simple dialogue which is often repeated, and stories with opportunities for vivid narration.
- You could select a few different options and present them to your class. Encourage them to think about how each could be converted into a play. This could be done in pairs or as a group discussion. The whole class can then select the book they would like to perform.

Consider how the story will sound aloud

- You don't have to be an actor to present a story well. You do need to use your voice expressively with a variety of tone, pitch, volume, pace and emphasis, bringing the words to life and letting the children see the pictures of the characters and events, as you read.
- Make sure they can all see the book. Discuss the front cover and the title.
- Read the story right through, as you turn the pages and show the pictures, so that the children have the pleasure of hearing and seeing the "shape" of the whole story.
- Sometimes if you stop and start your reading, to ask questions or elaborate the text, the flow of the story as written by the author is lost, and the children's concentration and pleasure in the story is diminished.
- With older children it is useful to emphasise how the story builds to a climax and a satisfying ending, which is what any drama they make must also do.

Before deciding on a play

Have fun trying out the action

- Let everyone experiment with the movement of the characters in the story.
- Use music or percussion instruments to accompany this movement.
- Organise the children in pairs or small groups to try out different ideas.
- Give each pair or group the chance to demonstrate their ideas to the others.

Enjoy experimenting with narration and dialogue

- Think of how the narration and dialogue can be shared between more than one speaker.
- Is it possible to have two or more narrators reading the dialogue, while others move as the characters through the events?
- With younger non-readers you can narrate, and encourage the children to join in repeated lines or phrases.
- Encourage the children to play with the sound of the words.
- Let them try different voices for different characters.

Provide simple costume or props or puppets to stimulate participation

There is no need for these to be elaborate or entirely representative.

- A hat or coloured scarf or simple headband is all that is required to denote characters.
- A simple prop /piece of costume/homemade puppet for each character will often entice even the most reluctant child to take part.

Create the setting for the action of the story

- Set any furniture you need first.
- Set starting points/places for each character. Use hoops or mats or signs to indicate where the characters begin their own action.
- Organise the actors. You can decide to involve groups of children to represent types of characters. Alternatively, you can choose one child to represent each character and tell the story several times so that every child has a turn of participating in the drama. Each time the others who are listening and watching can sit in role around the acting area, waiting for their turn to join in.

Narrate the story as the children participate in the action and dialogue

- As you narrate, allow time for the action and dialogue to take place.
- If a child or character does not respond at first you can help by using your voice to repeat the dialogue, or by taking a reluctant participant's hand and moving with them into the action.
- Once they know what to do children will – with time - very readily join in as you read the story.

Choose your moment

Suggest that the story could be presented to an audience

- Decide who would enjoy seeing this story in action
- Discuss numbers in the audience and where they will sit
- Do not automatically prepare an end-on acting area, as in traditional theatre. It is more natural for young children to play the action in the round, i.e., the audience sit in a large circle to watch the story unfold. Older children could attempt a promenade production between rows of the audience on each side. Or the audience can sit on three sides of the acting area, as for a 'thrust' stage.
- The key is to outline the floor space you need for the action and designated areas for each contributor /contribution to the drama. The children do not require to be hidden in the wings as if in a professional theatre. They are simply telling the story in a dramatic way to an invited audience.
- Discuss some of the essentials elements for performing the story:
Narrator(s), characters, actions, dialogue, props, costume, setting/scenery, sound effects.
- Remember that children do not always want to be actors, but may be keen to contribute to the presentation in some practical way.

Distribute the roles and jobs you have prepared for your chosen picture book

Make sure that there is an important task for each child to do as you all work together to make the story come alive.

- **Narrator(s)**- highlight the words they say, and encourage them to practise reading aloud.
- **Characters**- decide how they move and the voice they will use for their marked dialogue.
- **Sound team**- select children to play an instrument or make sound effects to accompany the characters /action or switch selected music on /off.
- **Costume department**- you may want your character actors to decide/make what they are wearing, or you can assign someone special to select items from a collection you provide. There is no need for the children to make a whole costume for each character. Hats/aprons/cloaks can be worn and head dresses/masks/simple puppets can be designed and made by the children themselves. Opportunities to experiment with moving in costume are recommended.

- **Stage management team-** practical tasks such as putting furniture or props in place or designing and manipulating visual effects, can be given to pairs or small groups to accomplish.
- **Publicity and box office team-** make posters, tickets/invitations, and programmes for the performance.

Rehearse and present your picture book drama

When you've completed all the preparations, you can make time to run through the sequence of action and words of the story once or twice.

It is counterproductive to rehearse this too much as the children will become formulaic in the way they move and speak, and lose expression and enthusiasm for the whole project. Before the presentation day just have two special rehearsals:

- **A technical rehearsal-** the story is narrated and acted with all props, and sound and visual effects in place and working properly.
- **A dress rehearsal-** a final run through with costume, props, sound and visual effects, at the end of which you decide on the 'finale' which involves everyone coming together to take a bow!

Presentation Day

Relax and enjoy the experience with the children of your picture book production par excellence! Good luck to all!

Follow up activities

A child's delight in performing a picture book with you can be extended through creative activities in the classroom. Often after children participate in instant drama/music/art you will find they very readily return to the picture book to read it for themselves, or share it with others. Even the simplest participation can tell you how children feel about a story and demonstrate the impact of the language and illustrations on their imaginations.

The following suggestions spring out of three favourite picture books I've used with three different age groups in primary schools:

Monkey Puzzle by written Julia Donaldson and illustrated by Axel Scheffler (P1-3)

Lullabyhullabaloo by Mick Inkpen (Nursery + P1-4)

Jack and the Beanstalk written by Richard Walker and illustrated by Niamh Sharkey (P5-7)

Monkey Puzzle activity ideas

Make monkey masks

Help for shape and instructions can be found online such as this [monkey mask template](#).

Make butterfly wings

Provide a large collection of pieces of silky material or silky scarves. Suggest that the children make wings with them and give them time to experiment flying or floating in a large space in their wings.

Role play in pairs

Decide which of each pair will be the monkey and which the butterfly and encourage pupils to move in character.

Instant dramas

After hearing the story aloud once more let the pairs (all at one time) play out the conversations between the butterfly and the monkey. Then organise the whole class to listen to different pairs' conversations. Give a sound signal (cymbal) to "freeze" the action. When everyone is still, tap one pair on their heads and ask them to continue their conversation. All listen to them speak then strike the cymbal again for everyone to resume their own role play. This can be repeated as often as there are pairs who want to take a turn of speaking aloud. This can become a popular game you can try with other stories.

Lullabyhullabaloo activity ideas

Create your own lullaby

Use chime bars, bells, jingling sound boxes (metal things in tins), shakers, etc. to accompany a lullaby song the children know or can learn. For example, *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star/Rock-a Bye Baby*. You can explore our [Bookbug Song and Rhyme Library](#) to find songs to use for this activity.

Sing with your instruments

Make a simple volume control arrow out of card which you can point upwards to increase volume/downwards to decrease volume. Practise singing and playing instruments at different levels.

Prepare the sounds and sound effects which appear in the story.

Let each child be responsible for making one sound either musically or vocally

Have fun reading the story aloud with the children adding all the voices and sound effects.

Jack and the Beanstalk activity ideas

Make a radio play

Accompany the telling of the tale with voices and sound effects. This could be recorded and turned into a podcast to share with the rest of the school or parents. You can find examples of radio plays on [BBC School Radio](#).

Make a script for everyone to follow

A group can take responsibility for presenting the narration. They can decide who says what as the story progresses. They should note down their words alongside their names in the order in which they will speak. For example:

Thomas: Jack knew better than to argue.

Annabel: So the next day he got up at sunrise and set off down the lane with Daisy in tow.

Billy: He had not gone far when he came around a corner and bumped into a funny little man.

The dialogue can be written by you, or if the children themselves are keen they can construct a script for a scene/scenes by searching the picture book text for speech marks and noting what is said alongside each character's name. For example:

Giant: Fee, Fi, Fo Fum, I smell the blood of a stinky man! Where is he woman?

Narrator: The giant sniffed his way round the room until he came close to where Jack was hiding

Old woman: Oh don't be silly! All you can smell is the stew I've made

For sound effects, children can collect instruments or objects to make/represent all the sounds that come into the story. For example, coconut shells for Daisy's hooves, or a shaker for the bag of beans, or Swanee whistles for the beans growing up and up into the sky and a rattling chain as the old woman opens the door.

If you or the children want to mark when the sounds come in to the script you can use the standard abbreviation for sound effects: FX. For example:

Narrator: He pulled and pulled until he could see the giant, hanging on for dear life, glaring down at him. Then he let go.

FX: BOINNNNGGGG!

Rehearse and record your radio play

Once you have everything ready try telling the whole story as expressively as possible with narration, dialogue and effects.

If you have the facilities have fun recording your efforts and playing back the results again and again!

Further information and links

There are further resources available to help you plan and produce a picture book play.

- Scottish Book Trust has a short resource for “Quick activities for performing picture books” to accompany books by Ed Vere. This can be found in the learning resources section of the website.
- Julia Donaldson’s picture books are often popular to perform, and she has a selection of her books which have been [converted into plays](#).
- As well as performing picture books, you could also look at performing poetry. Michael Rosen has a website with resources to support [poetry performance](#).
- For pupils with additional support needs, Ailie Finlay from [Flotsam and Jetsam](#) provides a [variety of resources](#) for sensory storytelling and story retelling.