

Training Students to Read Aloud

Throughout this course you will be asking the students to read aloud from primary source readings. All too often, student readers rush through the assigned passage, internally heaving a sigh of relief when their turn is over. Even students who have some training as lecturers, actors, or public speakers are hesitant to apply the skills they use in those contexts to reading aloud in class. Yet if students rush through a complex reading, or mumble their way through it, the meaning is lost and any follow-up discussion falls flat.

For these reasons it may be helpful to spend some time training the students to read aloud in a way that conveys the meaning of the text.

Using Tone to Convey Meaning

Reading aloud is comparable to a conversation. You may wish to begin a discussion about reading primary source materials with the topic of tone. Anyone who has ever been made fun of, blasted with sarcasm, or given a brush-off knows it isn't just what you say, but how you say it. Tone of voice changes a compliment into an insult, or it can make constructive criticism easier to hear. Tone can tell the listener how we would like him or her to receive our words. Tone can also tell the listener what we think is important about what we are saying.

Learn by Doing with Comedy

The following exercise can help to bring the point home:

1. Divide the large group into four small groups and give each a slip of paper with one of the following sentences on it.
 - YOU are my friend.
 - You ARE my friend.
 - You are MY friend.
 - You are my FRIEND.

If possible, try to ensure that the groups don't realize that they are all working with the same sentence.

2. Instruct the small groups to look at their sentences, particularly at the underlined word that communicates the primary meaning of the sentence. This is the "tone" word.
3. Now direct the small groups to make up a scenario that ends with this sentence, with its assigned emphasis. Encourage them to be as silly as possible in creating the storyline, and reiterate that the sentence with the tone word must end the skit.
4. Have each small group present its skit to the rest of the class.



5. When all the small groups are done presenting, engage all the students in a large-group discussion, ensuring that the following points are raised:
 - Because primary source readings don't come with underlined words, it is important to know how each word and each sentence fits into the whole.
 - Each sentence in a text supports the overall theme. By determining the overall theme, we better understand what words to "underline" with our voice.

Using Punctuation Cues to Convey Meaning

Punctuation provides cues for readers by separating clauses, showing the relationships between ideas, and indicating where new topics begin. Remind the students that punctuation can cue them about pauses and inflection. When reading primary source materials, preparation can make the difference between reading a string of words and conveying real meaning to the listeners. Whenever you plan to work with a primary source document, consider whether you will make ask for student readers. If you plan to do so, try to allow the students to prepare at home, or give them some class time for preparation.

Learn by Doing with an Encyclical or Epistle

Provide the students with a selection from a Church document, such as paragraph 17 of Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical "On Christian Love" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 2005), or a challenging biblical passage, such as Romans 8:31–39. These readings are readily available online. Explain to the students that the excerpt you've distributed is a difficult passage to read, and it is a difficult reading for listeners to follow. Allow the students to practice reading aloud quietly after they have marked the passage for dramatic effect as follows:

- Place a slash line between sentences, and a Q at the beginning of a question.
- Circle the commas, colons, and semicolons.
- Underline words that should be emphasized to convey meaning.
- Place a caret (^) after particularly meaningful phrases to indicate a dramatic pause.

Reading Aloud Well

You can help student readers by reminding them of the basics of public speaking, but you must create an environment where reading aloud well is accepted. No student wants to be the target of mockery. Involving all the students in practice, expecting everyone to read well, and working with the students until they are able to convey meaning will go a long way in creating a classroom where it is safe to read well. You may wish to directly address this issue with your students, inviting them into a "reading-well pact," where all agree to do their best and support one another's efforts.

The Mechanics of Public Speaking

Think about poor readers, both students and adults, you've heard in the past so that you can make a list of points to share with the students. Some readers slur their words, throw away clauses, or swallow the



last word of every sentence. Others may overuse rising inflection so that everything they say sounds like a question. Some student readers may project their voice toward the teacher only, and some may seem to read to the page rather than the class.

Offer tips like these for reading aloud:

- Imagine you are the author's spokesperson at a formal banquet: stand straight and speak clearly.
- Allow the class a moment to prepare to listen before starting your reading.
- Project your voice toward the person in the back row.
- Maintain a deliberate pace and say all phrases clearly. Remember that the ends of sentences shouldn't be rushed.
- Refer to the punctuation cues you made in preparation for the reading. Remember, when you finish, pause for a moment before turning toward your seat.

If you plan to have the students read primary source materials aloud in class, the time you spend training them to read well will pay off in listener comprehension; in turn, the class will enjoy more fruitful discussion of the materials.

Learn by Doing with TV-Style Competition

Consider allowing the students to bring a brief selection of their own choosing for skills practice. You may wish to involve them in choosing a particular genre of writing and word count that will be acceptable. Using a class-generated list of criteria for excellence in reading aloud, invite the students to evaluate each other in an *American Idol*-type of competition. This competition could be ongoing over a period of time and could provide a fun way for the students to learn the skills that will ultimately enrich the experience of working with primary source materials.

(This article is adapted from *Gather Faithfully* leader's guide and participant's booklet, both by Laure Krupp [Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2006].)

