

Literary Ideas and Scripts for Young Playwrights



Lisa Kaniut Cobb

Illustrated by Helen Matthews

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To all my friends who teach
and their students who write.

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Introduction

National attention on improving math and science test scores in our public schools has left writing curriculum in the dust. Yet it is inconceivable that employers would overlook poor reading and writing skills. Educators know that reading and writing skills improve together. Students must comprehend what they read, process the information, evaluate it critically, and respond to it. The same skills are essential for writing students as well as for math and science students. In fact they are essential in most professional careers. Without communication skills, engineers cannot explain their innovations to manufacturers, medical researchers cannot report their findings, managers cannot lead and motivate their employees, and students cannot improve their proficiency test scores.

Studies have shown that students who play musical instruments do better in math classes. The ability to read musical scores and translate them into the manual dexterity that is required to produce notes from instruments has been scientifically proven to increase the number of electrical synapses in their brains. It is logical to assume that training young students to turn their thoughts and feelings into written words would help their fresh, creative imaginations develop more electrical synapses as well. Both music and writing require the rational thinking skills of the left brain and the intuitive skills of the right brain.

Educators have also known for years that teaching grammar alone does not improve writing skills (Vandeweghe). Rather, writing improves with practice. The best writers begin writing in early grade school and hone their skills through high school. Most writing curriculum revolves around evaluating reading assignments. The trouble is, students have such a wide range of interests and aptitudes in reading that it is difficult to find reading material that grabs their attention. Some may gravitate toward nonfiction such as sports biographies or dinosaur discoveries, while others prefer fiction that is scary, or silly, or a mystery, adventure, or fantasy. Early grade school students are not ready to tackle classic literature together. However, they often enjoy a common familiarity with fairy tales.

This book offers ideas to help teachers energize their writing assignments. Ann Martin (Martin, 4) states that “the sources of writing have to be activated first, before we can impose standards of form.” She maintains that we must “respect the complexity of children’s thoughts and feelings” before children are taught how to “organize them into written form.” In other words, children’s imaginations need to be activated or fired up before they are taught grammar and writing style. Students who are given creative writing prompts and exercises like the ones in this book are given permission to think, to explore their own ideas, to make personal decisions, and to express themselves.

By tapping the knowledge students already have of fairy tales, poetry, history, and cultural mythology, teachers will stimulate the imaginations of their students. The creative writing exercises in each chapter teach students how to read a story as a writer and to evaluate the plot, characters, setting, and situation. Students decide what makes the story exciting or scary and consider how making small changes to the original will alter the ending. The process of evaluating stories is a critical writing skill.

Why must these exercises lead to plays? While young students might struggle with reading and writing, their verbal skills are well developed. They know how to get what they want. Their empathic skills are also keen. They know when someone is crabby, silly, sad, or angry. By concentrating on the

spoken dialog of a play, they focus on their characters' personalities. They imagine the tone of voice, inflections, and actions of their characters, without being bogged down with dry, descriptive paragraphs. They must "show rather than tell," a writing class mantra, how characters behave and feel through action and dialog.

In his book, *Playmaking*, Daniel Sklar says that while writing their own plays, students "develop language arts skills" (Sklar, ix). At the same time they learn to "appreciate their own feelings and to use their own imaginations" (Sklar, ix). In producing their own plays, they learn "self-discipline, cooperation and mutual respect" (Sklar, ix). Sklar came to this conclusion following a program he led in Macon, Georgia, where students wrote and produced their own plays for their community. "The kids' work emerged as a vital new force in the community" (Sklar, 70). They were empowered by their work. Sklar confirmed the usefulness of plays as a tool to enhance writing programs as well as other classroom skills through his fieldwork. This book presents a simpler version of his twenty-week program, and it is designed for classroom teachers rather than for visiting writing specialists.

When students are asked to give their plays a formal reading, or better yet a performance, they can hear when sentences are unclear, characters do not sound natural, and situations are funny. Plays clearly reveal the power of words as playwrights observe their affect on an audience. All three kinds of learning (the oral, visual, and kinetic learning styles) take place in a play.

This book is a collection of creative writing exercises and original plays, all geared toward students in the third through eighth grades. Language arts, English, history, writing and specials teachers will find *creative* writing ideas as well as material to perform. Teachers choose chapters based on the reading and writing levels of their students. Each chapter introduces a different approach to source material. The beginning chapters are designed for younger students, while the later chapters are for older classes. For instance, a poetry unit can be enhanced with Chapters 1 or 8. Chapter 9 is a great assignment for a history class. The original plays and readers theatre scripts at the end of each chapter are offered as models to inspire new plays. Teachers can decide whether to perform them or merely read them in class.

Each chapter begins with a section titled "Story Adaptation," where source material is suggested. The section explains what questions must be answered to transform the source material into a play. There are worksheets that can be copied and used to organize students' prewriting thoughts. As writers consider their source material and how to adapt it into an original play, they must make decisions and solve problems. Examples demonstrate the process.

In the next section of each chapter, "Playwriting," elements such as the structure of the play, characters, set, costumes, and props are discussed. Some material is better suited to readers theatre while other projects lead to plays. Readers theatre is different from plays in that the performers are not expected to act or memorize their parts. They are given specially bound copies of the script to carry onstage and read. Sometimes costumes are worn but not always. Sets are also minimal, ranging from a few chairs and stools arranged in specific ways to nothing at all on stage. These scripts are a great way to get students used to performing without having to deal with the stage jitters associated with memorization and acting. Students can read in the front of a classroom, without the need for a stage. Such readings are also less time consuming to prepare and perform.

Teachers decide whether each student will write an original version of a story or whether the entire class will generate a single story and script. If each student creates an individual story, a formal reading by a classroom full of "hams" can be turned into a contest. Then only the winning play or top three plays are performed, whether it is for other classes or an auditorium filled with parents.

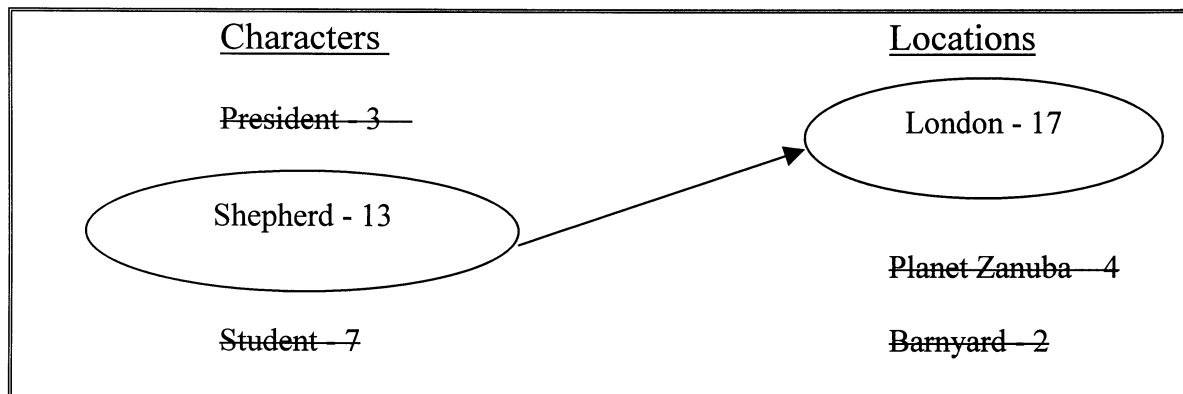
A contest gives students a target audience, which helps them focus on what is appropriate, and provides a forum for critiques. When students learn how to discuss strengths and weaknesses in their scripts, they not only produce better writing, but they also get a chance to practice diplomacy, critical thinking, and problem solving. Worksheets are provided in this book to help steer these discussions as well. Students learn to phrase their comments in supportive and helpful ways, and teachers must make

it clear that the script is under discussion, not the writer. Discussions begin with positive feedback and finish with suggestions for how to strengthen and clarify the work. Writers who welcome such critiques become stronger writers who are able to accept change as a positive thing. A critique can also let writers know that their script is wonderful already and should be submitted for publication immediately.

Ambitious student writers will want to cast and direct their own plays, or they may act as advisors for students who wish to take on those roles. Many schools have special teachers who lead groups for chorale, band, orchestra, art, theater, and even musical performances. These teachers may be willing to assist with a performance. Art teachers can help students create backdrops or props. All of these activities help writers see the fruits of their labor, building enthusiasm for the written word and for improving reading and writing skills.

Before turning to the first chapter, consider trying the following technique to demonstrate the creative possibilities for your students. Canadian author Karleen Bradford introduced me to the concept of clustering (Bradford). Clustering works for a group or an individual. However, when an entire classroom of students tries it, each new idea builds on the last as stories develop, and it is very exciting to watch students inspire each other. Once the concept is demonstrated for the whole class, students are eager to tackle such assignments on their own or in small groups.

Begin by asking the class to suggest a main character—preferably not just a name, but also an occupation such as student, president, or shepherd. After all the suggestions have been written on the board in front of the class, take a blind vote for all the choices, listing the number of votes next to each character. The winner becomes the hero of your story. Erase everything else and draw a circle around your hero. Next, ask students to suggest a location such as London, a barnyard, or the planet Zanuba. Tell the students that the more specific they are, the more material they will have for their story. Repeat the vote-erase-circle process, drawing a line from one circle to the next. The board will look like this.



At this point the class needs to come up with a conflict for the hero in this location. Suggest that they keep it simple. Consider the following possibilities:

- Shepherd lost her flock in London.
- Student is kidnapped and taken to the planet Zanuba.
- President only feels safe when surrounded by barnyard animals.

Their decisions become the basis for a simple story, or several stories. Students will have to solve the conflict, describe the places, create support characters, and wrap it all up for a satisfying ending. Older students can continue with a subplot by using the same process. This process may look like the bubble concept used in many classrooms, except here it helps generate choices and then narrows them down to the most interesting one. Bubbles are generally used to help students categorize and list details, while clustering is more like a free association exercise.

Once you've decided whether to attempt a single class story or individual ones, based on the age and writing skills of the group, you are ready to choose a chapter.

To paraphrase one of my favorite characters in Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, Now let the creative writing begin.

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1

Poetry for Choral Readings



This chapter demonstrates the creation of two original choral readings. The first one is an adaptation of the E. E. Cummings poem “in Just-.” The second choral reading is based on Lewis Carroll’s “The Walrus and the Carpenter.” Any poem can be adapted. For instance, teachers can choose poems written during the time of their current history unit, or one from the state or country in a geography lesson. Exploring the poetry of a time period or geographic region stimulates student’s creative juices, broadening their experience by allowing them to explore beyond the dry facts and into the realm of emotions and sensations.

Unless you choose poetry that is available in the public domain, the issue of copyright infringement may arise. If your students wish to submit their work for publication, this is a consideration. Work that is in the public domain is available for anyone to use and enjoy. Otherwise the author or publisher will need to be contacted for legal permission to derive a new story from their original.

Story Adaptation

I have been granted permission to use a poem by the modern American poet, E. E. Cummings. His style will appeal to younger classes because his poems are free of capital letters and punctuation and full of glee. “in Just-” is a twenty-four-line poem about a balloon seller whose arrival is a harbinger of spring. It will inspire an original choral reading.

The characters in the poem include a balloon seller, two boys named Eddie and Bill, and two girls named Betty and Isbel. The boys shoot marbles and play pirate games, while the girls play hopscotch and jump rope until they hear the whistles of the balloon man. There is lots of action but very little information about the characters. That is where budding playwrights step in. Each character needs a personality that will govern how he or she interacts with the others. The plot of the script is already laid out in the poem.

Playwriting

Even though E. E. Cummings laid out his poem in twenty-four lines, there are only sixty words. A copy of “in Just-” follows. As you take a moment to read it, notice all the white space the poet left on the page. This space creates natural pauses in the flow of words. It sets the pace, slowing it down as the eye covers the white space on the page and speeding it up when the words are bunched together.

in Just-

E. E. Cummings (1894–1962)

1 in just
 2 spring when the world is mud-
 3 luscious the little
 4 lame balloonman

 5 whistles far and wee

 6 and eddieandbill come
 7 running from marbles and
 8 piracies and it's
 9 spring

 10 when the world is puddle-wonderful

 11 the queer
 12 old balloonman whistles
 13 far and wee
 14 and bettyandisbel come dancing

 15 from hop-scotch and jump-rope and

 16 it's
 17 spring
 18 and

 19 the

 20 goat-footed
 21 balloonMan whistles
 22 far
 23 and
 24 wee

How can that kind of pacing be reproduced in a choral reading? This is a challenge and one worth attempting because it is such an integral part of the poem. It conjures up the pace of a fresh spring day, when a child rushes outside at the first sign of warm weather. His attention is drawn to such wonders as a mud puddle or a game of hopscotch. The goal is to create that same sense of wonder and joy in the script. Pacing will be crucial.

Consider the balloon man. He is little, lame, old and he carries a whistle to let the children know he is coming to their neighborhood. What kind of person would make a living this way? Is he friendly or surly? In our version, the balloon man will be a retired war veteran, which puts the story in a historical frame. It makes sense to set the story between the two world wars because the children are playing old-fashioned games.

Who are Eddie and Bill? The poet writes the characters' names as a single word—eddieandbill—so they must be inseparable friends. They run “from marbles and piracies.” This could mean they have just won all the marbles and have a gang of angry boys chasing them because they've cheated at the game. They could also be two young boys who like to pretend and wear newspaper pirate hats while fencing with sticks. Because they like pretend games, we'll make them young. Betty and Isbel play hopscotch and jump rope. Their names are also written as one word—bettyandisbel. Let's make them

older and wiser big sisters to the boys. This creates a boy–girl rivalry that will provide good material for the choral reading. Even more tension can be built by making the boys rambunctious and the girls bossy.

With five characters, this could easily become a full play. Since we’ve decided to create a choral reading for younger classes, we need to add specific characters: a narrator and a chorus. If we look for repetitive elements in the poem, we find “spring,” “whistle,” and “wee.” Put these words together and what do you see? Perhaps they are playful springtime fairies. Perhaps their movements can be fast or slow to mimic the flow of the words. These sprites can be responsible for repeating “wee” where needed.

There are still several things to decide, including costumes, set, and staging. Costumes are simple—play clothes for the children. The balloon seller wears an army helmet because he is a veteran. The boys wear newspaper pirate hats and carry broken tree branches for their pirate swords, perhaps even tucking them into a belt. Since it is “a mud-luscious spring,” they will look muddy. The girls wear rubber boots for splashing in puddles.

The set is divided into two areas, a boy territory and a girl territory. The boys have a circle of string surrounding a set of marbles, while the girls have a hopscotch board drawn with chalk, two stones, and a jump rope. The time, place, and characters have already been decided. It is time to listen to what they have to say. The script for *Mudluscious* on the following pages shows one way this poem can be adapted.

MUDLUSCIOUS



Summary

This is play for five characters—two little boys, two little girls, and a little old man—plus a chorus of springtime sprites and a narrator. One day the little old man comes into the neighborhood to sell balloons. The story is based on a poem by E. E. Cummings called “in Just-.”

Set

The stage is divided into two territories, one for girls and one for boys. The girls have a hopscotch board drawn in chalk, while the boys have a string circle with a marble collection.

Props

The girls need two stones and chalk for the hopscotch game and a sparkle jump rope. The boys have marbles, a three-foot piece of string tied to create their marble circle, small tree branches (for swords) tucked into oversized belts, and newspaper pirate hats. The old man has red, yellow, blue, purple, green, and pink helium balloons and a whistle.

Costumes

The two girls wear dresses with pinafores and rubber rain boots. The two boys wear cut-off pants, large belts, torn T-shirts, and an eye patch, and they have muddy knees and faces and bare feet. The balloon man wears an old army helmet. The narrator wears stage-reading glasses and carries a copy of the poem to read. The chorus wears spring flower wreaths on their heads or butterfly wings.

Characters

Narrator
Betty
Isbel
Eddie
Bill
Balloon man
Chorus

MUDLUSCIOUS

(Each character walks onstage and introduces her/himself, then takes position indicated.)

Narrator: Hello, my name is _____. I am the narrator. *(Sits cross-legged center stage front.)*

Betty: Hello, my name is _____. I play Betty. *(Plays hopscotch.)*

Isbel: Hello, my name is _____. I play Isbel. *(Jumps rope.)*

Eddie: Hello, my name is _____. I play Eddie. *(Shoots marbles.)*

Bill: Hello, my name is _____. I play Bill. *(Joins Eddie.)*

Balloon man: Hello, my name is _____. I play the balloon man. *(Limps offstage.)*

Chorus: Hello, we are the chorus. Wee! *(Skips offstage.)*

Narrator: *(Clears throat.)* Ahem. *(Puts on reading glasses and reads slowly.)* In . . .
Just- . . . spring . . .

Chorus: *(Skips onstage.)* Weeeee!

Narrator: *(Waits for chorus to settle down across the back of the stage.)* When the world is
mud *(Pauses.)* luscious . . .

Chorus: Mmmmm. *(Wiggles hands and feet on the floor as if in a mud puddle.)*

Narrator: . . . the little lame balloonman comes . . .

Balloon man: *(Whistles and enters with balloons, limping.)*

Balloon man coming.
I've got blues, reds, and yellows
for all you merry fellows.
Purple, green, and pink,
come see what you think. *(Exits.)*

Chorus: *(Doing the wave each time they say this.)* Weeeee!

Narrator: . . . and eddieandbill . . .

Eddie: *(Stands and looks around.)* I heard him, did you?

Bill: Who?

Eddie: The balloon man and his whistle . . . where is he?

Bill: Wait, listen.

Balloon man: *(Whistles offstage.)*

Eddie: Over there—come on. *(Runs a few steps, then stops, looking down.)*

Bill: Ooh, look at the mud.

Eddie: Wow. (*Drops to hands and knees to squish imaginary mud.*) It's perfect.

Chorus: Weeeee!

Narrator: . . . come running from marbles . . .

Eddie: (*Plays in mud.*) Hey, I'll swap my yellow cats eye for your blue one.

Bill: No way, but I'll take your black one for it.

Eddie: Let's shoot for 'em. Best two out of three?

Bill: Deal, but first I want to see the balloons. Where did he go?

Eddie: Listen.

Balloon man: (*Whistles offstage.*)

Chorus: Wee!

Narrator: Uh, let's see . . . from marbles and piracies . . .

Bill: Avast. He's off the starboard bow.

Eddie: Do you mean the right?

Bill: Yeah, starboard.

Eddie: Are you sure?

Bill: He's behind your house. Let's go.

Eddie: Aaargh ye matey, wait for me. (*Both run off stage.*)

Narrator: When the world is puddle- . . . wonderful.

Chorus: Weeeee! (*Kicks feet as if splashing.*)

Narrator: . . . the queer . . .

Balloon man: (*Enters with balloons.*) Get your little rubber bag full of helium, the air that's lighter than air. It's magic. Get your magic air here.

Narrator: . . . old . . .

Balloon man: Get your balloons now, so I don't have to carry them around any more. Come on kids, give an old guy a break.

Narrator: . . . the old balloonman . . . (*Plugs ears with fingers.*)

Balloon man: (*Whistles.*)

Narrator: . . . whistles . . . far and . . .

Chorus: Weeeee!

Narrator: . . . and bettyandisbel come dancing . . .

Betty: (*Stands and skips.*)

Isbel: (*Hooks elbows with Betty and swings like a square dance.*) Swing your partner round and round, now . . .

Betty: Now we're ballerinas. (*Twirls on tiptoe.*)

Isbel: (*Twirls.*)

Narrator: . . . from hop-scotch . . .

Betty: Did you bring our stones? I don't want to lose mine.

Isbel: Yeah, I know. It took us forever to find these.

Narrator: . . . and jump-rope . . .

Betty: Uh, oh. Where's my new sparkle jump rope?

Isbel: Right here, Betty. You forget everything.

Narrator: It's spring . . .

Chorus: Weeeee!

Narrator: . . . and . . . the . . . goat-footed . . .

Balloon man: Who are you calling goat-footed? What do you mean by that?

Narrator: That means sure-footed. You jump, climb, hop, sprint, and never fall.

Balloon man: Who are you kidding? I haven't jumped for years, not to mention hopped or sprinted. I'm old and lame, remember?

Narrator: Right. Maybe the children were goat-footed.

Balloon man: Sure, that makes more sense. I mean, just look at them.

(*Enter Eddie and Bill, who join Betty and Isbel as they dance in a circle.*)

Narrator: Right. Now where was I? Oh yes, the balloonMan . . . (*Fingers in ears.*)

Balloon man: (*Whistles.*)

Narrator: . . . whistles far and . . .

Chorus: Weeeee!

Narrator: The end.

Chorus: Not yet, we want to dance too. (*Joins children in circle.*)

Narrator: Oh all right, go ahead. Ahem. Not yet the end.

Chorus: (*Leaves circle.*) Weeeee! (*Bows.*)

Narrator: Now?

Chorus: Yes.

Narrator: The end. (*Children stop, bow with Narrator and chorus.*)

Balloon man: (*Blows whistle.*) What about me?

Chorus: Come on. (*Waves him into their line. All bow and skip off stage, except Balloon man, who limps.*)

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Story Adaptation

Another well-known author, Lewis Carroll, wrote a long, silly poem called “The Walrus and the Carpenter,” which is in the public domain. Students may recognize the poem’s style from Carroll’s famous book, *Alice in Wonderland*. “The Walrus and the Carpenter” tells of an unlikely pair of friends out walking on a beach on a fine night who invite some oysters to join them. Can you picture anything sillier? Lewis Carroll can. The older and wiser oysters decline the offer, but soon the two friends are followed by a long line of young oysters. For our play they will become the chorus. Seven maids with seven mops as well as a sulky moon and an over-eager sun round out the cast. This poem is 108 lines long and is written in rhyme with a measured, singsong beat. It will be fun to try to preserve as much of that as possible. Lewis Carroll’s dialog shows that the walrus and carpenter are a couple of emotional fellows, two silly characters in a silly setting. What a great place to start.

Playwriting

The first exercise in this chapter was short and a simple adaptation. Let’s see how this can work for a longer poem. Take a moment to read Lewis Carroll’s poem “The Walrus and the Carpenter,” reprinted below. Better yet, close the door and read it out loud, and as you do, listen to the pacing and rhyme. Does your head start wagging from side to side with the rhythm? Do you develop a kind of carefree and playful voice?

The Walrus and the Carpenter

Lewis Carroll (1832–1898)

- 1 The sun was shining on the sea,
- 2 Shining with all his might:
- 3 He did his very best to make
- 4 The billows smooth and bright—
- 5 And this was odd, because it was
- 6 The middle of the night.

- 7 The moon was shining sulkily,
- 8 Because she thought the sun
- 9 Had got no business to be there
- 10 After the day was done—
- 11 ‘It’s very rude of him,’ she said,
- 12 ‘To come and spoil the fun.’

- 13 The sea was wet as wet could be,
- 14 The sands were dry as dry.
- 15 You could not see a cloud, because
- 16 No cloud was in the sky:
- 17 No birds were flying overhead—
- 18 There were no birds to fly.

- 19 The Walrus and the Carpenter
- 20 Were walking close at hand;
- 21 They wept like anything to see

22 Such quantities of sand:
23 'If this were only cleared away,'
24 They said, 'it would be grand!'

25 'If seven maids with seven mops
26 Swept it for half a year,
27 Do you suppose,' the Walrus said,
28 'That they could get it clear?'
29 'I doubt it,' said the Carpenter,
30 And shed a bitter tear.

31 'O Oysters, come and walk with us!'
32 The Walrus did beseech.
33 'A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk,
34 Along the briny beach:
35 We cannot do with more than four,
36 To give a hand to each.'

37 The eldest Oyster looked at him,
38 But never a word he said:
39 The eldest Oyster winked his eye,
40 And shook his heavy head—
41 Meaning to say he did not choose
42 To leave the oyster-bed.

43 But four young Oysters hurried up,
44 All eager for the treat:
45 Their coats were brushed, their faces washed,
46 Their shows were clean and neat—
47 And this was odd, because, you know,
48 They hadn't any feet.

49 Four other Oysters followed them,
50 And yet another four;
51 And thick and fast they came at last,
52 And more, and more, and more—
53 All hopping through the frothy waves,
54 And scrambling to the shore.

55 The Walrus and the Carpenter
56 Walked on a mile or so,
57 And then they rested on a rock
58 Conveniently low:
59 And all the little Oysters stood
60 And waited in a row.

61 'The time has come,' the Walrus said,
62 'To talk of many things:
63 Of shoes—and ships—and sealing-wax—
64 Of cabbages—and kings—
65 And why the sea is boiling hot—
66 And whether pigs have wings.'

67 'But wait a bit,' the Oysters cried,
68 'Before we have our chat;
69 For some of us are out of breath,
70 And all of us are fat!
71 'No hurry!' said the Carpenter.
72 They thanked him much for that.

73 'A loaf of bread,' the Walrus said,
74 'Is what we chiefly need:
75 Pepper and vinegar besides
76 Are very good indeed—
77 Now if you're ready, Oysters dear,
78 We can begin to feed.'

79 'But not on us!' the Oysters cried,
80 Turning a little blue.
81 'After such kindness, that would be
82 A dismal thing to do!'
83 'The night is fine,' the Walrus said.
84 'Do you admire the view?

85 'It was so kind of you to come!
86 And you are very nice!'
87 The Carpenter said nothing but
88 'Cut us another slice:
89 I wish you were not quite so deaf—
90 I've had to ask you twice!'

91 'It seems a shame,' the Walrus said,
92 'To play them such a trick,
93 After we've brought them out so far,
94 And made them trot so quick!'
95 The Carpenter said nothing but
96 'The butter's spread too thick!'

97 'I weep for you,' the Walrus said:
98 'I deeply sympathize.'
99 With sobs and tears he sorted out
100 Those of the largest size,
101 Holding his pocket-handkerchief
102 Before his streaming eyes.

103 'O Oysters,' said the Carpenter,
104 'You've had a pleasant run!
105 Shall we be trotting home again?'
106 But answer came there none—
107 And this was scarcely odd, because
108 They'd eaten every one.

Carroll has created a lighthearted romp and that is what we will also try to achieve with our choral reading.

To convert this poem to a choral reading, we start with the characters. The oysters will be the chorus while the other characters have walk-on parts. A narrator is needed to describe how the sun shines and the moon sulks, or we could make them characters as well. A narrator must still introduce the walrus and the carpenter, who then begin a dialog. As the story unfolds, the narrator can explain parts that cannot be made into dialog.

Costumes will help tell this story. The carpenter needs a tool belt with a hammer, the walrus should wear a brown oversized man's suit and a long, white fake mustache combed into two definite points in place of tusks. A trip to the thrift shop will turn up a suit if there are no dads willing to lend one. The maids carry mops and wear aprons, the sulky moon wears white from head to toe, and the sun wears all yellow. The oysters are a challenge. The simplest solution is to make matching hats out of one white paper plate for each person in the oyster chorus. The plate is cut in the middle so that one half is tied on the head like a headband, while the other half becomes a necklace. The heads of the chorus appear to be sandwiched between the two plate halves. Another option is to create clam-shaped hats out of two white paper plates and tie them on with a piece of yarn or elastic that goes under the chin. The oysters' clothes should match. Keep it simple with something like blue jeans and white T-shirts.

A long piece of blue cloth laid out along the front of the stage will be the ocean. This cloth is held at both ends by "stage hands," wearing all blue and making the cloth flutter like waves. A "conveniently low" rock is made from a low bench or box draped with tan burlap. The characters will march around the stage like a conga line, marching to the beat of the poem, with the carpenter and walrus in the lead. The only question remaining is how to make the oysters disappear as they are eaten. The walrus sorts them and the carpenter doesn't notice they are gone, so his back must be to the oysters while he is sitting on his rock. Perhaps the waves can wash up, billowing high so the oysters can sneak or perhaps roll away near the end of the script. Let's call this script something silly like *The Sunny Night*.



THE SUNNY NIGHT

Summary

A carpenter and a walrus walk on a beach and invite the oysters to join them. The sun shines at night and makes the moon sulky. Silly oysters are in for more than a stroll on the beach. There are a minimum of nineteen parts in this choral reading, although extra players can be added to the oyster chorus.

Set

A low bench covered with “sand-colored” burlap, a length of blue cloth to be the sea.

Props

Seven maids need seven mops. A loaf of bread, a plastic knife, a bottle marked “vinegar,” a pepper grinder, and a large handkerchief are all stored in Walrus’ pockets.

Costumes

The carpenter wears a tool belt with a hammer stuck in it. The walrus wears an oversized brown suit and a long, white fake mustache combed into two long points to look like tusks. Seven maids wear aprons. The sun wears all yellow; the moon wears all white. The little oysters wear white paper plates on their heads, with paper plate collars; the eldest oyster wears large paper platters the same way.

Characters

Walrus
Carpenter
The Sun
The Moon
Seven Maids
Six Little Oysters
Eldest Oyster
Narrator
Ocean Waves

THE SUNNY NIGHT

(All characters walk onstage, introduce themselves, then exit, except for the stage hands, the eldest oyster, and the sun.)

Walrus: My name is _____. I play the Walrus.

Carpenter: My name is _____. I play the Carpenter.

The Sun: My name is _____. I play the sun.

The Moon: My name is _____. I play the moon.

Seven Maids: We are _____, _____, _____, _____, _____, _____, and _____. We play the seven maids.

Six Little Oysters: We are _____, _____, _____, _____, _____, and _____. We play the little oysters.

Eldest Oyster: My name is _____. I play the eldest oyster.

Narrator: My name is _____. I play the narrator.

Two Ocean Waves: We are _____ and _____. We make the ocean flow.

(The stage hands are in place, moving the “water,” and so is Eldest Oyster. Enter the sun.)

Sun: *(Stands with arms akimbo, legs apart.)* The sun, that’s me, was shining on the sea, shining with all my might. I did my very best to make the billows smooth and bright—
(Bends and tries to smooth the waves. Stage hands don’t cooperate.)

Narrator: *(Enters.)* And this was odd, because it was the middle of the night.

Moon: *(Enters, crosses arms, and frowns.)* The moon, that’s me, was shining sulkily, because I thought the sun had got no business to be there after the day was done. It’s very rude of him, I said, to come and spoil the fun.

Narrator: The sea was wet as wet could be, the sands were dry as dry. You could not see a cloud.

Sun: No cloud was in the sky.

Narrator: No birds were flying overhead.

Moon: There were no birds to fly.

Narrator: The walrus and the carpenter were walking close at hand. *(Enter Walrus and Carpenter, bawling loudly.)* They wept like anything to see such quantities of sand.

Carpenter: If this were only cleared away, oh, it would be so grand. (*Enter maids who start to mop.*)

Walrus: If seven maids with seven mops swept it for half a year, do you suppose that they could ever really get it clear?

Carpenter: (*Bawling loudly.*) I doubt it. (*Maids leave disgusted.*)

Walrus: Oh Oysters, come and walk with us, I really do beseech. A pleasant walk and a pleasant talk, along the briny beach.

Carpenter: We cannot do with more than four to give a hand to each. (*Eldes oyster shakes his head slowly "no," then winks, but doesn't move.*)

Walrus: I think he does not choose to leave his cozy oyster bed. (*One young oyster rolls in.*)

Narrator: But one young oyster hurried up, all eager for the treat.

Oyster 1: I brushed my coat, washed my face, and now I'm clean and neat.

Narrator: And this was odd, because, you know, he hadn't any feet. (*Oyster looks up and shrugs.*)

Narrator: Soon other oysters followed him and yet another did; and thick and fast they came at last, and more and more and more—all hopping through the frothy waves and scrambling to the shore. (*Last two oysters roll in.*) The walrus and the carpenter walked on a mile or so, and then they rested on a rock conven—i—ently low, while all the oysters stood, and waited in a row.

Walrus: The time has come to talk of many things: of shoes . . . and ships . . . and sealing wax . . . of cabbages . . . and kings.

Carpenter: (*Sits on the rock, back to Walrus.*) And why the sea is boiling hot and whether pigs have wings.

Oyster 1: But wait a bit,

Oyster 2: Before we have our chat.

Oyster 3: For some of us are out of breath,

Oyster 4: And all of us are fat.

Carpenter: No hurry.

Oysters: (*Together.*) Thank you. (*Oysters sit.*)

Walrus: (*Reaches into pockets.*) A loaf of bread is what we chiefly need,

Carpenter: Pepper and vinegar besides, oh good show old man.

Walrus: Now if you're ready, Oysters dear, we can begin to feed . . .

Oysters: (*Together.*) But not on us!

Narrator: They turned a little blue.

Carpenter: (*Quietly.*) Cut me another slice.

Oyster 1: After such kindness

Oyster 2: That would be . . .

Oyster 3: A dismal thing to do!

Walrus: The night is fine. Take a look. Do you admire the view? (*Points first oyster toward the sea then scoops him into jacket. Fabric “waves” high as oyster slips away, hat visible on top of “water.” Walrus turns back around and licks his fingers.*) (*Inspects second oyster.*) You are very nice.

Carpenter: (*Sits with back to walrus.*) Cut us another slice! I wish you were not quite so deaf—I’ve had to ask you twice!

Walrus: (*Spreads imaginary butter over a slice of bread.*) It seems a shame to play them such a trick, after we’ve brought them out so far, and made them trot so quick.

Carpenter: (*Inspects bread and waves it over shoulder, angry.*) The butter’s spread too thick!

Walrus: (*Sorts oysters, one rolls away.*) I weep for you. I deeply sympathize. (*Bawls and wipes eyes with large handkerchief.*)

Carpenter: Oh oysters, you’ve had a pleasant run. Shall we be trotting home again? (*Turns to look at Walrus and the oysters. Shows surprise.*)

Narrator: But answer came there none, and this was scarcely odd, because he’d eaten every one. (*Bows and leaves.*)

Carpenter and Walrus: (*Bawl loudly and exit. Sun and moon stalk off.*)

Eldest Oyster: The End.

Other Poems to Adapt

Choral readings have plenty of parts for a classroom full of eager actors. Again, if your plays will be performed for a paying audience, remember to check the copyright status of the poems. Children's librarians in public libraries can steer you toward collections of poetry, however, the best source of poetry can be the students. The exercise in this chapter can follow a poetry unit for any grade level. If poetry is not part of the year's curriculum, perhaps an older class that just finished their poetry unit would allow their work to inspire younger students. They might even agree to be an audience for the young playwrights.

Extensions

1. Ask for volunteers to choose music to accompany your choral reading. *Mudluscious* would be fun with some square dance music, something adventurous for the pirates, and something graceful for the ballerinas. Students would choose the music and then learn a few bars to play at the appropriate time in the reading. Even beginning band students can tackle this assignment with a little guidance from their band teacher.
2. Have students make fairy wings or spring flower hair wreathes for the *Mudluscious* chorus, and the paper-plate oyster hats for the chorus in *The Sunny Night*.
3. Assign a student prop master to get the balloons and whistle for *Mudluscious*, or all of Walrus' cooking supplies and the cloth for the sea needed in *The Sunny Night*.

