

Flummery and Trivet presents

10 Tips for Reading Out Loud to Young Listeners

by

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How to enjoy your experience,
enthrall your listener,
and create a little cocoon of happiness
with just words and voice

You want to read a book to a child. Terrific!

Or are you terrified?

It doesn't have to be like that.

You *can* have a fun and engaging experience for both of you.

You *can* be as excited to read as your audience is to listen.

It just takes a little preparation.

Here are our top 10 tips for reading to young listeners:

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1. Read the book before you read the book

Know what the book is about before embarking on the story-telling journey with a listener.

A book may be popular, but there may be situations in it that make the book not right for your particular listener. Your listener might not be ready for a book about a boy being bitten on the neck by a man-wolf hybrid. Perhaps a book describes some sibling rivalry which is too similar to what your listener is going through right now. Maybe a beloved pet dies in a book, and that's too sad for your listener at this point in his/her life. You can only know the contents of the book by reading the book.

Don't rely on the book's cover illustration or the blurb on the back. Read the book before you read the book so you can decide whether book and listener are a good match.

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If a listener requests a book and you think it's not right, you can of course start to read it, and if it turns out that it's just the wrong book/listener combination, put it aside and read another book. You can always go back to the first book when the combination feels right.



2. Read the book out loud before you read the book

Reading out loud helps you understand the sound of the book; where there's happiness and light, and where there's woe and sorrow. It helps you create the world of the book for the listener.

Reading out loud is not the same as reading silently; words you know when you're reading silently but never say out loud might trip you up if you're not used to speaking them (like [onomatopoeia](#), say, or [antidisestablishmentarianism](#)).

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Some books have short sentences

"I am Sam."

Dr. Suess,
Green Eggs and Ham

but others have longer ones

"A wagon track ran before the house, turning and twisting out of sight in the woods where the wild animals lived, but the little girl did not know where it went, nor what might be at the end of it."

Laura Ingalls Wilder,
Little House in the Big Woods

Being aware of the kinds of sentences you'll be reading increases the smoothness of your delivery. You'll have practice reading long sentences to become aware of your need to breathe, and the cadence you have when you come to the end of a sentence (i.e., you wouldn't say "A wagon track" as if it were the three-word sentence "I am Sam.").

You won't know which regular words you will garble when reading them out loud if you don't read them out loud (mine is "didn't").



Regular speaking is off the cuff, so the *brain-mouth* corridor is much more in synch: the brain thinks of something to say and sends it to the mouth to say. With reading out loud, though, your corridor becomes *eyes-brain-brain-mouth*: the eyes take in the visual word, the visual brain interprets it, the verbal brain translates it, and then sends it out to the mouth to speak it.

So saying the words you're going to say *before* you're going to say them makes you better at saying them, because you are giving your corridor some practice.

Also useful is knowing where the author put (or did not put) comas. If there are no comas, see if you can say the sentence as written, not based on your normal breathing pattern.



3. Create different voices for the characters

Imagine if the Wicked Witch sounded just like Dorothy. If you were listening to such a rendition of *The Wizard of Oz* you would have to work very hard to keep track of who was saying what.

And even if you could tell them apart, it would be no fun. The story would hold no magic, because the mental mechanics of separating the two characters all the time would take precedence over the act of listening to the story.

Imagine Mr. Dursley sounding like Harry, or Captain Hook sounding like Peter Pan. You might as well be listening to someone reading the commodities report!

Books are magic. *Magic*. Enhance that magic by using different voices for everybody in your book. You might be surprised at how fun it is coming up with aural characters!

Big suggestion: If you're able, take a bath with your book. I mean it. There's something about the acoustics in a tub that lend the space to the spoken word.

Next big suggestion: I highly recommend "Rip Van Winkle" by Washington Irving (seriously) for getting used to reading out loud, and *The Phantom Toll Booth* by Norton Juster for practice in creating character voices (oh, the Whether Man just begs to be given an accent).



4. Practice switching between voices

There is a certain amount of physical activity required to switch between, say, a high-pitched mouse's voice and low booming lion's voice: the vocal chords need time to narrow (for the mouse) and widen (for the lion).

Once you've got the voices for your characters, it's a good idea to practice switching between them a few times before you start the "live" reading, to get a feel for what your vocal chords need to do, what they feel like when doing it and how long they take to do it.

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If your story has two or more children/women/men/mice/lions in it, there'll be less vocal difference between these them, so it's good to work out how to make them sound unique.

In general, adult males have the lowest voices, adult females have the mid-range voice, and children have the highest voices of all. Girls and boys of the same age have approximately the same pitch.

To create individual characters in the same register, give one an accent, or change their enunciation (i.e., one might say "I'm not going!" and one might say "I'm not goin'!")



5. Set the stage with the first sentence

Is it scary? Is it funny? Is it lighthearted?

Saying the first sentence right says it all.

“There was a hand in the darkness, and it held a knife.”

Neil Gaiman,
The Graveyard Book

“First of all, let me get something straight:
This is a JOURNAL, not a diary.”

Jeff Kinney,
Diary of a Wimpy Kid

Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much.”

J.K. Rowling,
Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone

Consider the speaker: is it a narrator? A character? Male? Female? Ghost of indeterminate gender?

That first page, and that first sentence, oo it fills listeners with excitement. A story! Starting right now! And it’s being read to me! Awesome.

(Of course, there will be kids of, let us say, indeterminate excitement, who may profess disdain or disheartenment at the commencement of the reading of a book.

I would direct you to the rather famous and utterly delightful “The Princess Bride” by William Goldman, which is a book about a book being read by a grandfather to his grandson home sick from school.

Believe in the book, and just start reading.)



6. Read more slowly than you think you should

Words are still a little new to kids. They are still getting used to the sounds of words, and the spaces between words, and associating them with images (especially if you're reading a picture book).

Don't rush it. Let the story unfold in its own time. Stop and take a breath—even in the middle of a sentence. There is no contest, nobody wins a smiley face sticker by getting to the end first.

Take your time reading/saying the words. You've got an audience, and they are listening. Happy, even, to listen. So give them something to listen to: the words, the tone, and the tempo.

You don't have to read as s...l...o...w as m...o...l...a...ss...es either. Reading too slow is as bad as reading too fast. Too slow and the story's dull, too fast it's impossible to follow.

Some characters, of course, lend themselves to slower...pronouncements. Take Bob Marley's ghost in *A Christmas Carol* by Dickens. Just imagine if Bob Marley's ghost zipped through "I am here tonight to warn you, that you have yet a chance and hope of escaping my fate..." as if he were the Mad Hatter of *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

Altering the vocal pace for characters is not the same thing, though, as slowing down the reading of the entire story. Ebenezer Scrooge's replies to Marley's ghost...well, he's nervous (there's a *ghost* in his room, for heaven's sake), and when humans are nervous they talk faster. So you've got one character talking slowly and one character talking quickly. Bingo, a great scene that's great to read out loud.



7. Ask questions about the story

Ask questions about what's going on/what a listener thinks is about to happen, to ensure that the listener is on the same page as you (geddit?).

Asking questions of the listener encourages "active listening." Active listening activates the mind and keeps the listener involved in the story.

Asking "Why are the magical mice trying to make the cheese cake for Sinofia?" or "Do you think Annie'll get back to the lighthouse before the storm hits?" help 1) the listener focus on the story, and 2) you to know if you ought to re-read a portion.

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You might of course get the all-kids-everywhere response, "I dunno."

While there are a myriad of reasons why you might be *I dunno'd*, the three to consider first are:

- The story is a little too advanced, and your listener can't follow it;
- The listener has reached and passed his/her capacity to listen for the day;
- You aren't (ahem) reading the story in a way that works for them.

End the reading session with a smile, and try again another day.



8. Talk about the illustrations

Not all books will have illustrations. But if yours does, understand that they are part of the story you're reading.

Younger listeners may not know what a “hank of rope” is. Or an “Alaskan Malamute.” Or “puice.” Point it out to them if it's in an image.

Some images may take your listener to somewhere other than the story; call it a flight of fancy. Kids have huge imaginations; they can imagine a totally different world and outcome than where the book is going.

It's okay if your listener does that. Bring him/her back to what you're reading with a gentle “Let's see if that's what happens in our story.”



9. Know when to stop reading

There are very few kids who can listen to a read-to-me story for an hour. Their bodies and their brains aren't wired to sit still for an hour, so don't think you'll change that.

You'll know when a listener is "done" because the fidgeting/yawning/leg swinging will start, or you'll be asked a completely non-story question like "Can I have a cookie?"

Sometimes if a story is a little complex—a lot of characters, or a scene with a lot of movement and detail—your listener's brain may get overloaded, and they will stop listening.

And of course if it's a bedtime story, they'll fall asleep.

All of the above is okay. Don't take it personally. It's the way it is.

Close the book and smile. Say something like, "Wow, that was a lot!" or "We'll find out what happens tomorrow/next Thursday."

There should be no punishment for a listener's attention span being shorter than yours. You want them to WANT to be a listener, and you can foster that by not being annoyed when they've reached their listening capacity.

Just because they're "done" listening for the day doesn't mean they didn't pay attention to or aren't going to think about what you've read.

The next time you're together, ask them about what has already been read:

- "What was the name of the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher?"
- "What did Greg do when he got the 'Cheese Touch?'"



10. When they ask you to re-read it, re-read it

A listener wants you to “read it again.” Even though you read it yesterday, and on Sunday, and the Thursday before that.

So what?

Maybe there’s something about the way you read the story that has them enthralled.

Maybe it’s the discovery of new words they love the sound of.

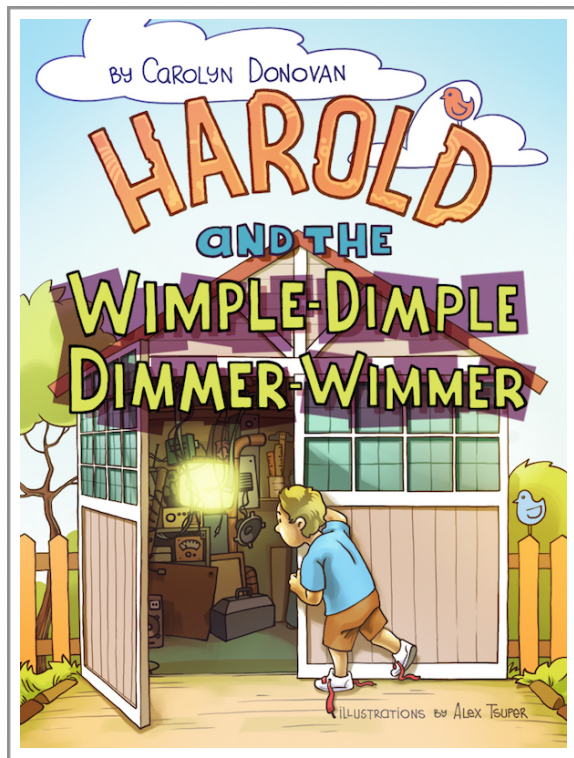
Maybe there’s something in the story that resonates with something the listener is working on in his or her own life.

The thing is, they want **you** to read it to **them**. Again.

See? You *are* a superstar!



Now that you've read our tips, we have a great read-to-me book for you...



Seven-year old Harold can't tie his shoes. Couldn't yesterday, can't today, won't be able to tomorrow.

No matter what he does, Harold cannot tie his shoes. Even really really believing that "this time" he'll be able to, he can't.

Harold is worried, as second grade is about to start and he's doesn't want the kids at school to laugh at him because he can't tie his shoes.

When he discovers the Wimple-Dimple Dimmer-Wimmer in the garage of his family's just-moved-into house, he isn't sure what it is. The only thing he is totally and completely sure of is that he can't tie his shoes. And also, that only he can see the Wimple-Dimple Dimmer-Wimmer,

since his mother calls it "a pile of junk in the corner."

Can the Wimple-Dimple Dimmer-Wimmer change Harold's mind about the shoe-lace tying thing?

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