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The ABCs of Booktalking: Ideas to Help Produce Terrific Booktalks

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Teachers and librarians know that booktalking is a most effective means of promoting interest in books and reading among children, adolescents, and adults. An enthusiastic booktalker possesses the power to make books fly off classroom and library shelves and into the hands of eager readers.

While some booktalkers may be born with the gift, for most of us, booktalking is a practiced art. Experience brings skill in presenting books and in reading audiences. Each booktalker must find and then refine his or her own style through study, practice, and observation. And style is never static; new books offer fresh opportunities to try new approaches.

The following alphabetically-arranged ideas for creating informative and engaging booktalking sessions are based on the author's professional experience, study, and teaching. When twenty-six letters could not contain all the information the author wished to share, letters **I** and **R** were repeated. Readers will note that almost every initial letter in the following paragraphs begins an active verb; *booktalk* itself can be an active verb. Booktalkers must be active in developing and pursuing their skills.

Arrive early to arrange the setting. A few minutes of organization will help the booktalking session to flow smoothly.

Be brief. Think of booktalks as commercials. A 30- or 60-second spot can be as effective—even more effective—than an infomercial. Young listeners will usually decide within the first minute whether or not they are interested in a book. If the booktalk is longer than two minutes, a youthful audience may lose interest. The younger the audience, the shorter the individual booktalks and the booktalking session should be.

Cite the title and author of each book clearly

and show the book. Booktalking to a large audience may require that book covers be formatted into slides, overhead transparencies, or a picture data file (PDF).

Demonstrate a craft, project, or fact from a book. A craft book is easily promoted by demonstrating a craft or two. Books by Kathie Ross are good choices to incorporate into many booktalks because they cover topics from holidays to ocean to dinosaurs and more. To hook an audience on Pamela Hickman's *Animal Senses*, try the author's suggestion to look through a colander to simulate the vision of insects.

Establish a central theme or topic. Themes that allow for multiple genres tend to have wider appeal than genre-specific booktalks. This is not to say that booktalking sessions on fantasy, contemporary realistic fiction, or fairy tales will not be appreciated by the right audience. The better you know your audience, the more specific your topic or theme can be. However, themes such as "Walk in Space" can easily incorporate science fiction, fact, biography, activity books, poetry, and more. Even if your theme is as broad as "My Favorite New Books," listeners will benefit from knowing the parameters of the booktalking session.

Find and read resources about booktalking. New and experienced booktalkers will profit from Joni Bodart's and Caroline Feller Bauer's many books. Bodart's *Booktalk* and *Booktalking the Award Winners* series provide hundreds of prepared booktalks for booktalkers to personalize and make their own. Bauer's three recent titles, *Leading Kids to Books Through Magic*, *Leading Kids to Books Through Puppets*, and *Leading Kids to Books Through Crafts*, offer creative suggestions for topics, book selections, and activities to pair with booktalks. A bibliography

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of these and other sources follows this article.

Give a small token or object from the story to each member of the audience as part of the booktalk. Certain stories are ideal candidates for tokens: stars for Klaus Baumgart's *Laura's Star*, sleigh bells for Chris VanAllsburg's *Polar Express* or Nick Butterworth's *Jingle Bells*, and chocolate kisses for Jonathan London's *Froggy's First Kiss*.

Hand out an annotated bibliography. For each title, include author, call number, and brief annotation. Annotations can jog the memory of readers when they are browsing for books. When possible, put more books on the bibliography than you actually booktalk to provide your audience with more choices.

Interest readers in books by comparing them to popular books that they have previously read and enjoyed. "If you like the *Where's Waldo* books, you will probably enjoy *Animal Hide and Seek* or *Fabulous Feasts*." "If you have read the *American Girl* books, you might want to try the *Dear America* Series, beginning with Kathryn Lasky's *A Journey to the New World: The Diary of Remember Patience Whipple*." For assistance in making connections between similar books, consult *What Do Children Read Next?* and *What Do Young Adults Read Next?*

Interest readers about other books in series, trilogies, etc. Young readers interested in Pam Conrad's *Stoneword* will want to know about the sequel, *Zoe Rising*. Beginner readers of Cynthia Rylant's *Poppleton*, Steven Kellogg's *Pinkerton, Behave*, or Rosemary Well's *Max's Christmas* will be excited to discover that each is the first book in a series. *Reading in Series* is an excellent reference source to aid in identifying the order of books in series.

Jazz up your booktalking sessions by using a variety of genres. When possible, use biographies, craft books, informational books, biographies, poetry, etc, to appear to the wide interests of young readers.

Kee a file of booktalking ideas for favorite books. Include actual booktalk outlines, themes or topics, techniques, etc. A file is often a better memory keeper than the brain, and a computer file can provide easy search capabilities.

Let the audience see your face and eyes. *Avoid* reading from notes. Your eyes and facial expressions should show your enthusiasm for the books.

Move on if the audience is bored or if you forget the storyline. Booktalkers should watch their audience's reactions and adjust accordingly. If a book is bombing, cut the booktalk short. If you forget a prepared booktalk or you cannot recall the central characters or plot, simply say, "Let's save this book for another time."

Never tell the ending of a book to a young audience; however, it is appropriate to reveal the ending if you are presenting booktalks to other librarians or adults who are interested in selecting children's books.

Over-recommend any book and you risk disappointing the child or adult who reads it. A comment such as "This week, my favorite mystery is _____" is a solid recommendation, and is not as absolute as "This is the best mystery I have ever read."

Ppractice, practice, practice (at least when you first begin booktalking). Less practice is needed with experience because you learn what works. Do not make the mistake of thinking that your decreasing need for practice means you can cut back on preparation. Even experienced booktalkers must prepare for successful booktalks.

Quit thinking "It's too much work," or "I'm too nervous." Start small—a few books, a few minutes—at the end of a story program or class instruction. The exhilaration of selling young people on books will keep you motivated.

Read a *brief* quotation that sets the stage for the book or relates a pivotal point in the plot. The

elegantly crafted preface of Natalie Babbitt's *Tuck Everlasting* and the tragically amusing account of bringing home a dead rat in Lois Lowry's autobiography, *Looking Back*, are great quotations to read.

Relate an exciting incident from the book or provide an overview to the action. The poison nail polish scene from Louis Sachar's *Holes* and the witness of the murder scene from Willo Davis Roberts' *The View from the Cherry Tree* are riveting examples.

Reveal how the book affected you. Sharing a personal reaction to a book is a type of self-disclosure that allows listeners to understand both you and the book better. Here is an example:

"Tiger Ann in Kimberly Holt's *My Louisiana Sky* brought me back to my own Southern childhood and its insecurities. Although her challenges were different from mine, I desperately wanted Tiger to triumph. Let me tell you about twelve-year-old Tiger and how she got her unusual name."

Show a sample of exciting art work from a picture book, but just a sample; leave some things for the readers to discover and enjoy on their own. Consider showing a sequence of shapes, colors, and animals from Lois Ehlert's *Color Zoo* or *Color Farm*, or a couple of incarnations of Camilla from David Shannon's *A Bad Case of Stripes*. Remember that with a large group, you may need to use slides, transparencies, or a PDF in order for everyone to see the illustrations.

Tell inside information about the author, illustrator or the book. Take advantage of professional conferences to meet, hear, and talk to authors and illustrators. In a library conference presentation, Caldecott-winner Peggy Rathmann revealed that she used her very own dog and some of his antics in drawing Gloria and her boyfriend as the model for Officer Buckle. When she broke up with him, Rathmann found she could no longer draw her old boyfriend, so Officer Buckle became a new man. Another way to find interesting tidbits is to surf web pages. Access authors' and illustrators' web pages through The Children's Literature Web Guide at <http://www.acs.ucalgary>

ca/~dkbrown/index.html.

Use questions to draw the listeners into informational books. A basic developmental need is competency. Children in middle childhood ask question after question in their quest to know more. Use that natural curiosity. Your questions will capture their interests, and they will read to find the answers. Begin a booktalk:

"Did you ever wonder how large dinosaurs were compared to people today? David Peter's *A Gallery of Dinosaurs and other Early Reptiles* will show you."

Then show and comment on any two double-page spreads in the book, and young readers will be hooked.

Vary the techniques (quotation, demonstration, inside information, questions, etc.) used in a booktalking session. Variety keeps the audience's attention.

Watch other booktalkers, and incorporate their best techniques into your booktalking style. In addition to listening to authors at professional conferences and meetings, attend programs that focus on introducing new books.

X-change ideas with other librarians. Share your creativity with others. Be willing to booktalk for colleagues.

Yippee, yahoo! Yield to the urge to booktalk.

Zero in on your own style. Experiment. No two people booktalk alike. Discover what works for you.

So what should you do after reading this article? Make *booktalk* an active verb in your home, school, or library. If you are a novice, start with just a few books. Practice on your family. If you are an experienced booktalker, try a new technique or resource. The reward of young people eagerly reading the books you recommend is personally and professionally gratifying and very much worth the effort.

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