Seventeen Full-length Plays for Students

including information, lessons, and assignments for understanding and performance
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Reading a play is different from reading other kinds of literature because a play is different from other kinds of literature. Short stories, poems, novels, and so on are all complete on the printed page. But a printed play—also called a script—is not complete. It becomes complete when it is performed by actors for an audience. The play is what happens on the stage or screen.

Because of this, you—as reader—must bring a little more of yourself to reading a play. Of course you will bring your imagination, as you do to reading short stories and novels. And you will also make an effort to visualize the characters and actions, and to imagine their thoughts and emotions. What else can you do to help make your reading more complete and satisfying? Here are some tips.

**Reading Tips**

- Read the **stage directions**. (*They are often in parentheses and printed in italic type, like this.*) Stage directions are not meant for an audience; they are messages from the playwright to the people who stage the play. They may tell the actors when and where to move, what emotions to express, what props (handheld objects, such as a newspaper or a coffee cup) to pick up and what to do with them. They may tell the director where to position the actors or what the overall mood of a scene should be. They may tell the designers what the set looks like, what costumes the actors should wear, what music or sounds are heard, or what time of day the lighting should suggest. Stage directions are usually not read aloud, even when the actors rehearse a show.
• Understand the **stage areas.** Stage directions often include abbreviations like *R* for *right* or *L* for *left.* (These mean the actors’ right or left sides as they face the audience.) Other abbreviations are *U* for *upstage* or *D* for *downstage* or *C* for *center.* (*Downstage* means toward the audience; *up* and *down* are terms left over from the days when stages actually slanted.)

• Pay attention to the characters’ names. They tell who says what speeches.

• Read the speeches aloud. They are, after all, meant to be heard. Read with as much feeling as you can, to get the most out of the speeches. Even if you’re reading the play by yourself, you can play all the parts, changing your voice for the different characters. This will give you a better understanding of the characters, who they are and what they are doing.

• Look for a **subtext.** This is, simply, what the characters are thinking or feeling, and it is not always the same as what they are saying. For example, a character may say, “Of course I’ll take my little sister to the movie, Dad,” but actually be thinking, “How can you do this to me? What will my friends think?”

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### Theatre Conventions

A **convention** is an accepted way of doing things. The more plays you see on stage, the better you will understand the conventions, the things that make a play a play. Here are some common conventions.

**Narrator** Sometimes an actor will speak directly to the audience, to explain who the characters are or what is happening. Sometimes a character will speak directly to the audience and then go back to speaking to the other characters. When they do, they serve the function that a narrator serves in short stories or novels.

**The “Fourth Wall”** In realistic plays, the actors may behave as if the audience simply isn’t there. It’s as if the audience is eavesdropping on the action through an invisible “fourth wall” of a room, whether the set is actually an enclosed room or not.

**Dramatic Time** The time an action is supposed to take onstage isn’t necessarily the time that same action would take in real life. For example, actors may take seven minutes to eat a meal that they would spend twenty-five minutes on in reality. Just accept what the play tells you about how much time has elapsed.
Lapses of Time  If you go to the movies, you’re probably familiar with the convention that several minutes or days or even years elapse from one scene to another. It’s the same with plays—a curtain or change of lighting may suggest that any amount of time has passed. When you read a play, the stage directions will usually specify what is happening.

The World Offstage  Actors are trained to keep in mind, when they enter or exit, just where it is they’re supposed to be coming from or going to. This helps them create their characters more realistically. When you’re reading a play, try to imagine the lives the characters are leading when they’re not onstage. This will help you understand the characters and their subtexts better, and will give you a better understanding of the play as a whole.

Sharing the Experience
Seeing a play performed live onstage can be a truly thrilling experience. As a reader, you can share some of that thrill if you read attentively, with imagination, and if you try actively to enter into the world of the characters and of the play. In this book are many different kinds of plays in different styles from playwrights all over the world. Enjoy them.
The Play as Literature: Characterization
Gary Soto is one of those rare adults who remembers vividly what life was like when he was fourteen. Soto’s stories, as well as his first play, *Novio Boy*, are filled with the longings, friendships, fun, and misunderstandings of youth. Through the use of lively dialogue and description, Soto reveals much about his characters’ personalities. The way a writer goes about acquainting us with his characters is called *characterization*.

As you read *Novio Boy*, contrast Soto’s characterization of the young people (Rudy, Patricia, and their friends) with how he presents their elders (Rudy’s mother, Uncle Juan, and Mama Rosa). Use a chart like the one below to help you organize your information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Looks</th>
<th>Speech</th>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Movement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The Play as Theatre: The Set
The space where a play is presented on a stage is called the *set*. Even before the play begins, the set gives the audience visual information about where and when the play occurs and how the people in the play live.

Some sets are very elaborate and ornate, full of backdrops, scenery, props, and furniture. Other sets are so sparse that no more than a chair is placed on the stage.

As you read *Novio Boy*, think about the kind of sets that would help the audience understand and become involved in the play.

Warm Up!
With a partner, discuss how two fourteen-year-old friends would meet and greet each other. Next, discuss a meeting between a teenager and an older person who lives down the street. How would they greet each other? How would the two meetings differ?
The scene begins in a backyard where two boys, both Mexican American, are philosophizing about girls. They are sloppy-looking, with holes in the knees of their pants. Stage right, two girls are silhouetted on a couch in a living room. The room is dim. Lights come up on RUDY and ALEX. RUDY paces back and forth and ALEX tries to keep up with him. RUDY throws himself down on a lawn chair. ALEX keeps pacing for a moment and then, noticing that his friend has sat down, joins him.

RUDY. What am I gonna talk about? She’s older than me and good-looking.

ALEX. Just level with her. Tell her you’re sorry you look like you do.

RUDY. Sorry? You mean I should be sorry that I look like Tom Cruise? (Pause) You’re cold, homes. You’re no help at all.

ALEX (giggling). Just joking, Rudy.

Listen, man, you got to start simple. Break the ice. Ask her . . . what her favorite color is or something.

RUDY. Color?

ALEX. Yeah, color. Like, red or white.

RUDY. You mean, like, blue or yellow?

ALEX. Lavender!

RUDY. Purple!

ALEX. Forest green!

RUDY. Chevy chrome!

ALEX. That’s it, man.

(RUDY gets up and starts to pace. ALEX gets up, too.)

RUDY (incredulous). Colors?

ALEX. Colors. I picked up this little secreto from Mama Rosa on the Spanish station.

RUDY. Mama Rosa! You get your advice from her?

ALEX. She’s for real. She’s an expert about love and things. She says you got to get your boca¹ rattling. One

¹. boca (bōˈkä), mouth
Responding to the Play
1. Look back over the seven scenes in Novio Boy and pick your favorite. Describe in writing what you like about it and why.
2. Do the characters in the play seem realistic and well-rounded? Why or why not?
3. Which of the characters in the play would you go to for advice? Explain why.
4. If you were creating the set for this play, would it be elaborate or sparse? Choose a scene and describe the set for the class.
5. Think about a scene you especially liked. Draw the stage, scenery, sets, and props that would be essential to the scene.

About Spanish Pronunciations
Remember these tips when reading the Spanish words in Novio Boy:
- a is pronounced /ä/ as in father
- e is pronounced as long a /ä/
- i is pronounced as a long e /ë/
- o is pronounced as in low /ö/
- u is pronounced /ü/ as in loot
- v is pronounced b
- j is pronounced h
- h is silent

Creating and Performing
1. To develop an understanding of character, play the role of either El Gato or Mama Rosa answering these questions from the radio audience:
   “If I want someone to like me, what should I do?”
   “My friend and I had a fight, how can I make up?”
   “I want to earn money to buy Mom a gift. How can I do it?”
2. Rudy was given lots of suggestions about how to talk to Patricia. What do you think he has learned by the end of the play? Write four rules Rudy might come up with for breaking the ice. Read them to the class.
3. Think about how the characters listed below would stand, walk, and gesture. Choose one and demonstrate for the class.
   Rudy     Alex     Patricia
   Alicia   Rudy’s Mother    Uncle Juan
   El Gato   Mama Rosa       Estela