

Example # 1 – Extemporaneous Reading
An excerpt from “Charles” by Shirley Jackson

“How was school today?” I asked (my kindergarten son, Laurie), elaborately casual.

...He grinned enormously and said, “Today Charles hit the teacher.”

“Why did Charles hit the teacher?” I asked quickly.

“Because she tried to make him color with red crayons,” Laurie said. “Charles wanted to color with green crayons so he hit the teacher ...

The third day – it was Wednesday of the first week – Charles bounced a seesaw on to the head of a little girl and made her bleed, and the teacher made him stay inside all during recess. Thursday Charles had to stand in the corner during story-time because he kept pounding his feet on the floor. Friday Charles was deprived of blackboard privileges because he threw chalk.

On Saturday I remarked to my husband, “Do you think kindergarten is too unsettling for Laurie? All this toughness, and bad grammar, and this Charles boy sounds like such a bad influence.”

“It’ll be all right,” my husband said reassuringly. “Bound to be people like Charles in the world. Might as well meet them now as later.”

On Monday Laurie came home late, full of news. “Charles,” he shouted as he came up the hill; I was waiting anxiously on the front steps. “Charles,” Laurie yelled all the way up the hill, “Charles was bad again.”

During the third and fourth weeks it looked like a reformation in Charles; Laurie reported grimly at lunch on Thursday of the third week, “Charles was so good today the teacher gave him an apple.”

“What?” I said, and my husband added warily, “You mean Charles?”

“Charles,” Laurie said. “He gave the crayons around and he picked up books afterward and the teacher said he was her helper.”

“What happened?” I asked incredulously.

“He was her helper, that’s all,” Laurie said, and shrugged.

“Can this be true, about Charles?” I asked my husband that night. “Can something like this happen?”

“Wait and see,” my husband said cynically...

The PTA meeting’s next week again,” I told my husband one evening. “I’m going to find Charles’s mother there.”

“Ask her what happened to Charles,” my husband said. “I’d like to know.”

“I’d like to know myself,” I said

“If only she is there,” I said prayerfully.

“She’ll be there,” my husband said. “I don’t see how they could hold a PTA meeting without Charles’s mother.” ...

After the meeting I identified and sought out Laurie’s kindergarten teacher...

“I’ve been so anxious to meet you,” I said. I’m Laurie’s mother.”

“We’re all so interested in Laurie,” she said.

“Well, he certainly likes kindergarten,” I said. “He talks about it all the time.”

“We had a little trouble adjusting, the first week or so,” she said primly, “but now he’s a fine little helper. With occasional lapses, of course.”

“Laurie usually adjusts very quickly,” I said. “I suppose this time it’s Charles’s influence.”

“Charles?”

“Yes,” I said, laughing, “you must have your hands full in that kindergarten, with Charles.”

“Charles?” She said. “We don’t have any Charles in the kindergarten.”