For some kids, the best way to read is to turn up the volume.

Turning up the volume is a great way to get students excited about books. Looking at printed pages is no longer the only way to enjoy a story or learn facts. Today there’s a wealth of titles being produced as sound recordings, and teachers can use these audiobooks to improve listening skills, to arrange an audio author visit, and to provide an extra set of vocal chords in the classroom.

Recorded books can help educators address the needs of students who are learning to speak English. Children with different learning styles and those with disabilities such as dyslexia are likely to be more successful when reading includes an audio component. Finally, 21st century students have been pushing buttons since their toddler years and they’re comfortable with an array of machines in their learning environment.
According to the Audio Publishers Association, the number of books transformed into sound recordings has increased 350% in the last 15 years. In addition to being available on cassettes and CDs, these recordings also vary in their style of presentation. Both abridged and unabridged works are available. Many books are read by a single narrator, but recordings that feature a cast may have as many actors as story characters. Even film stars have added their voices as narrators, and on rare, often wonderful, occasions an author will read his or her own book.

With a plentiful supply of recordings awaiting them, some teachers may find that the biggest hurdle they face is their own concern about whether listening to a book is as worthwhile as reading it. Doubters will be encouraged by what Kylene Beers, formerly of the University of Houston, TX, observed in several Houston area classrooms. When students in grades 6 to 9 listened to the recording and followed along in the book, they were more interested and their comprehension improved. Discussing the importance of enthusiastically engaging young readers, Pamela Varley, a public-policy case worker at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government, states, “For many listeners, well-narrated versions of well-written books have another special talent: a heightened ability to mesmerize the listener.” She concludes, “...I believe that audiobooks will give some kids a fresh chance to find their way to books, and other kids, a new way to hold onto them.” Audio activities offer positive strategies for keeping young readers excited about literature.

Preschool & Kindergarten
They Can Listen, Before They Can Read

In a 1985 report from the Commission on Reading, the value of reading aloud to even the youngest children is described as “The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading...” Gathering a circle of students around the teacher is one way to increase the group’s receptive vocabulary; setting up listening stations is another. Teachers can use an individual cassette or CD player with headphones so children can choose their own recording from a stock drawn from school and public libraries, or from classroom collections. Pick stories that are short such as Eric Carle’s A House for Hermit Crab (Recorded Books, 1998) or one of Margaret Read MacDonald’s Tuck-Me-In Tales (August House, 1997), then add a puppet or stuffed animal so the senses of touch and sight will accompany the listening. Use Chris Raschka’s Charlie Parker played be bop (Live Oak, 2000) or Thatcher Hurd’s Mama Don’t Allow (Live Oak, 2001) to incorporate music into the experience. Nursery rhymes may be reinforced with CDs such as Frog in the Meadow (GIA, 2000) by John Feierabend and Luann Saunders which features lesser-known verses that the presenters repeat so youngsters can chime in.

Grades 1-3
Get Going with Read-alongs

The span of time it takes individual students to make the transition from full-time listener to beginning reader varies greatly. Pairing picture books and easy readers with tone-
indexed cassettes or CDs allows youngsters to learn as they coordinate their eyes and ears. Gary Soto’s *Too Many Tamale* (Weston Woods, 2002), Pamela Munoz Ryan’s *When Marian Sang* (Live Oak, 2004) and Sara Stewart’s *The Journey* (Live Oak, 2002) all explore America’s diverse cultures. They are also good examples of challenging stories that will interest primary grade audiences. Read-alongs can be done at individual listening stations or with classroom sets of books.

Sound recordings are also an excellent way to introduce the classics to younger children. Hearing Julius Lester’s engaging retelling of *The Tales of Uncle Remus* (Recorded Books, 2001) helps youngsters appreciate the richness of our language without requiring that they have the skills to sound it out. Once children become familiar with these stories, they can try acting them out with the recording providing the background voice.

In Stratford, CT, school and public librarians use recorded books when they match primary grade readers with upper grade students. They call the program Stratford ROARS, which stands for *Reward Our Aural Reading Skills*, and prizes are given to the enthusiastic participants. These audiobook buddies not only listen to stories together, they also record their own book reviews. Stratford librarian Tess Beck reports that even the reluctant readers in the program develop a more positive outlook on the pleasures of reading.

**Grades 4-6**

**Learning by Listening Longer**

Once children learn to read, parents and teachers often abandon the practice of reading to them. It is also the time when reading rewards the swift, and students with learning difficulties can become frustrated. Girls and boys who loved learning to read may now be struggling with books that have smaller print, more pages, and no pictures. Recordings such as *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (Listening Library, 2003) will keep J.K. Rowling fans of all reading levels conversant with their peers about the young wizard’s adventures.

This is also a good time to introduce students to full cast productions which offer them an auditory theater experience. Using a troupe of actors to read the book and adding music and/or sound effects further enhances the text. Kids are bound to be drawn into Bruce Coville’s *Shakespeare’s Greatest Hits*, *Vol. 1* (Full Cast Audio, 2003), Brian Jacques’ *Loamhedge* (Recorded Books, 2004) and Philip Pullman’s “His Dark Materials” trilogy (*The Golden Compass*, *The Subtle Knife*, *The Amber Spyglass*, all Listening Library; 1997, 2000, 2000), especially when they find out that these authors are members of the cast.

Giving students a chance to dramatize and record a portion of their favorite book will further extend this learning experience.

Listening doesn’t have to be confined to language arts. It’s a lot easier to hear Doreen Rappaport’s brief biography of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in *Martin’s Big Words* (Weston Woods, 2001), or to follow along while a narrator reads the *Bill of Rights on The Three Main Documents of American History* (Audio Bookshelf, 2004). It’s exciting to learn about the Civil War from primary source materials from Abraham Lincoln, Walt Whitman, and other notables of the period in *Blood* (Listen & Live Audio, 2001), edited by Peter Kadzis. Students can also learn about history through fiction titles such as Paul Fleischman’s *Bull Run* (Recorded Books, 1995) or Irene Hunt’s *Across Five Aprils* (Recorded Books, 2001). Fleischman’s title shows one of the war’s major battles through the eyes of 16 people from both sides of the conflict, and it’s a perfect introduction to readers’ theater. Hunt’s novel takes the war to the homefront in Southern Illinois, where even families are divided over the issues.
Nonfiction science recordings can make facts as fast paced as the evening news. The Weather Channel’s view of Flood (Recorded Books, 2000) by Ellen Murphy’s account of the 1888 “Storm That Changed America” in Blizzard! (Audio Bookshelf, 2003) will fit right into a unit on climate. Both of these audiobooks can provide excellent opportunities to practice note-taking skills. Students didn’t get it the first time? Just rewind.

**Grades 7-8**

**Even Reluctant Readers Will Listen**

Using audio approaches for traditional assignments can keep easily distracted students interested, and help those reading below grade level to stay afloat. When it’s time to do a biography report, students with an interest in golf can listen to Matt Christopher’s On the Course with...Tiger Woods (Recorded Books, 2002), while skateboard enthusiasts might try his On the Halfpipe with...Tony Hawk (Recorded Books, 2002). They can also hear Michelle Kwan’s account of her ice skating career in The Winning Attitude! (Recorded Books, 2001). These titles can be purchased with paperback books so middle schoolers will be able to listen while reading and come back later to double check the facts they need.

Writing assignments can begin with students listening to the opening sections of longer books that feature amazing adventures including Geraldine McCaughrean’s The Kite Rider (Full Cast Audio, 2004) and Cornelia Funke’s Dragon Rider (Listening Library, 2004). After writing their predicted outcomes, members of the class will be listening very closely to see if they had the same idea as the author. This exercise can be repeated throughout the story. Another exercise is to have students start with a writing prompt extracted from a shorter novel such as Holling Clanceny’s Caldecott Honor Book, Paddle-to-the-Sea (Audio Bookshelf, 2004). A selection from a short story collection such as Avi’s What Do Fish Have to Do with Anything? (Recorded Books, 1998), which deals with surviving, or thriving in middle school would also work. For the next step, have students follow up with the audio presentation. Either way, kids will get to practice comparing and contrasting their imagination with the author’s finished product.

**Grades 9-12**

**High School in Ear Gear**

High school students are busier than ever and plugged into the latest in listening devices. Audiobooks can be part of their commute to school or their exercise routine. In the classroom, students can be introduced to authors and film stars who bring another dimension to the books they narrate.

The author who becomes the narrator has an abiding relationship with the words being spoken. The intensity is magnified when listeners know they are hearing Khaled Hosseini read his novel Kite Runner (Recorded Books, 2004) set in his native Afghanistan during the rise of the Taliban and after U.S. intervention. Jack Gantos’ autobiography, A Hole in My Life (Listening Library, 2002), strikes a deeper chord when students know he lived through a prison sentence for drug dealing and turned his life around to write about it. Though it’s been six decades since Bess Myerson was crowned Miss America 1945 (Jewish Contemporary Classics, 1998), when she reads from Susan Dworkin’s book about the years during World War II, anti-Semitism, and her own life-changing crowning, Myerson’s recollections are fresh. When the late Christopher Reeve reads his memoir Still Me (Random House, 1998), it is far more compelling than seeing his powerful testimonial on paper.

Whether it’s personal history or world history, listening to someone recounting important events personalizes the experience. Clint Willis’s anthology, The War (Listen & Live, 2001), features oral accounts of World War II from writers such as William Manchester and Paul Fussell. The Normandy invasion is covered in depth in Stephen Ambrose’s D-Day: June 6, 1944 (Simon & Schuster, 1994), while Robert Trumbull’s The Raft (Recorded Books, 2002) chronicles the ordeal of three airmen shot down and drifting in the Pacific for 34

**Books That Speak Volumes**

*Invite Robert Frost to your classroom* or have your students join the civil rights march in Selma, Alabama. The CDs that accompany Sourcebooks titles such as Elise Paschen’s Poetry Speaks (2001), Mark Eteleved’s The Spoken Word Revolution (2003), and Herb Boyd’s We Shall Overcome (2004) are filled with the voices that shaped great literature and great events. Designed to accompany well-documented text, each track in these audio compilations is also marked at the appropriate point in the book. Top notch narrators such as Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, and Charles Osgood further enhance these effective high school level supplements. www.sourcebook.com or 800/43-BRIGHT
days. The post-war world of a Holocaust survivor is vivid in Aranka Siegel’s *Grace in the Wilderness* (Recorded Books, 1998). Teachers can play short sections to supplement textbook information, or offer these audiobooks as an alternative to the printed book. Listening to these recordings has the intimacy of hearing a relatable telling of wartime experiences with the added authority of careful documentation.

Stellar young adult fiction can bridge socioeconomic gaps while taking young listeners back in time. Walter Dean Myers’s novel *Monster* (Recorded Books, 2000) is the story of a teen in jail for murder. Jennifer Donnelly transports listeners to 1906 where they meet a talented young writer bound by her family obligations in *A Northern Light* (Listening Library, 2003), and Gary Paulsen’s *Sisters/Hermanos* (Recorded Books, 1994) uses Spanish and English narration to juxtapose two young women trapped in very different worlds. These recordings will connect with a wide range of adolescents and will be especially helpful for those whose reading abilities haven’t yet caught up with their interests and life experiences.

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Celebrities are an additional draw. The chance to hear Hilar Swank and Chad Lowe will be enough to interest teens in Joyce Carol Oates’ *Big Mouth & Ugly Girl* (HarperCollins, 2002) about two teens who turn their mutual distrust into friendship. Choosing either Blair Brown’s reading of Isabel Allende’s *City of the Beasts* (HarperCollins, 2002) or Cherry Jones’ narrating Carson McCuller’s *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (HarperCollins, 2004) will bring important authors to the attention of teen listeners.

Classic plays and poems are meant to be performed, thus audiobooks are a perfect way to delve into great literature. Numerous producers offer poetry collections that include works both classic and contemporary. Even lengthy works such as Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* (Recorded Books, 1992) are invigorated by an audio presentation. Everyone will be spellbound when Dylan Thomas reads poems such as “Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night” or his own recollections of a holiday on *A Child’s Christmas in Wales and Five Poems* (first recorded in 1952, HarperCollins reissue, 2002).

Students will feel like they are on a field trip when they listen to any one of the 38 plays in *The Complete Arkangel Shakespeare* (Audio Partners, 2003), or hear Derek Jacobi read Homer’s *The Iliad* (HighBridge, 1992.)

For those who might question the validity of using sound recordings in the classroom, it is helpful to remember that Homer’s epic poem was based on oral tradition. The *Iliad* was set down on paper at a time when written accounts were just emerging. While Homer couldn’t have envisioned his words being digitally converted into sound, today’s students may be surprised at how much they can learn just by listening. Versatile and easy-to-use, audiobooks are technology’s adaptation of the sage sharing stories by the fire and a much-needed teacher’s assistant in today’s busy classroom.

Barbara Wysocki is Director of Children’s Services, Cora J. Belden Library, Rocky Hill, CT.

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