

Yertle on Trial

Most students are familiar with Dr. Seuss's book *Yertle the Turtle*. Yertle is the dictatorial and oppressive king of a pond. He decides that his kingdom is too small, and demands that the other turtles stand on each other's backs to build an ever higher throne for the Mighty Yertle. Then Yertle's reign upon the throne is toppled by the simple, innocent act of the turtle at the bottom of the stack.

This entertaining mock trial builds on Seuss's original story by adding a new angle. It focuses on the personal plight of one character unidentified in the story—the turtle in the middle of the stack, Sadie. A quiet and well-behaved youth, Sadie was taught to listen to her elders, not to disagree with them, and to obey them. Sadie was frightened when she was asked to climb up to the top of the pile of turtles, and even more frightened when other turtles began to climb onto her. But she obeyed. She didn't say a word.

After the great stack of turtles collapsed, Sadie had a terrible shell ache. The pain persisted for several weeks, so her mother took her to the local reptile doctor for an examination. The doctor said that Sadie's shell had a thin crack that might never heal properly.

Sadie's mother decided to sue the Mighty Yertle for enough money to take care of Sadie's medical expenses. She also wanted to make sure that Yertle did not abuse other turtles again. Sadie's mother thought that not even a king had the right to ask turtles to risk injury just to satisfy his need to be even greater.

Attorney(s) for the Plaintiff

Your responsibility is to represent Sadie. You will explain to the jury that Yertle abused his authority and that Sadie was injured as a result of his action. You may also argue that it is important to teach Yertle that even a king may not order other turtles around without good reason.

Witnesses for the Plaintiff

Mack. You were the turtle at the bottom of the stack. You may testify that Yertle did not listen to you even when you did complain to him. You, too, have had shell problems since that dreadful day in the pond. You believe that Yertle should be held responsible for Sadie's misfortune.

George Snapper. You are an elected member of the Turtle Council. You have a responsibility to make sure that all are treated fairly. You believe that King Yertle ignores the rights and needs of others.

Yolanda. You are Yertle's assistant, and you enjoy most of the work you do. You are afraid that Yertle will fire you if you support Sadie. Yet, you feel that Sadie's rights have been violated, and you must speak up for her.

Dr. Lyn Lizard. You are a physician who specializes in the treatment of reptiles. You have been Sadie's doctor since the day she was hatched and know that she has always been healthy. After her fall, you examined her and determined that her shell had a thin crack. You have treated similar cracks and know that they may cause pain and suffering for many years. You also know that Sadie will need special care. She will not be able to

go to school or play with other turtles for a long time.

Sadie. You are very sad and worried about the future. You think that Yertle, even if he is a king, did not behave properly and should be held responsible for his actions.

Slither. You are Sadie's mother. You believe that Yertle did not use good judgment when he asked a young turtle to climb onto the stack. You also feel it was selfish of him to order other turtles to do something so dangerous. You want the jury to order Yertle to pay for all Sadie's expenses and never to take advantage of other turtles again.

Attorney(s) for the Defense

Your responsibility is to defend Yertle. You argue that Yertle, as the king, has a right to order his subjects to do whatever he thinks is necessary. He thought it was necessary to see what was beyond his pond and pressed other turtles into service to help him. They were hurt in the line of duty, so he wasn't personally liable for Sadie's injury. He did not realize how young she was, or he wouldn't have ordered her to join the stack of turtles.

Witnesses for the Defense

Mertle. You are Yertle's sister, and you believe that Yertle has an absolute right to tell other turtles what to do. You may argue that royalty may not be sued because they have complete authority.

Dr. Sam. You are the royal physician, and a turtle yourself. You are an expert in turtle health, including the resistance, durability, and recuperative powers of the turtle shell. You want the jury to know that Dr. Lyn is nothing but a thin-skinned lizard who is hardly qualified to treat turtles, much less testify on their behalf. You may tell the jury that Sadie's injuries are not serious, and you are sure that, while she is quite shaken, she will be much better very soon.

Yertle. You are insulted that members of your kingdom would even think that they have a right to question your judgment or to sue you. Subjects may not sue a king. You do not think that the court, or members of the jury, have the authority to tell you what to do.

Hector. You are an old turtle who remembers what the kingdom was like a long time ago. In the old days, the people always did what the king told them to do, and they led happy and healthy lives. That is why you have lived so long yourself.

Frank Flycatcher. You are Yertle's best friend. You believe that he really cares about the people in his kingdom, but he sometimes does foolish things. The jurors should understand that a king's life is difficult, and they should not create more problems for poor Yertle. Or for themselves. Any money paid to Sadie will come from taxes they pay to the national treasury.

A Note to Jurors

Your job is to listen very carefully to what the witnesses say. Determine whether they are telling the truth, whether what they say is important to the case, and whether they are accurate when they testify. Compare the testimony of the witnesses. Do the facts fit together? Was one side more reasonable than the other? Are you persuaded that a king

may be held responsible for his actions? Do you think that this king should be in this situation? Your verdict must be unanimous. If you decide that the king is responsible for Sadie's injury, you must determine how he will compensate her.

How to Conduct Your Mock Trial

Each attorney may make an opening statement. This is the attorney's opportunity to tell the jury a little about the case and what he or she intends to prove.

After opening statements, each attorney may call witnesses. In this mock trial, each witness may be questioned for a maximum of three minutes. The attorney for the plaintiff is always allowed to present her or his case first.

The attorney for the other side may cross-examine each witness for two minutes. The attorney may ask questions only about information that the witness has already talked about.

Following witness testimony, each attorney delivers a closing argument to summarize the case. The attorney tells the jury why they should agree with his or her client's position.

The jurors review and discuss the case privately. When they all agree on a verdict, they tell the judge what they have decided.

Source: Adapted from Gayle Mertz, "Yertle on Trial," Update on the Courts 4.2 (Winter 1996): 14-15.

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http://www.abanet.org/publiced/lawday/schools/lessons/yertle_roles.html