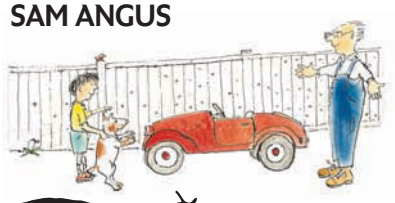
FROM THE PUBLISHERS OF teach PRIMARY

Teach Reading & Writing

BRILLIANT IDEAS FOR LITERACY ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

"My life stories"

- FRANCESCA SIMON
- A.F. HARROLD
- DAVID O'DOHERTY
- JOHN BURNINGHAM
- RODDY DOYLE
- SAM ANGUS



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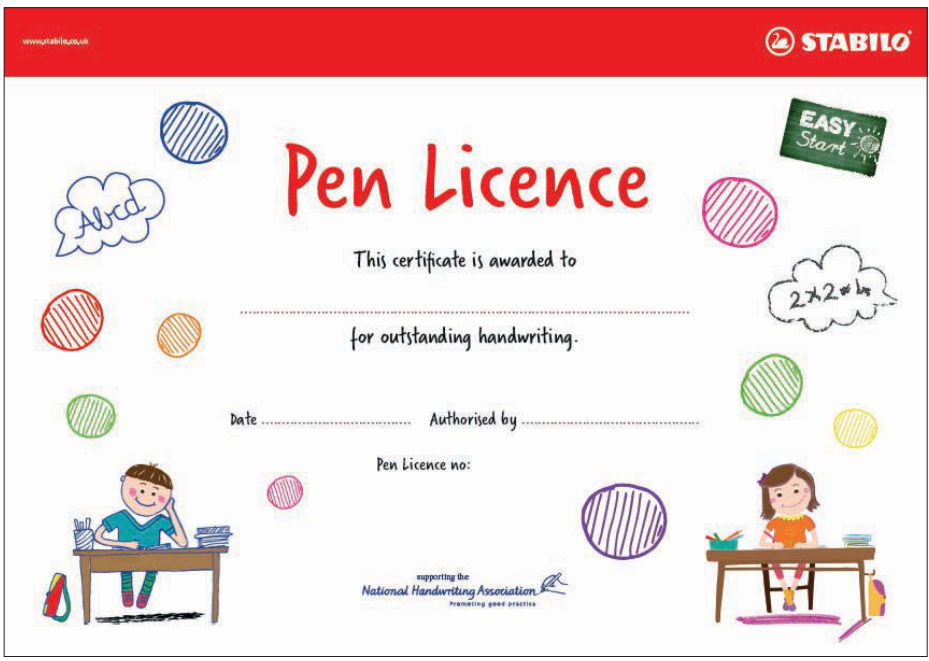

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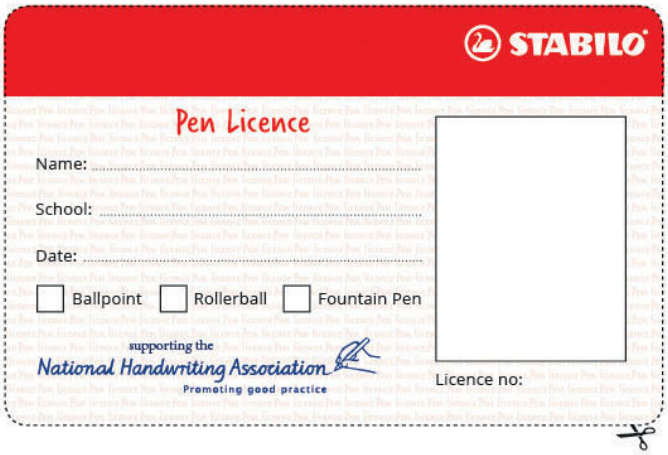

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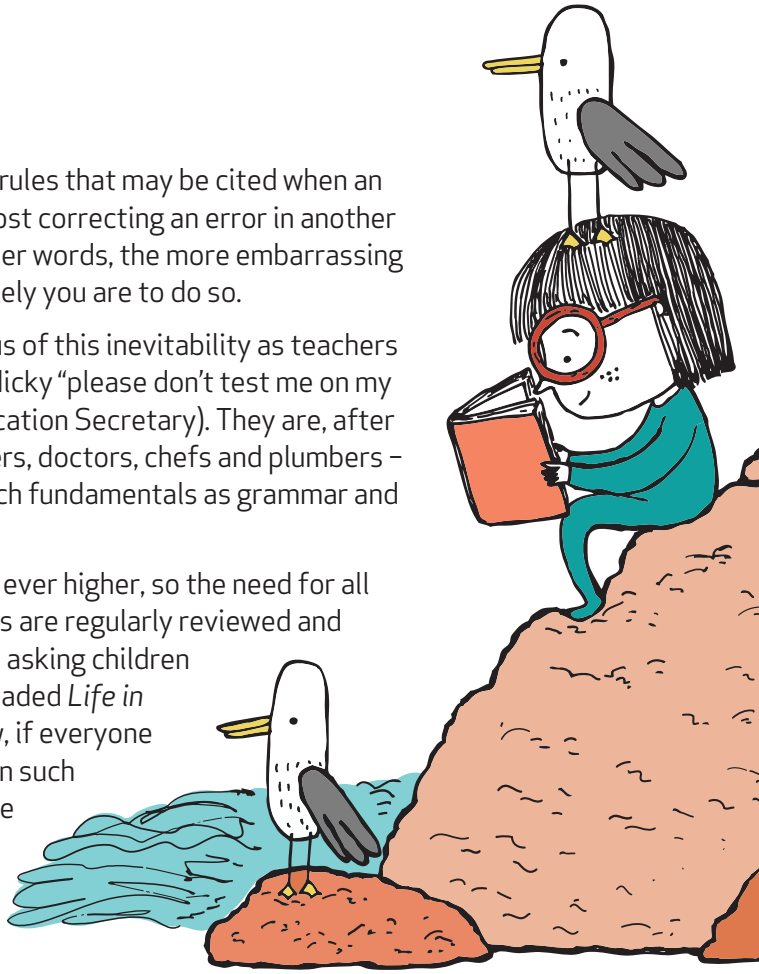
Welcome...



According to Skitt's law (one of several eponymous rules that may be cited when an online debate threatens to get out of hand), 'any post correcting an error in another post will contain at least one error itself'. Or, in other words, the more embarrassing it would be for you to make a mistake, the more likely you are to do so.

Editors aside, few professionals can be as acutely conscious of this inevitability as teachers (although politicians are regularly caught out by it, too, as Nicky "please don't test me on my tables" Morgan was painfully aware during her time as Education Secretary). They are, after all, responsible for instructing the next generation of lawyers, doctors, chefs and plumbers – not to mention educators – so surely, their own grasp of such fundamentals as grammar and spelling should be beyond reproach?

Well, yes. And as the standards expected of pupils become ever higher, so the need for all those who work with them to ensure their own literacy skills are regularly reviewed and refreshed is increasingly important. There was a time when asking children to *practice* their multiplication or complete a worksheet headed *Life in the 60's* might pass largely unnoticed in the classroom; now, if everyone is doing their job properly, you're as likely to be called out on such crimes against the English language by Jacob in Y5 as by the staffroom's resident pedant (you know who we mean).

And, irritating though that might be, on the whole it's probably not a bad thing. A clear, early and supportive focus on accuracy only becomes a real problem if by the time he gets to Y5, Jacob is too busy looking for typos in his library book to get lost in the story, or so keen on cramming 3A sentences and wow words into his latest epic that he forgets it's supposed to entertain a reader rather than impress an inspector. So, whilst this issue of *Teach Reading & Writing* offers plenty of features designed to help you hone your GaPS expertise alongside your pupils' and thus avoid falling foul of Skitt's law (and has naturally been proofed to within an inch of it's life* in the hope that we can do likewise) it is also full of ideas to help you engage and inspire learners, and celebrate literacy in all its glorious diversity together, across the curriculum and every day.

Find more brilliant literacy learning ideas at www.teachprimary.com/reading-and-writing

Stay safe – and enjoy the journey!
Joe Carter & Helen Mulley, associate editors

* Well spotted; we did that for comic affect**, of course.
** We could be here for some time...

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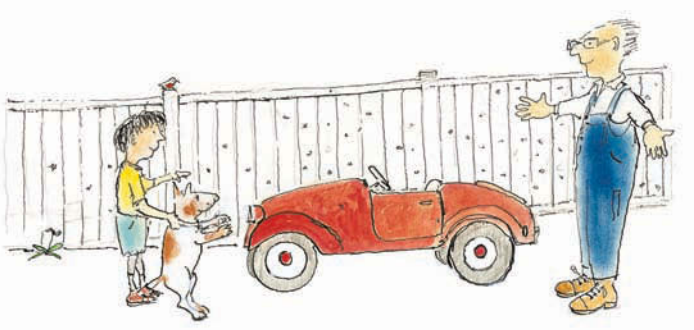
Illustration © Tony Ross

"My Life Stories"

Original essays from some of the UK's best-loved children's writers and illustrators



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JAMES BOWEN is director of NAHT Edge, the union for aspirational school leaders (nahtedge.org.uk)

Too close for comfort

If Dickens took the SATs and missed out his modal verbs, he'd fail. It's time for the DfE to sort out secure-fit assessment, says **James Bowen**...

Much has been made of the introduction of 'secure-fit' as an assessment method for writing. For non-teachers, this may seem like a technicality, but it has had profound implications – both on how children's written work is judged, and the way writing is being taught in many schools. So what are the issues with this approach?

Good writers judged too harshly

While it is not necessarily a bad thing to note that a child struggles with a specific aspect of writing – her handwriting or spelling, for example – we should not be forced to label her as 'failing to reach the expected standard' when she is otherwise a proficient writer. Schools will always want to identify any areas for development a child may have, but a single, specific area of weakness should not be a limiting factor when making an overarching judgement. To use an extreme example: theoretically, in the secure-fit approach, a child could write the equivalent of *Great Expectations*, but he cannot not be classed as 'working above the expected standard' for an 11-year-old if he struggles to spell the words from the Year 5 and 6 word lists. This cannot be right.

Secure fit also discriminates against children with specific learning difficulties, such as dyslexia and dyspraxia. Many children with such needs are destined to be always working below the expected standard, regardless of whether their writing is grammatically correct, creative and entertaining.

The box-ticking approach to teaching

Another major issue with a secure-fit approach is the impact it has on classroom practice and the way writing is taught. It is commonplace to hear of Year 6 teachers having to teach a series of lessons on modal verbs and reminding children to include a few of these in their next piece of writing – just so that the relevant criteria can be ticked. This isn't the way we should be teaching children to write. There is a time and place for modal verbs, and I don't have an issue with teachers explaining and teaching these if they feel it will support the overall purpose and quality of their pupils' writing. However, insisting on seeing evidence of them in several pieces of work will inevitably lead to teachers having to 'teach to the criteria'. Writing assessment should be far more holistic and allow teachers to judge the overall quality of a child's writing, rather than just the component parts. Our aim should be to enthuse and motivate children to want to write, not make them think it's a box-ticking exercise. This approach saps all the joy and pleasure out of writing – surely not what we want for our children.

Only 100 per cent will do

When defending the secure-fit approach, we have heard ministers and the DfE referring to it as a common assessment method used elsewhere in the world. I cannot think of any other exam, test or assessment in either education or life in general that requires a 100 per cent pass mark. You can gain a first-class honours degree with less than 100 per cent, and even the driving test allows you to make a number of minor mistakes. Why can't we apply a similarly reasonable approach when assessing the writing of six or 11-year-olds?

Back to the drawing board

The DfE needs to go back to the drawing board on this one and completely rethink how writing should be assessed at the end of KS1 and KS2. If the government is insistent that secure-fit is here to stay (and I sincerely hope it isn't) at the very least it should look again at some of the specific criteria that have been set in the interim assessment frameworks. These are currently overly focused on the more technical aspects of writing, such as spelling and grammar, that are already assessed elsewhere in the GaPS test. There seems no need to assess these twice. A revised approach should have much greater emphasis on a child's overall ability to communicate her meaning in writing and how she's able to write for a given purpose and audience.

Either way, an urgent and thorough review of primary assessment has to be at the very top of the DfE's to-do list.

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A.F. Harrold

"I met books and I met books and I met books..."

Poet, writer and performer **A.F. Harrold** recalls a reading journey with misty beginnings and no end in sight

It's such a long time ago now and I remember so little of it.

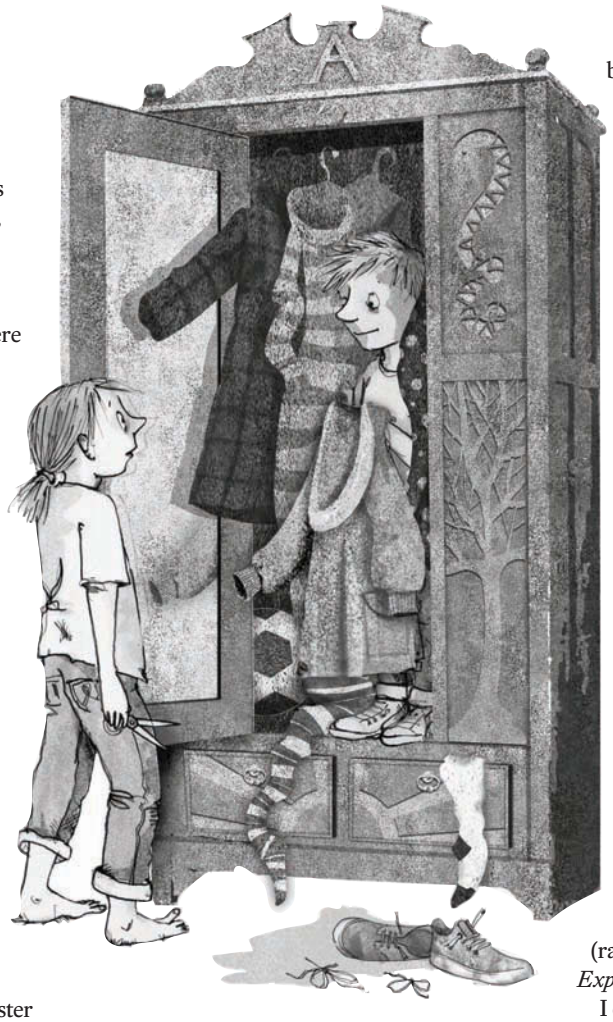
I try closing my eyes and going back.

There were Ladybird books with letters and numbers on the front, I can see them, and there was Jan Pienkowski's *Haunted House*, I can see that. There was Raymond Briggs' *Gentleman Jim*, I can see that, and there was a Star Wars readalong-with-the-tape-and-turn-the-page-when-R2-beeps called *Planet of the Hoojibs*. I can see that.

There was a spinner in the newsagents-cum-general-store nextdoor to the chemist in Fitzalan Road. I can see myself getting a colourful science fiction book down, again a Ladybird.

There was almost everything in the children's section of the library. My dad had a cleaning job in the evening, at a dentist's in town, and once or twice a week he'd take me with him, drop me off in the library on the way in, and pick me up a couple of hours later on the way home. (I can remember going with him to the dentists once, after hours and empty the place was spooky as all get out.)

I can remember reading Billy Brewster books and Douglas Hill books and Terence Dicks there, but I couldn't tell you anything about them. I read all the non-fiction books and had my sex education via (possibly?) Usborne's finest. (Also, how to be a spy. And how to make all sorts of things I never made, but I enjoyed reading the instructions.)



"I spend much of my time reading books that didn't exist when I was a kid."

I *think* there was the *Beano*. My brother's *Commando* and *Battle* comics. Later there was definitely 2000AD. Still is.

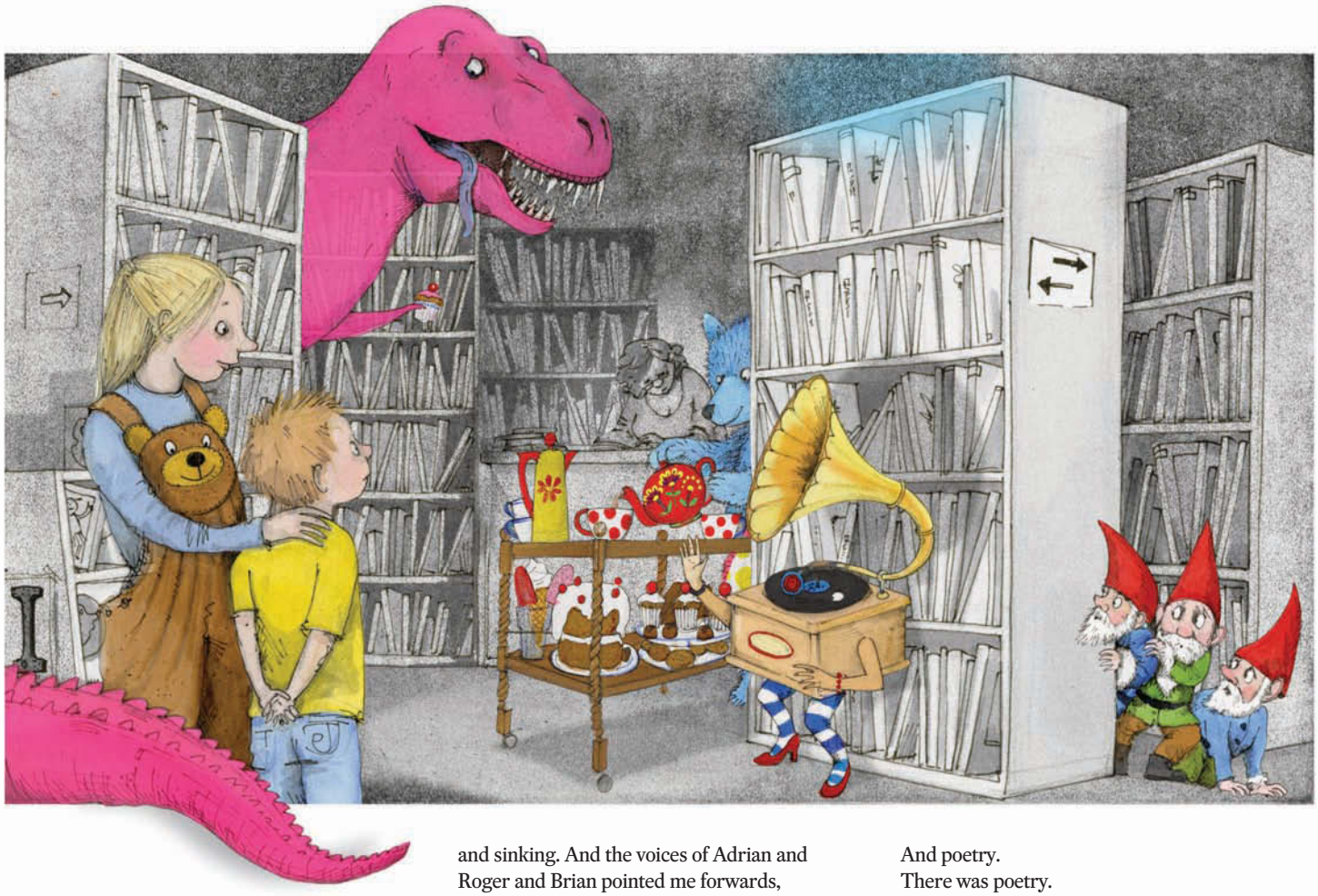
There were Fighting Fantasy books. And the choose-your-own-adventure ninja series that began with *Avenger*, or was it *Usurper*? And other cheaper, knock off versions of these systems that didn't satisfy.

There was the film of *Lord of the Rings*, the Ralph Bakshi cartoon of most of the first two books, rented from the tiny selection of videos for hire in Radio Rentals (or was it Rumbelows?), which led to reading *The Hobbit*, and later *The Lord of the Rings* itself.

I can remember Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay (WFRP) and Warhammer 40,000 (40K) wargaming. The rulebooks were thick and filled with fluff, background stories and descriptions and fragments.

I remember my magnificent English teacher, Mrs Coates, giving me a copy of *Oscar and Lucinda* (which, looking back, I realise had just won the Booker) to broaden me. It was okay. She also lent me her *Collected Poems of William Blake* (rather than just the *Songs of Innocence & Experience* we needed for class).

I discovered a proper second-hand bookshop in town, run by a proper odd and grumpy and resentful-you've-come-in-and-disturbed-the-books bookseller. I bought all sorts of old things there. Japanese myths, Babylonian myths, poetry, dusty old things that made me sneeze.



Illustrations by Emily Gravett, for The Imaginary, by AF Harrold (Bloomsbury)

Somewhere in there I found Bertrand Russell's *Why I Am Not A Christian*, which changed my life. Instead of dabbling about with religion and witchcraft (a piece I wrote in my GCSE drama class about summoning the horned god made my teacher, an awful petty woman, take me aside afterwards and give me a Bible to take home (which wasn't hers to give, belonging to the school)), I had cobwebs blown away and began to think better. More philosophy followed, and because of that book I went to university to study philosophy (for want of knowing what else to do).

That was what got me away from the Very Nice, Very White, old hometown and out into somewhere more interesting. I wasn't any good at philosophy, but at least I escaped and stayed away.

I remember finding Iris Murdoch somewhere after that. I remember finding Russell Hoban. I remember finding Primo Levi. I remember Proust. I remember Pratchett. I remember *Maus*. Oh.

I remember *The Mersey Sound*. Listening to the audiobook while lying on a mattress in a box-room in a shared house filled with strangers in other rooms, depressed on a Sunday morning. Barely employed. Empty-futured. Half-hearted. Utterly lost. Adrift and sinking. And the voices of Adrian and Roger and Brian pointed me forwards, onwards, up.

I remember working in a bookshop. They closed us down eventually, because we weren't good at selling, but I met books and I met books and I met books. Not whole books, but bites, snippets and nibbles I tasted as I shelved them. And the ones I – *ahem* – borrowed. And *The Bookseller*.

And poetry.
There was poetry.
I remember there was poetry.
And now, there is this.

Somehow, I've ended up a children's author (I have never had a plan, I never expected to be here) and I spend much of my time reading books that didn't exist when I was a kid (David Almond, Sally Gardner, and all the glorious rest), and the ones that did but that I missed at the time: *Danny Champion of the World*, *The Witches*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, *Marianne Dreams*...

Some of it's great. Some of it's even better. Much of it's wasted on kids.

While my mum was dying I'd talk to her and she'd say, 'Do you remember when I read you...?' and I'd say, 'No, I don't remember.' And she swore that she always read books to me, and I wept because I couldn't remember that at all. I wept because all that remained of the good she had done is a memory of me sat or lying with the book, reading all by myself.

And, looking back, it seems I've lived my life reading, instead of living it, but when you hear what people do to one another when they leave the house, this doesn't seem too bad a sin.

So, if you need me, please, just leave me alone. I'll be in the bath, with a paperback that's beginning to disintegrate.

ISABELLA WALLACE is an author, visiting lecturer and former teacher

Squeezy bottles, toy cars and flyswatters

Eighteen ways to play your way to better reading and writing in the Early Years and KS1...

"I hate phonics, Mummy!" my forthright four-year-old announced emphatically as I collected him from school one day. "We have to sit on the carpet for ages. I just want to play!"

Of course, in Reception he played a lot – in fact, most afternoons were spent outside in child-led play and discovery. But for him this seemed a world away from the times set aside for reading and writing.

For us teachers, it can be hard coming up with a host of different ways to teach the same aspects of literacy, day after day, without draining all the joy out of the darn thing. So here are 20 practical ideas to let these skills become synonymous with playtime. You may even like to have some of these activities permanently set up so that children can 'magically' make progress in their reading and writing during free play or golden time.

1 The alphabet chase

Set out the initial sounds you've taught the children and want them to revise. Children must race to find objects that begin with a particular sound, and then place them on the correct letter(s). This activity works well outside – where children can look for natural items – or even in a school hall, to blend literacy with PE.

2 Pick a pocket

For a variation on the above idea, create a classroom display by fixing a small plastic wallet next to each letter of the alphabet. Ask children to bring in items beginning with those letters that can be placed into the transparent pockets. This is a display that can be constantly changed and grown. You can even use it for all those little things children find outside at playtime!

3 Twisty eggs

Use hollow plastic eggs to teach Consonant-Vowel-Consonant words. Write consonants all around the rim of the larger half and then a vowel-consonant pair ("at", "ar", "en", etc.) against the rim of the smaller half. Children can then put the halves together and twist one side around to explore different CVC words.

4 Lego word building

Write on the bricks with a permanent marker. You can write individual letters so that children can practise building words, or whole words to build sentences. You might even ask children to fix all the verbs or nouns together.

5 Whack-a-word

Write phonemes or words on balls of modelling clay with a felt tip pen. Call out a word, sound or relevant question and the children must squish the corresponding ball as fast as they can.

6 Park it

Have children draw out a map of a car park and write a word or phoneme in each parking space. Call out an instruction that requires children to steer their toy car to park on the correct answer. This activity can also be done in pairs – with one child being the driver and the other being the sat nav.

7 Swatting up

Place some flyswatters and a large example of text (such as a newspaper page) on each table. Call out particular types of words or sounds for children to swat. Ask for feedback from each table.

8 I-Spy bottles

Help the children to fill clear plastic bottles or tubs with dry rice and a selection of random miniature items. Allow them to shake up the container and, in pairs or groups, they can play "I spy with my little eye, something

beginning with…" This resource presents a great opportunity for practising initial sounds and can be taken home to play with a parent or carer.

9 Target practice

This is another great one for bringing literacy into PE lessons. Call out relevant words and let children aim soft sponge balls at those words, which are displayed on the wall. Alternatively, you can display the whole alphabet and ask the children to spell out a word, shot by shot.

10 Sound hunts

Give every child a paper plate with his or her name in the middle and the alphabet cut in tabs around the outside. Take the children outside and ask them to spot objects that begin with those sounds. Each time they spot an object, they fold down the relevant letter.

Back in the classroom, you can discuss what the children saw and which letters they turned down. Are there any letters that no one found? Are there more common initial sounds that everyone found ideas for?

11 Messy writing

Make writing exciting by allowing children to practise letter shapes with their fingers in a variety of different ingredients. Try sand, shaving foam, chocolate spread, salt, flour, etc. This type of activity is also fun to set for homework.

12 Easy-peasy-water-squeezy

On good weather days, take children outside with squeezy water bottles to practise their letter formation on a grand scale. This really makes children think hard about each letter's direction and shape.

13 Puddle jumping

Cut puddles out of card and place them on the floor with a word or letter written on each. Ask pupils to jump on the word you call out, or answer your question by building a sentence with their jumps. They might also spell out words by jumping on a sequence of letters.

14 Paper chains

Let children make their own paper chains to explore how letters link to make words, how words link to build sentences or how ideas link to build a narrative.

15 Connect 4 (or 3, or 5, or 6…)

Use old versions of this popular game to allow children to spell out words together. Simply use a permanent marker to write a letter on each token.

16 Send me a letter!

Place a selection of toy cars on every table. You will also need some wooden clothes pegs with a letter of the alphabet written on each. One child calls out a letter and rolls a car to the child sat opposite him. The child receiving the car must find the right letter as quickly as possible, peg it to the vehicle and send it rolling back to the first child.

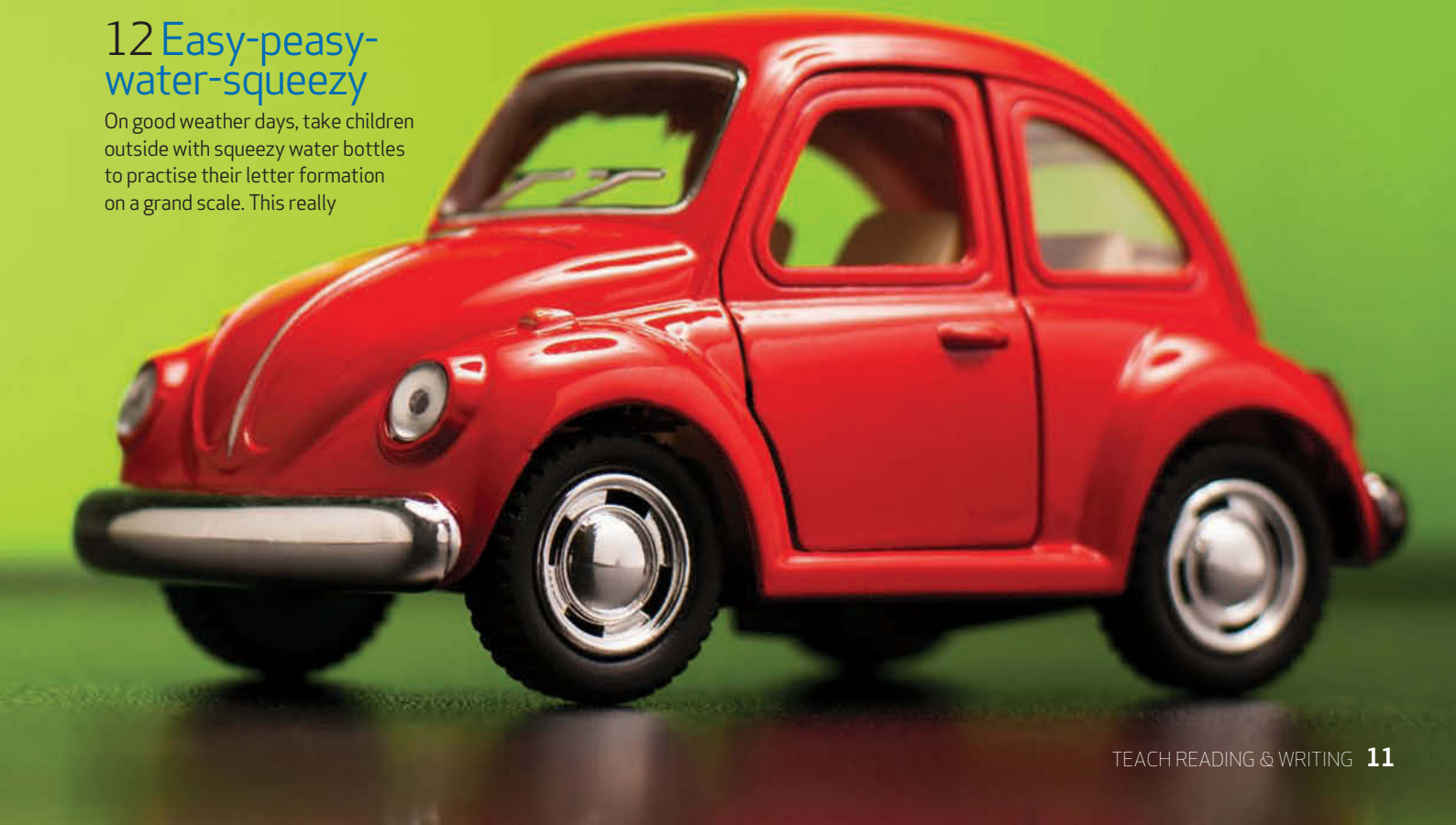
17 Model behaviour

Help children to really consider and remember the shapes of the letters you're teaching them by asking them to form them using different materials. Try modelling clay, dry pasta or beans, sticks and stones, grass or tin foil.

18 Hand golf

Use paper cups and polystyrene (or pingpong) balls to help the children have fun categorising different words. Write the categories on the cups. On the balls you can either write words or draw (or stick) pictures. Line up the cups and have the children toss the balls into the correct containers. You might use this activity to match pictures with the appropriate initial letter, categorise words into the different parts of speech or simply differentiate between positive and negative words, singular and plural, past and present.

Isabella Wallace is co-author of the best selling teaching guides, *Pimp Your Lesson* and *Talk-Less Teaching*, and the forthcoming *Best of the Best* series for teachers. Well known for her highly popular CPD events, she presents nationally and internationally on outstanding teaching and learning.



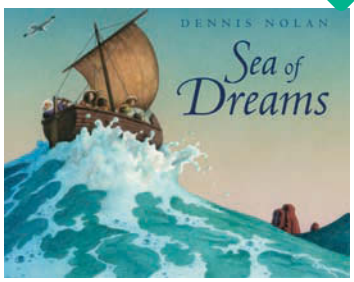
CAREY FLUKER HUNT is creative projects manager at Seven Stories

10 GREAT SEA adventures

Sublime and mysterious, the ocean plays host to countless magical children's stories. So set sail with **Carey Fluker Hunt** and discover some of the very best for inspiring classroom creativity

Foundation Stage

1



Sea of Dreams

BY DENNIS NOLAN (Roaring Brook Press)

What's the story?

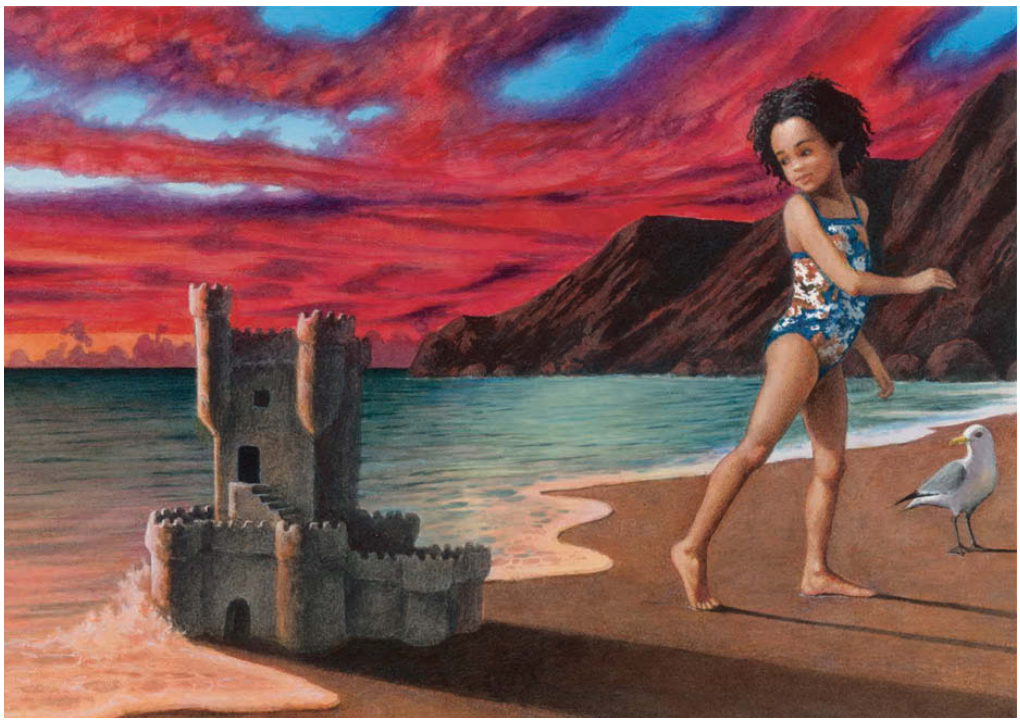
A girl builds a sandcastle. As the sun sets and the tide comes in, she leaves the beach. Then, just as the first wave breaks over the battlements, a light comes on in the castle window... Every spread in this glorious picturebook has the potential to inspire dramatic storytelling. Collectively the illustrations create an almost cinematic experience with a narrative energy that can't be ignored.

Thinking and talking

Who are the people in the sandcastle, and how did they come to be on the beach? Talk about what you would see and do if you could enter the castle. What would you bring to life, if you could? And what would happen next?

Try this

- **Find some 'tiny environments' and imagine how they'd look to their inhabitants. Use various small-world figures to populate an outdoor space. Take some photographs, map the area, draw what you can see and tell stories about it. Find pictures of seaside scenes and add drawings of tiny people having adventures.**
- **Tell the story from the point of view of the boy who falls into the water.**
- **Design sandcastles, using pictures of real castles for inspiration. What would you put in a sandcastle, if you were going to live in it? Try making castles from sand and other materials.**



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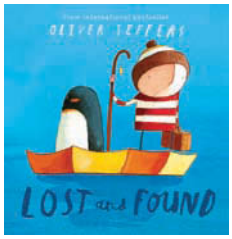


Foundation Stage

Lost and Found

BY OLIVER JEFFERS (Harper Collins Children's Books)

What's the story?

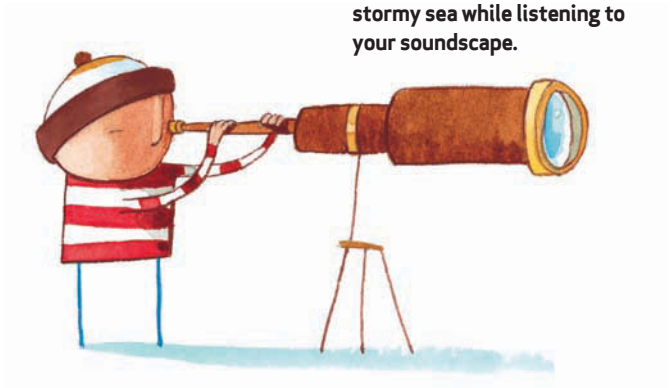
When a penguin turns up on your doorstep, what do you do? Take him to the South Pole in a rowing boat, of course. But what if the penguin isn't lost, just lonely? This is the story of a friendship, told simply and with great style.

Thinking and talking

Why do you think the penguin likes the boy? What should you do to be a good friend, and why is friendship important? What kind of stories does the boy tell the penguin? Which stories do you prefer, and why?

Try this

- **What do you think the boy and the penguin talked about? In pairs, roleplay their conversation. When you've worked out the best version, write it down and illustrate it.**
- **Find a toy penguin and an umbrella for him to sail in. Write or draw the penguin's thoughts on giant thought bubbles. Can you design a better boat? Build one using junk materials and test it on water.**
- **Look at the storm picture. What can the boy see, hear and smell? Create a soundscape by making 'stormy sea' noises and record it. Explore paint and other media to create a picture of a stormy sea while listening to your soundscape.**



3

Foundation Stage

Wave

BY SUZY LEE (Chronicle Books)

What's the story?

A girl plays on a beach, making fun of the waves. There's an invisible barrier between them, so they can't touch her. Or can they? To the delight of her audience, Suzy Lee uses the 'gutter' of this wordless picturebook to establish a rule and break it. This book will appeal to children who enjoy responding kinaesthetically and will inspire retellings and performances of all kinds.

Thinking and talking

Talk about a visit to the beach or swimming pool. What games do you play? Mime them and let others guess. How should you stay safe near water?

What do you think about the colours Suzy Lee uses? How do they make you feel? Would different colours change your mood? Retell the story from the girl's perspective, then the wave's. How do they differ?

Try this

- **Pretend to make faces at waves, then run away. Work together to move like a wave. Create a soundtrack using your voices and/or percussion instruments, or find some appropriate music and perform a wave dance.**
- **Explore the colour blue using different media and create some watery, wavey pictures. Find out about gulls, then watch some birds in your school grounds. How are they similar and how are they different?**
- **Invent a 'wave-creeping-up-on-a-girl' version of the Grandmother's Footsteps game and test it. Agree on the rules, then write instructions for another class on how to play.**

Key Stage 1

4

The Snorgh and the Sailor

BY WILL BUCKINGHAM AND THOMAS DOCHERTY (Alison Green Books)

What's the story?

One night, as a storm rages, a sailor washes up at the snorgh's house and starts telling him a story. The snorgh – who doesn't like company – stomps off to bed. By morning, the sailor's gone. The snorgh realises that he has to hear the end of the story, and sets off in pursuit. Ignoring sea monsters, whirlwinds and deserted islands, he finds the sailor, only to discover that in fact, he's been creating another story all along.

Thinking and talking

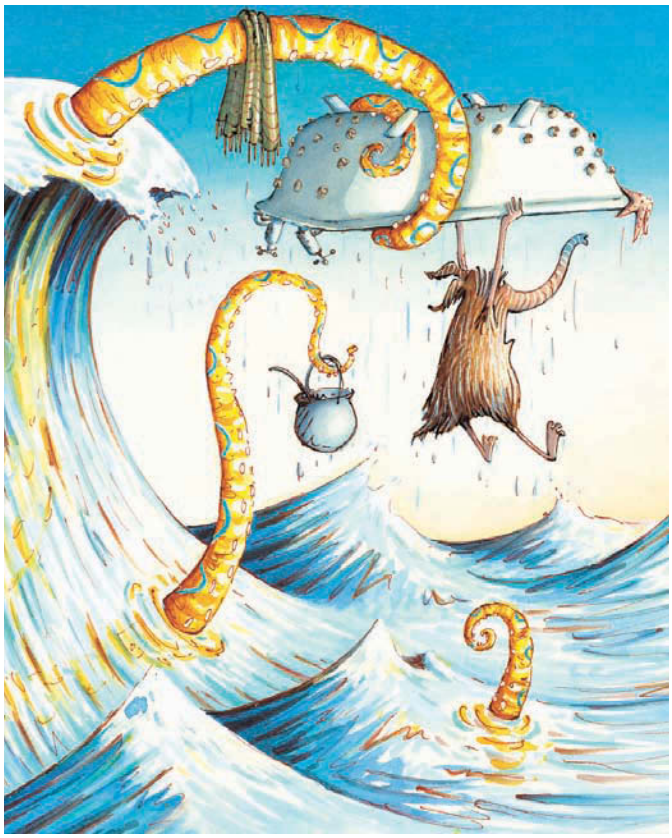
■ Do you believe the snorgh when he says he doesn't like adventures? What can you find in the pictures or story to help you answer this? Do you think the snorgh will be happier at sea than he was on land? What makes you happy, and why?

Try this

■ **What happens to the snorgh and the sailor when they leave the island? Use the line drawings to tell the next chapter of their story, and then share it with your classmates.**

■ **Look at some old seafaring maps and use them to help you draw one of your own, showing the snorgh's adventures.**

■ **In pairs, invent a new seaside character and an unlikely friend for him. Roleplay their conversation, then draw your characters and write about them.**



5

Key Stage 1

The Pirate Cruncher

BY JONNY DUDDLE (Templar)

About the book

There's a stranger in town and he's tempting the pirates with promises of treasure. But 'free' money usually comes with strings attached – and the Fiddler's strings are being pulled by something very large and very hungry! This busy picture book offers a hugely entertaining romp through pirate territory that's familiar, but presented here with real style and substance.

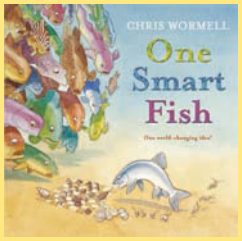
Thinking and Talking

There are many clues about what's really happening in this book. Can you find them? Who or what is the Fiddler, and who's controlling him? Look at the way Jonny Duddle divides his pages (full spread, or smaller images?) and his viewpoint (where would the camera be if this book were a film?). Talk about how this helps him tell his story and how it makes you feel as a reader.

Try this

■ **Look at the 'pirates in hammocks' spread. Write what**

6



One Smart Fish

BY CHRIS WORMELL (Red Fox Picture Books)

What's the story?

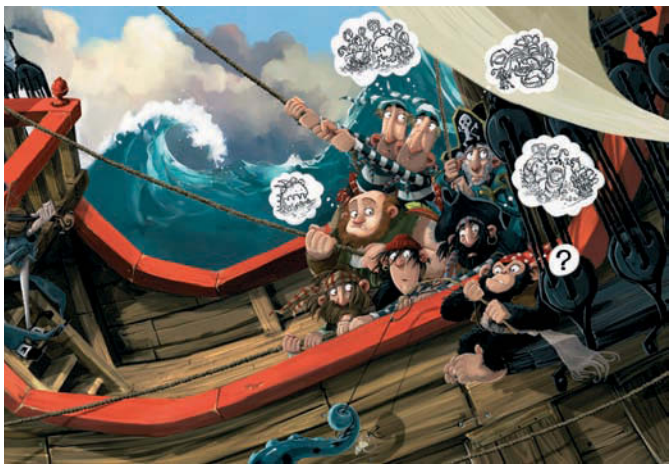
Long ago, when the world was young and nothing walked upon the land, a dull-looking fish had a bright idea. He'd already invented chess, created some artworks and entertained his friends with songs and plays, so it shouldn't have come as a surprise. But a fish, walking up the beach, on feet? No wonder the others were so amazed!

Thinking and talking

Look at the spread showing the fish on holiday. What are they doing; how are they entertaining themselves? And why does the sign say 'Danger, shallow water? What do you think the colourful fish are thinking when the smart fish walks up the beach? What impossible thing would you like to do, and why?

Try this

- **Create an enormous collaborative underwater frieze. Use a board and some shells to play chess – or perhaps you could even invent a new game for the Smart Fish!**
- **Look at the tree diagram and identify the creatures. Why don't you recognise some of them? Talk about change (evolution) and the consequences of not changing (extinction). Find out about fossils, the first amphibians and dinosaurs.**
- **Imagine you've invented wings. Where would you go? Make your own wings out of fabric or paper, and decorate them.**
- **they're thinking, then blank out the bubbles and draw different thoughts for them. Create a sea monster of your own to replace the lower part of the pull-out spread.**
- **How many small-world figures can you load onto a model boat before it sinks? Is there a technique to it? Can you modify the boat in any way to improve your score? Use your data to create graphs and infographics.**
- **Set up a pirate recruiting office, complete with job adverts, information about pay and conditions and application forms. Roleplay a recruiting officer interviewing a pirate for a job (all paperwork to be filled in correctly, of course), then write a letter offering the position, or explaining why it's refused.**



7

Key Stage 1

Manfish: The Story of Jacques Cousteau

BY JENNIFER BERNE AND ERIC PUYBARET (Chronicle Books)

What's the story?

Manfish tells the story of groundbreaking diver and film-maker Jacques Cousteau and the questions that fascinated him as a child. Why can't a person breathe like a fish? Could I make an underwater film? And how can we protect the sea? In this book, words and pictures complement each other to create biographical non-fiction with a difference.

Thinking and talking

Was Cousteau an ordinary child, or was he unusual? How did he become an inventor? Which illustration do you like best? Why do you think some of them are round, while others are drawn in vertical strips?

Try this

- **Together, create a mural showing a cross section from shallow water to deep-sea trenches. Populate with drawings of creatures in their natural habitat and write about them.**
- **Watch a film by Cousteau, then take masks and snorkels to your local pool and investigate. What kind of suits and equipment do modern deep-sea divers use? Compare with the equipment available when Cousteau was young.**
- **"You can't build what you can't imagine…." Talk about problems that need solutions. Choose one problem and dream up different ways to solve it, then present your ideas to the class. You might need to draw pictures, make models or act something out to get your message across – which can be as wild and imaginative as you like!**

Key Stage 2

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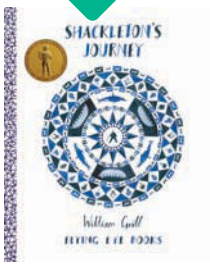


Shackleton's Journey

BY WILLIAM GRILL (Flying Eye)

What's the story

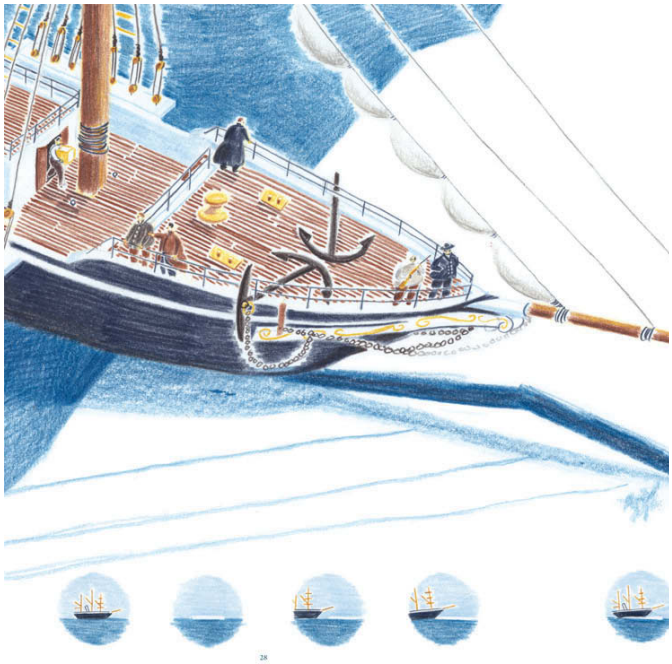
With its epic struggles, heartbreaking losses and heroic leadership, the story of Shackleton's expedition has become the stuff of legend. In this absorbing picture book, Grill presents the facts behind that legend, marrying attention grabbing text with pared-down illustrations evoking the harsh, cold beauty of the frozen South. Grill's stylish page designs and minimal colour palette make this a sophisticated read.

Thinking and talking

What has this book told or shown you about the Antarctic that you didn't know or understand before? What did Shackleton and others do to keep everybody safe and well despite the challenges? What makes a good leader, do you think? What do you think about the way Grill chose to illustrate this book?

Try this

- **Draw a picture of everyone in your class on a single page, and label with the jobs they'd have chosen if they'd been part of Shackleton's expedition.**
- **Use a measuring jug to investigate the expansion of water as it freezes, or float ice cubes and time how long they take to melt at different temperatures. Why do icebergs float? Freeze something crushable in a closed container full of water and observe what happens. What did Shackleton do to protect the Endeavour from the ice?**
- **Inspired by Grill's minimal style, draw a map of your local area. Who might want to explore it, and for what reasons? Create an imaginary diary written by the expedition's leader.**
- **Research another expedition or environment (an Apollo mission? the Amazon?) then write and illustrate some spreads for a non-fiction picturebook inspired by Grill.**



Key Stage 2

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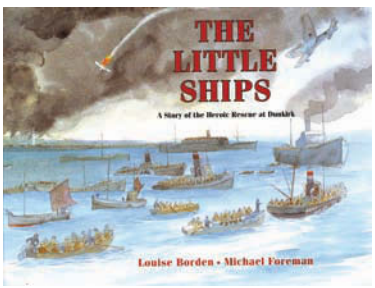


The Little Ships: A Story of Heroic Rescue at Dunkirk

BY LOUISE BORDEN AND MICHAEL FOREMAN (Frances Lincoln)

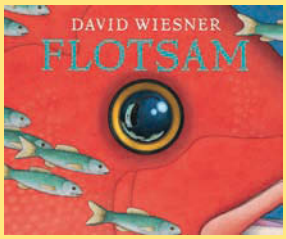
What's the story

Louise Borden's prose poem about the 'disaster and miracle' of Dunkirk brings the heroic WWII rescue of soldiers stranded on French beaches vividly to life. Told through the eyes of a girl who joins the convoy in her father's fishing boat, this is an arresting and imaginative introduction to a real event. Michael Foreman's evocative illustrations match the mood of the narrative perfectly.

Thinking and talking

Why does the girl dress as a boy? What does she see and experience during her journey? Does it change her? How? There are lots of jobs to do on board the Lucy. List the peacetime tasks, and compare

9



Key Stage 2

Flotsam

BY DAVID WIESNER (Andersen Press)

About the book

A boy discovers an old-fashioned camera on a beach. The photos, once developed, tell an incredible story of starfish islands and underwater aliens, and link him to children across the globe. Combining beautifully detailed, full page spreads with graphic novel style action frames, this wordless and sophisticated picturebook encourages children to notice, question and invent.

Thinking and talking

How do we know which images are photos taken by the camera, and which are not? Look at the underwater photos. Which do you like best, and why? Look at the photos of children who found the camera. Why are they holding pictures of each other, and what's the significance of the numbers? Why do you think the final pictures are in sepia rather than colour?

Try this

- **Borrow an old-fashioned camera. Sketch it, make diagrams and find out how it works. Light-sensitive paper will help your class understand film-based photography (or you could make a pinhole camera). Find some Edwardian portrait photographs and create characters and stories for the people featured.**
- **Find out about the oceans of the world and the creatures that live in them. How are ocean currents formed, and how do they transport flotsam (like the camera) around the world? Find out about jetsam, and about how our oceans are threatened by pollution.**
- **Create some new imaginary underwater scenes, in a medium of your choice, or write a story to accompany one from the book.**

them with the wartime ones. Collect words for different types of boat, and look for examples of military imagery and language.

Try this

- **How does Michael Foreman recreate the colours and textures of the sea? Use watercolours and experiment. Once you've painted a seascape, find out about historical naval battles. Research one, then draw some historically-accurate boats to populate your scene.**
- **There's an extract from Churchill's post-Dunkirk speech at the back of this book. Listen to a recording. In The Little Ships, the girl says "I was glad Mr Churchill didn't keep his words in his hands and in his eyes, in the way of Deal fishermen." What does she mean? What makes a good speech? Have a go at writing and performing one about something that matters to you.**

GLADIATORS, READY!

Young, fearless and creative students have come forward ready to do battle with amazing authors and ferocious fiction, says **Lloyd Burgess**...

The first young combatants to arrive stand with weapons in hand, practising their skills. As their opponents from other schools gradually enter the arena, it's hard to know at this early stage which will emerge victorious, and which will fall prey to the lions. (I'm politely informed there are no lions.)

It turns out that these children are in fact 'reading gladiators', and their 'weapons' merely books. They're taking part in a challenge day as part of Just Imagine Story Centre's latest programme. Over the course of the year clusters of schools have been going through a set book list with some of the brightest readers in Year 4, with the goal of broadening children's literary horizons and opening their eyes to new authors and genres.

"The Developing Excellence in Reading project a few years ago showed that Year 6 children were making very limited book choices," says Just Imagine's Library Services Adviser Caroline Bradley, who is overseeing today's event. "So, we decided to go in at Year 4 when children are starting to form their reading identities, the idea being they'll mature into better readers making better reading choices by Year 6."

The first gladiatorial event of the day shows off children's creative skills and knowledge of the texts, having them recreate the title of one of the books using craft materials to show off its themes and tone. The host school, Ivy Chimneys, have opted for wordless tale, *Journey*, Epping Upland choose *The Silver Donkey* and Coopers Dale and Theydon are showcasing the superhero theme from *Flora & Ulysses*. It's Lambourne who win the round, however, with their blue colour palette expertly capturing the eerie plants, the bluchers, from Polly Ho-Yen's *The Boy in the Tower*. At the end of the round each team presents their work, eloquently explaining their creative choices.

Acting out

The afternoon's session starts with a quiz round, then moves on to drama, which handily fits in to one of the aims of Reading Gladiators. "It comes back to *To Kill a Mockingbird*," says Caroline. "It's about walking in another man's shoes. We want to give them experiences like *The Boy in the Tower*, and have them relate that with things they see on the news, different perspectives and children in other cultures and situations. It's vital that children are growing up to have more empathy."

With the drama challenge, the children are stepping not just into the characters' shoes but their minds and bodies as well, letting them show they understand these characters, their motivations and the themes at the heart of each book. One boy brings the monkey from *The Imagination Box* to life with Andy Serkis-like skill; Beowulf and Grendel air their differences on something akin to an episode of Jerry Springer; but it's a girl from Epping Upland who steals the show, revelling in the role of April from *Small Change for Stuart*, and helping them win the round. But, having finished second in the drama and the quiz, it's the morning's art champions, Lambourne, who win overall.

"Each month Just Imagine send schools a newsletter with related activities and a competition, and we've entered all of these – we've really enjoyed it," says their teacher, Amy Barnes. "I think the children are now more willing to choose a challenging book to read, and it's broadened the range of titles they're likely to pick too. Plus, all the rest of the class want to try the Reading Gladiators books."

Passing on

Teachers have also gained, being introduced to new authors – and discovering other, unexpected positives. "Some schools are using the discussion guide that we send out with the books as a guide for teacher training," says Caroline. "Senior teachers have said to us they've told staff that 'This is exactly the sort of thing you should be doing in guided reading sessions'. So hopefully teachers can transfer the types of activities in our guide to other books they're using."

Now embarking on its second year, Just Imagine has three times as many schools signed up to the programme. "Developing Excellence in Reading found that children were reading Dickens or Austen, but not really understanding them, or they were clutching a copy of *Twilight* thinking that's a mature read," says Caroline. "Hopefully Reading Gladiators will help them extend their reading in much better ways."

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RACHEL CLARKE is director at Primary English Education (primaryenglished.co.uk)

Phun with Fonix

Don't restrict your phonics teaching to the mornings. Spot graphemes and phonemes in quality texts throughout the day and help children understand why it's worth all the effort, says **Rachel Clarke**...

Every day in Reception and KS1 classes the length of the country, teachers and children take part in the daily phonics lesson. It's a pacey affair of revisiting previous knowledge, learning new sounds, building words, and then using what's been learnt to read or write captions. But what is it all for?

You and I know we teach phonics as the foundations of literacy; that is to equip children with the basic skills of decoding for reading, and segmenting sounds for spelling. But do all children share our view? Some, certainly. However, I've met a few who think phonics is a lesson that takes place before playtime. Full stop. One little sage even told me that she wasn't sure how useful it was, "Coz I write lots of words on a whiteboard, but I don't get to keep them coz I have to rub them off." When I suggested the skills themselves might help her with her wider reading and writing, she gave me *that* look.

She's a teenager now and questioning the validity of homework and maintaining a tidy bedroom, so I guess it could be more about this particular child. I blame her father.

The words of my youngest daughter struck a chord and have influenced my thinking about phonics for a number of years. Do we make the skills we teach in phonics explicit enough to the children? Do they realise why they're learning sounds and letters? And if not, how can we embed phonics in our wider units of work?

Illustrations by Axel Scheffler

Giving phonics meaning

Most Reception and KS1 teachers I work with use high-quality texts as the cornerstone of their English provision. These texts provide models of sentences, have narrative structures that can be replicated in the children's own writing, are rich with interesting vocabulary and, most importantly, inspire young learners with stories they might otherwise be unable to read. Many of these texts also offer opportunities to embed and apply the phonics teaching that has already taken place in the discrete daily phonics lesson. In short, they are essential tools in making explicit the link between phonics lessons and the broader aims of literacy.

Spotting alternative graphemes

Many of us use *The Snail and The Whale* by Julia Donaldson. It offers a good story to retell and opportunities to think about travel, different perspectives and conservation. But it also allows us to embed learning about alternative graphemes for the long /a/ sound.

Provide the children with grids like this:

ai	a_e	ay	others

Ask them to work in pairs and spot as many words in the text as they can that use the different graphemes for long /a/. Make a class copy and pin it to the wall for reference.

The best part of this activity comes when you start investigating where different graphemes come within a word, e.g. 'ay' tends to come at the end of words, while 'ai' is more likely to come in the middle. Spotting graphemes in authentic texts and then noting the position of the graphemes within words really underlines how sounds and letters are constantly at work, and not just in the phonics lesson.

Dice games and buried treasure

Shark in the Park! by Nick Sharratt is another gorgeous text frequently used in Reception and KS1. It's got lovely rhymes, which the children can try to predict, and repeated refrains for the whole class to join in with. It's also a book that offers opportunities to practise working with the /ar/ grapheme.

As a class, start by collecting /ar/ words from the text. Then add to this list with some of the pupils' suggestions. If you want to embed the phonics further, you could play the classroom favourite, 'Full Circle'. Start with plastic letters or grapheme cards showing /sh/ /ar/ /k/ and ask the children to change one grapheme at a time to make new words.

A twist on this is to label up three dice: one with the initial sound on each face (/sh/ /b/ /l/ /d/ /p/ /m/); one with /ar/ on each face; and a third die with final sounds. Children can then roll the dice to build /ar/ words.

As a final thought for embedding phonics, why not play 'Buried Treasure' with the words children have found and generated during the previous activities? This way you can explore vocabulary by sorting the real words (treasure) from the nonsense words.

Who'd have thought a boy with a telescope could give us so much phonics fun?

Different pronunciations

Dougal's Deep Sea Diary is a popular choice for KS1 teachers looking to inspire learning about 'under the sea'. It's also a 'go to text' for looking at first-person recounts, and an essential story for promoting positive male role-models. The text is particularly good for embedding one of the most challenging aspects of phonics: that one grapheme can represent more than one sound. In this case /ea/ making both a long sound in sea, and a short sound in treasure. Collect words from the text that use the /ea/ grapheme then challenge the children to sort them into hoops according to their pronunciation.

Teaching phonics through the short, daily lesson really is the best way to introduce children to the complexity of sounds and letters in the English language. However, if we're to help them see the sense in their phonic learning, finding ways to embed it in our everyday practice is essential.

High quality texts enable us to showcase how real writers use phonics to write engaging and enjoyable stories, and they create opportunities to revisit previous learning and to see it in purposeful contexts. What's more, by using the same games and activities, we're further cementing the link between what takes place in the phonics lesson and what takes place at other times of the day. All of which should mean that fewer children think of phonics as something they do before going out to play, and instead come to view it as a set of skills they apply when reading and writing.

START WITH THESE STORIES

Five quality texts to help you embed phonics...

***Some Dogs Do* by Jez Alborough has predictable rhymes that use the same graphemes, e.g. Ben, then; reply, fly; yowled, howled.**

***Don't put your finger in the Jelly, Nelly!* by Nick Sharratt offers huge scope for generating words with rhyming strings, e.g. Nelly, jelly, welly, belly, telly…**

***Hairy Maclary from Donaldson's Dairy* by Lynley Dodd offers the opportunity to look at how the same (and different) graphemes can be used to create rhyme. Maclary, dairy; Potts, spots; Morse, horse.**

***Charlie Cook's Favourite Book* by Julia Donaldson is wonderful for exploring the /oo/ sound. In fact, you can't really go wrong with a Julia Donaldson text for embedding phonics.**

Also consider books by Jeanne Willis. She has a wicked sense of humour and creates some of the most entertaining and clever rhyming texts around – think of *Grill Pan Eddy*, *Misery Moo*, and her toilet humour offering, *Who's in the Loo?*.

"High quality texts enable us to showcase how real writers use phonics to write engaging and enjoyable stories, and they create opportunities to revisit previous learning..."

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Put the joy back into WRITING

The GaPS test may be useless, but don't let it strip the creativity from your lessons. Teaching grammar is essential to the art of good story telling...

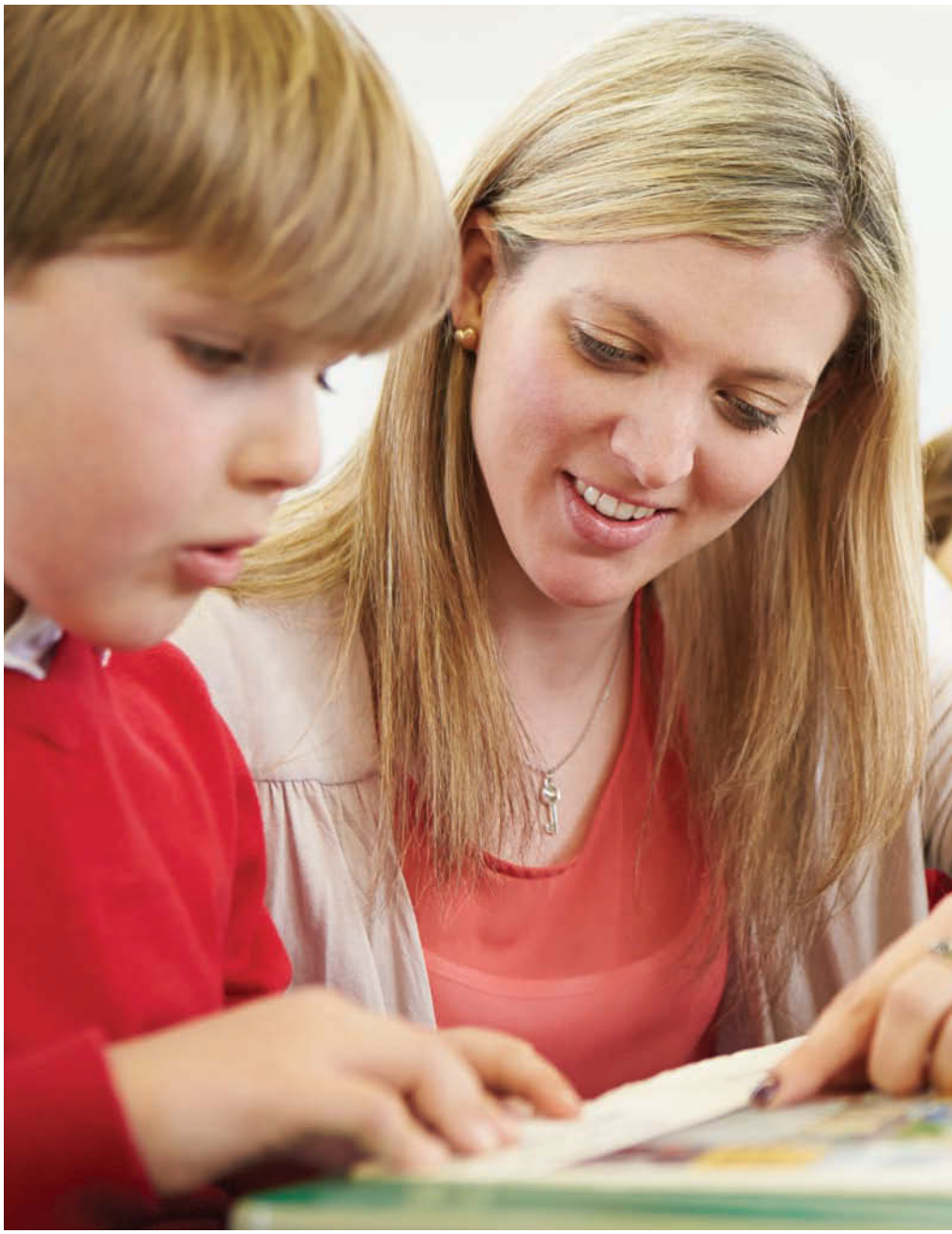
One thing we have heard more than almost anything else over the last academic year is that the current English curriculum, and the new assessment processes for Years 2 and 6, have taken the joy and creativity out of writing. There can surely be no doubt that the 2016 SATs were horrible; there was the terrible feeling of approaching high-stakes testing and assessment with little sense of what the process was going to be like, and precious little help from a central body that seemed often to be barely one step ahead of the rest of us. But neither this, nor the mess that is the Interim Teacher Assessment Frameworks – and certainly not the Programmes of Study – require a rejection of creativity.

Now, with that dreadful first year of the new assessments out of the way, we can catch our breath and take stock. This is our chance to look at what the curriculum really says, think about ways of achieving the ITAF requirements, and how we can make the most of the situation and enable children to love *and* master writing.

The introduction to the Writing PoS states clearly that the learning of grammar is not meant to stifle creativity – a point we have taken to heart with our approach. The school in which we spend the most time (due in large part to it being situated in an area of high deprivation) has this year produced the most grammatically-accurate, best-spelled and most creative writing in Y6 we have seen – at this setting – in over 10 years. Of course, the shifting goalposts of assessment do not reflect this (in percentage terms the results have dropped, and this is, frankly, reprehensible), but there is no doubt that the rigorous teaching of grammatical accuracy has combined rather well with more imaginative, inventive work. So perhaps we need to have another look at what we mean by 'creativity'.

Learning the steps

In very many of the creative arts, a huge focus is placed on skill-learning and practice. Think of music, fine art, and dance. Of course, we can have a go at each of these without any technical skill, and be creative… but few of us would produce really brilliant outcomes. A great art teacher will not just inspire children; she'll teach them tonal techniques, how to use perspective, and how to mix and master colour. Look at the rigours of dance classes, and the hours of practice required to make the movements part of the 'natural' repertoire. And even those advanced musicians who have never learned to read music will have practised skills over and over again.

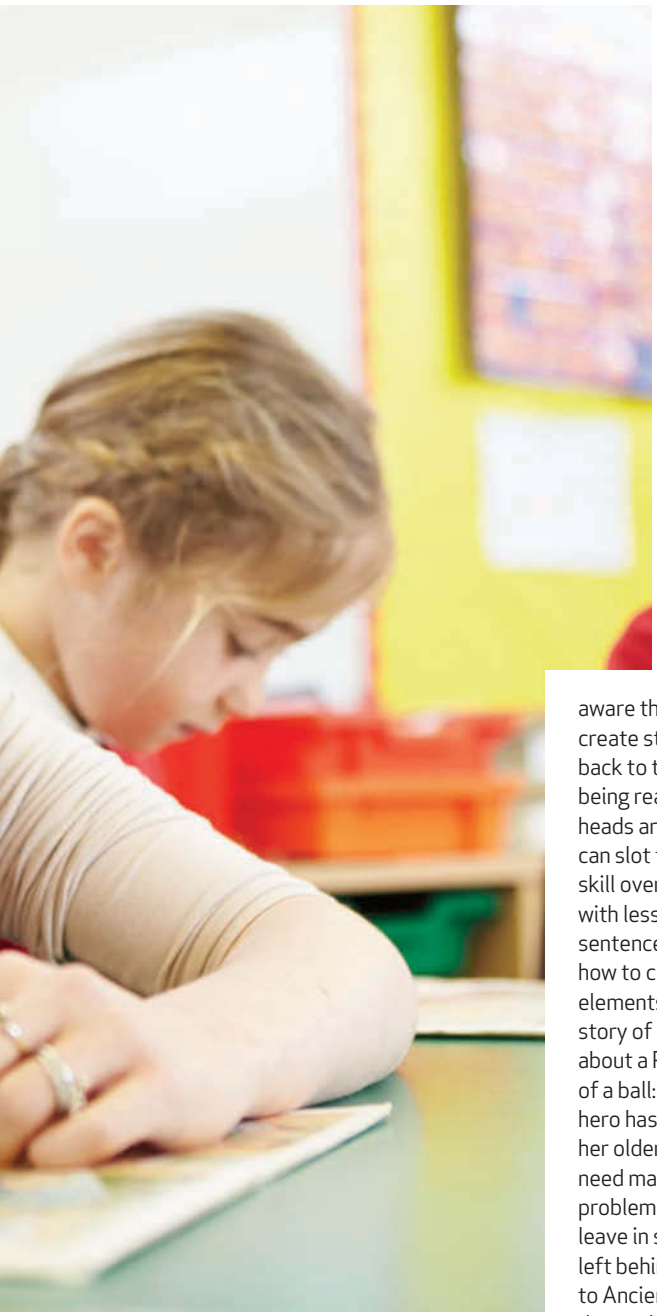


This last example is useful when we look at advanced writers in a primary school: the ones so frequently described as 'natural' writers. They just seem to know how to compose; it flows from them… and they certainly don't need to be shown how to construct different types of sentences. However, they weren't born speaking in perfect prose, nor with a headful of stories; these things have been acquired through experience – lucky experiences – and are then reproduced, combined, mashed-together and reinvented. Just like the brilliant musician who can't read music.

Perhaps, if we could have all parents reading stories to their babies and toddlers, and continuing with bedtime stories well into KS2, and if those children went on to love stories enough to turn off a game or a film and read for themselves, then there would be a greatly reduced need for the teaching of grammar, because they would have a very strong sense of what 'sounds right'. But these aren't the children with whom we do most of our work. And even those lucky ones who do have this feel for language and writing can be helped with pointers when there is shared language about language. Just as you might say, "Try using a metaphor there instead," you might also say, "Try placing that subordinate after the main clause instead, to increase the pace," or "Try varying your modals to get that sense of uncertainty."

Don't teach to the test

We want to be clear here: we think the grammar and punctuation tests are largely useless, and it is unfortunate they exist. Grammar for control over spoken and written language, however, can be extremely effective. How can you reach the heights of creativity if you lack the skills with which to express yourself?



By the way, it is possible to teach grammar for writing and still prepare children for the silly tests. You might, for example, use a short, multi-sensory grammar starter (focused on, say, the effect of conjunctions) followed by a brief shared-writing session in which you model this learning in context. Children would then apply these conjunctions to achieve the desired effect in their own writing – with crucial mini-plenaries throughout in which they underline examples in their own or each other's work. There's no need for pointless grammar exercises; you're teaching children how to write to better effect.

Inspiring stories

Of course, there is far more to creative writing than using grammar for effect. Many of us have noted the importance of narrative in this curriculum – and we're all aware that some pupils seem to be able to create stories, while others can't. This goes back to the former point about reading and being read to, and the lucky children whose heads are full of stories and characters they can slot together and adapt with increasing skill over time. But just as we can teach those with less linguistic capital to master their sentences for effect, we can also show them how to create new stories by combining elements from different sources. Take the story of *Cinderella*, for example, and make it about a Premier League academy trial instead of a ball: the invitation arrives, but our little hero hasn't got any boots and has to do his / her older sibling's chores. We don't necessarily need magic, but we do need to solve the problems so he / she can play brilliantly, then leave in such haste that something personal is left behind. Or why not transfer the narrative to Ancient Rome and have the Emperor demand that all British slaves be brought to the Coliseum for a gladiatorial contest – the winner of which will be freed. How will our hero get the weapons and armour required? And after a brilliant contest, what will he or she leave behind?

It's easy to do this sort of thing with KS1 classes, as the books used are generally short enough to provide good models for children's own stories – think everything from Aesop's Fables to *The Rainbow Fish* and *Baby Elephant*. In KS2, we almost always use short stories rather than novels (though some novels have chapters with an adaptable structure). Continue to use traditional tales, plus myths, fables and legends, but look too at great short story collections by Bill Naughton and George Layton, for example.

We know that there will be cries of, "This isn't creativity!" …but it is teaching children how creativity happens: the collision and combining of ideas, the application of learning from one area to another. It is what story writers do, largely unconsciously. Many rom-coms and sports films follow a Cinderella structure; the original *Terminator* film is very similar in structure to *Jaws*… which bears some striking similarities to *Beowulf*! *The Lion King* is largely based upon *Hamlet*. JK Rowling combined the boarding school genre with Tolkien and Narnia – that's not cheating: it's innovation. Look at the debt *Star Wars* has to bible stories. Many of Shakespeare's plays are re-writes and adaptations; was he uncreative?

The wonderful writers of stories in our classrooms are already doing this, probably without knowing it; let's help them take more control of the process, while giving the other, less fortunate writers the tools with which to do this for themselves.

All the elements

There is nothing in the National Curriculum that tells us to teach narrative like this, but there is nothing in there that tells us not to, either. Every aspect of the writing PoS can be taught in this way from Y1 right through to Y6 – the result being that children will write grammatically accurate, creative stories. And the more stories they get under their belts, the more creative they will be; they will have more ideas with which to experiment, and the tools (the grammar) they need to express these. Truly creative writing requires mastery of inspiration and technique. The curriculum contains all of this, but it's up to us to piece it together.

"How can you reach the heights of creativity if you lack the skills with which to express yourself?"

MIX AND MATCH

FROM SHAKESPEARE TO SPIELBERG, CREATIVE STORY TELLERS ALL DRAW INSPIRATION FROM THEIR FOREBEARS. SO WHY NOT ENCOURAGE CHILDREN TO:

- Take *Jack and the Beanstalk* and substitute the beans for something else that leads to another world, where something valuable is protected by something terrifying. It could be a sci-fi or fantasy device. Or, if you're studying Ancient Egypt, swap Jack for a youthful Howard Carter and think what he might swap – against instructions from his professor – for a map of The Valley of the Kings. What treasures will he discover, who will be guarding them, and how will the evil be defeated?
- Interweave elements from two stories: read *Treasure Island* to the class, and show them how to put that world into the structure of *Jack and the Beanstalk*: Jack is Jim Hawkins; the cow is something valuable, like a compass; the beanstalk becomes a treasure map; and the gold is guarded by Long John Silver.
- Re-set George Layton's *Balaclava Story*: what craved possession would replace the balaclava if it was set in Hogwarts, or in the Jedi Academy?

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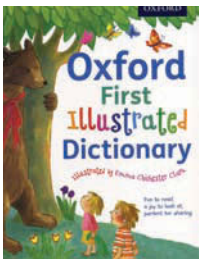

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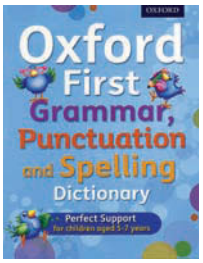

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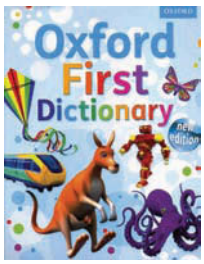

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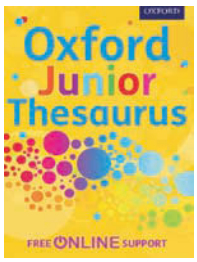

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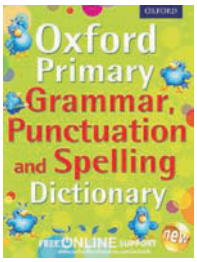

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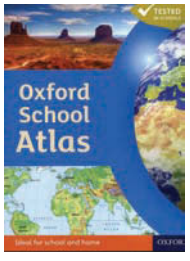

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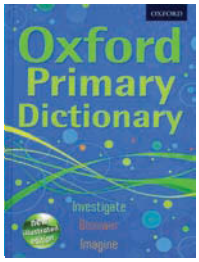

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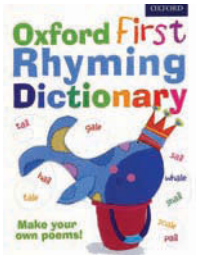

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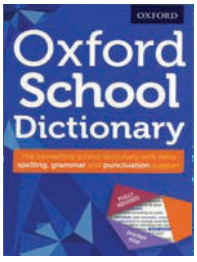

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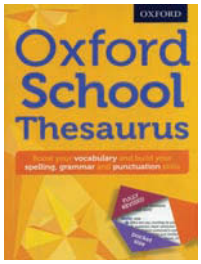

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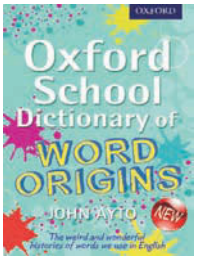

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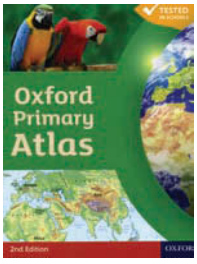

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SHIRLEY CLARKE is an international freelance consultant and former teacher and lecturer

5 steps to better PEER MARKING

Getting children to improve each other's work is the Holy Grail of assessment. But you've got to build the right foundations, says **Shirley Clarke**...

Why peer mark? Because the greatest resource in the classroom is not necessarily the teacher. We need to be training children to learn from one another because, without the barriers that can exist between child and teacher, they can speak more freely, interrupt each other when things are not clear, and bounce around their ideas.

It all starts with the proviso that the most important thing about any writing is the author's intent and the impact on the reader. After this, it's about providing success criteria, toolkits or examples of excellence to enable the above.

The following steps are the culmination of some 20 years of working with teachers to improve children's learning through formative assessment. They seem to be, at this moment, the most effective five stages for peer marking.

Step 1

ASSIGN PARTNERS AT RANDOM

Organise your class so that children have a new talk partner each week, selected at random. Many schools do this as a matter of course and it means that:

a) Children have a chance to learn and socialise with every person in the class at some point.

b) Changing partners regularly stops children being trapped in one role for weeks at a time (e.g. the higher achiever; the lower achiever; the helper; the confident one; the shy one, etc.).

c) They always have a learning partner with whom they can share strategies, talk about their writing, and discuss any questions put to the class.

Be flexible. Sometimes threes are better or you might want to pair up children differently for a particular purpose. On the whole, however, regularly giving children a new partner at random is the best scenario for learning and developing skills.

Step 2

READ WORK ALOUD

Emphasise that children should read aloud what they've written at every stage, and let them do their first edit on their own.

It is when we read our writing aloud that we hear where the commas and full stops naturally fit and whether it sounds 'right'. Writing that's full of wonderfully long descriptions, for instance, might look impressive on the page, but when spoken out loud it can sound over the top – ridiculous, even.

Encourage children to do this first on their own – quiet muttering rather than loud orating. If they go straight from a first draft to partner discussion and marking, it doesn't give children the chance to do some personal editing first. It's also frustrating to listen to someone read aloud when she's continually stopping to correct or change her work; it's equally annoying for authors to be told about errors they can spot perfectly well for themselves.

Step 3

PRACTISE TOGETHER

Model what peer marking should look like. Use the visualiser to pick one child's writing at random, usually half way through the process, and go through the following stages:

"Let's read it through so far." At which point you read the text aloud to the class.

"What do we really love about it and why? Talk to your learning partner…" This is a chance to share opinions and underline the best bits on the screen. Notice that I don't go straight to the success criteria, unless those affect the quality of the work – such as in the writing of a letter. Saying something like, "Yes, she's used the past tense" doesn't help children judge the quality beyond the basic structure of the piece. Instead, focus on questions such as, "What words, phrases or sentences have the best effect? Why?"

We want to concentrate on how the writing makes us feel, and how this has been achieved, rather than on technical language. If, for instance, we were to focus on the word 'it' in the opening to a piece of writing that's intended to be scary, we might say this fires our imagination as we begin to wonder what 'it' might be. Or we could highlight where the author has shown, as opposed to told, the reader how the character is feeling: "I could feel my heart pounding as I stood stock still" rather than "I was terrified".

"Is there anything that could be even better?" This could be the choice or the position of a word, or any punctuation that would make a difference to the sound or sense of the writing, etc. Ignore errors for now, unless this is a very young class at the beginning of writing.

Ask children to talk to their partners, share ideas and involve the author of the piece in deciding whether to accept the improvements. Keep reading the writing aloud to see if the suggested improvements really do improve the piece. A more impressive adjective might seem like a good idea in theory, but in reality have a negative effect on the flow of the piece. Take, for instance, 'It was big, black and towering'. Replacing 'big' with a longer word might spoil the sentence by removing the alliteration and ruining the rhythm.

Step 4

MAKE JOINT IMPROVEMENTS

Ask partners to peer discuss their writing and work together to improve it. This is better than asking children to simply swap books, which leaves them unsupported. The author should be the only one making marks on her work, and she should have the final say on any changes.

The role of the partner is to advise – we're not casting her as the teacher with licence to write comments on another child's work. Role play how children might politely reject their partner's suggestions. Skip this step and pupils often feel duty bound to accept their partner's ideas, even if their own thoughts were better. "Thank you. That's made me think of an even better idea." is a good way of doing it.

Have children use two coloured pens: one to show what they deem excellent and another to highlight any improvements made. Both pupils in a pair should write their names on their writing to make it clear it was peer discussed. This, with the colours, makes the processes involved transparent to all parties.

It's a good idea to leave one side of writing books blank. This provides a valuable space for trying out spellings, comments by the teacher and, most importantly, any improvements to be made by the author – lined up alongside the original. Without this space, children can feel limited when it comes to making changes.

Step 5

CHECK FOR EFFECT

Keep coming back to the intent of the author and the impact on the reader. I used to ask my audiences to improve the following sentence by changing only the nouns and verbs: 'The woman ate the food'. I would get fairly predictable responses, such as 'The queen nibbled the cake'. When I started asking them to think first of the impact they wanted to have on the reader ("Do you want them to feel horrified, disgusted, pitying, amused, shocked, excited, etc?") their sentences were remarkably improved. Suddenly, there were hags chewing bones and supermodels inhaling lettuce leaves. And they could work with their partner to strengthen their chosen impact still further, rather than being happy with the first attempt.

You can see children from Year 2 upwards involved in cooperative peer marking on my website (shirleyclarke-education.org). One example sees pupils in Y2 involved in an entertaining discussion in which they improve each other's instructions for following the fire drill. "Nervously line up" is my favourite. Two children challenge whether there could be a better adverb, but the six-year-old child who chose it is adamant it's the most effective.

"Emphasise that children should read aloud what they've written at every stage, and let them do their first edit on their own."

David O'Doherty

"The thing about reading is, once you're in, you're in"

Children need to make their own connections with books, says comedian and author **David O'Doherty**

I'd love to be able to say that I remember the moment I learnt to read – when the jumble of letters on the page suddenly sprang to life, but I'd be lying. I can definitely recall the first time a book made me – and I can't think of a better word here – *hoot* with laughter, though. It was *Mr Chatterbox*, from Roger Hargreaves' Mister Men series. There's a joke, across several pages, where our hero, having chatted to everyone else in town, starts chatting to a worm. And it goes on and on for days and nights, which is illustrated with the same picture of them both, where the sky goes from light to dark, and back to light again. I remember thinking, "YOU CAN'T DO THAT IN A BOOK!" My ultimate dream for the *Danger is Everywhere* series is for just one kid, somewhere in the world, to have that same sense of outrage while holding one of our books.

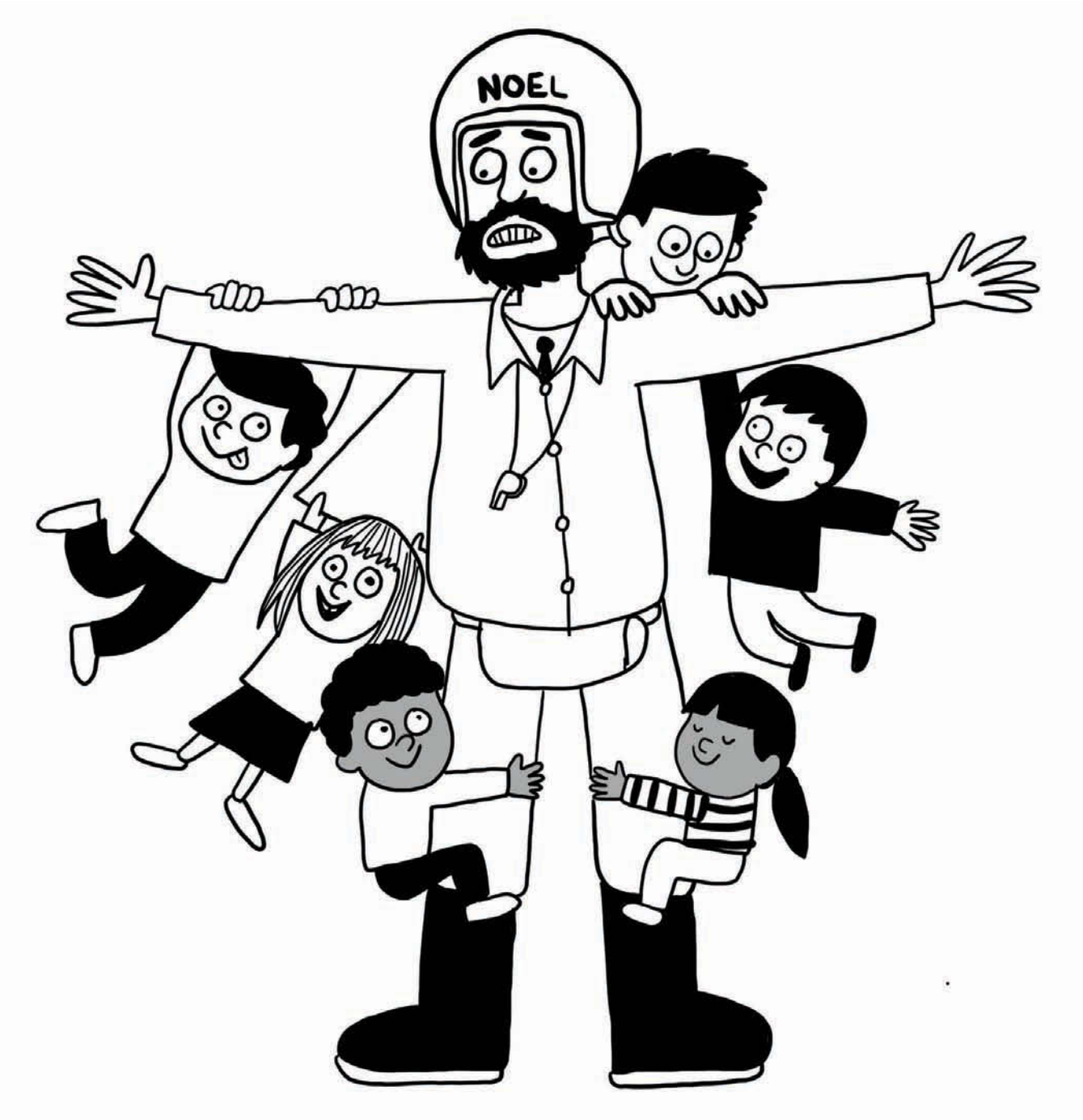
The truth is, I really did think danger was everywhere when I was young. I was frightened of so, so many things – from walking in the dark (zombies) to swimming in the sea (Irish sharks), to the old reliables like ghosts in the sock drawer and mice in my breakfast cereal. I thought it would be interesting to write a book with a grown-up central character who is even more scared than I was, or any child could possibly be. Kids are used to adult figures who are more sensible and informed than they are. So having one who not only takes himself very seriously, but is also an idiot, really interested me. It's the kind of flipped expectation that Dahl does very well. I suppose for him, it was a reaction to Victorian children's books in which Mummy and Daddy always know best. For me, it's from the rules-obsessed priests of my childhood and, more recently, the proliferation of TED Talk-style know-alls.

"One of the main jobs for schools is to destroy any aura of exclusivity around reading. It's to remember that a shelf of books may initially intimidate a kid."

The trick with *Danger is Everywhere* is to get the audience onside from the start. The reader has to be made aware that the *expert*, Docter Noel Zone, can't be trusted. From a status point of view, you are miles above him. And it's this piece of critical thinking that makes it funny, rather than genuinely terrifying, which I suppose it could be for a reader who doesn't realise that you can't actually get attacked by a sock drawer ghost, or a bus stop cobra.

I think it's possible to be too precious about reading. One of my least favourite genres of writing is when people in Sunday supplements bang on about their idyllic literary upbringings – how they fell in love with books; how they used to smell and lick them; how they have always loved reading much more than *you*. It makes reading seem like an exclusive club.

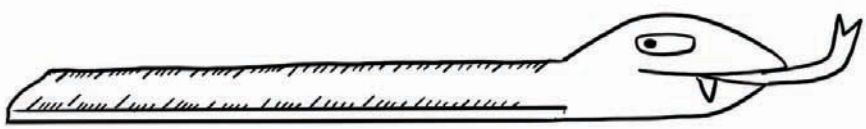
One of the main jobs for schools is to destroy any aura of exclusivity around reading. It's to remember that a shelf of books may initially intimidate a kid. It's all about making that first connection - to help



each kid find that first story that grabs them. For me, it doesn't matter what that story is. I got hooked by a pulp detective series called *The Three Investigators*, in which a group of all-American boys solve mysteries from Jupiter Jones' uncle's scrapyard. It was a bit like the Famous Five, but American, so therefore much cooler. My teachers looked down their noses at it, because I should have been reading *Oliver Twist* or *Lord of the Rings*. All I remember is that I loved the stories so much, I'd run back to the bookshelf in the library as soon as I finished one, to get another. And the thing about reading is, once you're in, you're in.

You can't be arrogant when you're trying to write for children and think you instinctively know how to communicate with them. I have two nieces, and spending time with them has definitely sharpened my sense of what kids are interested in, and what makes them laugh. If they find something boring, they let me know. In fact, they get up and walk out of the room.

By night I work as a stand-up comedian. With all of the navel-gazing and narcissism that comes with that job, you could easily disappear up the leg of your own trousers. Writing for children is my release. I really love it.



***Danger Really is Everywhere: School of Danger*, the third book in the Danger is Everywhere series by David O'Doherty, illustrated by Chris Judge, is published by Puffin and out now.**

SARAH THRELKELD-BROWN is a primary teacher and contributor at Andrell Education

ONCE MORE, WITH FEELING

Fluency isn't just about being able to decode quickly – children need to be able to read with expression and without effort. And it's down to us to model how, says **Sarah Threlkeld Brown**...

A question I am often asked is 'What helps children learn to read?' In some ways, the answer is easy: children learn to read by reading. The problem can be that struggling readers often don't get to spend enough time with texts.

The solution is to make the explicit teaching and practice of fluency part of the reading routine in every classroom. As children's confidence builds, the difference can be seen in both their reading aloud and their silent reading – and there is a growing body of research that confirms teaching fluency, along with regular practice, leads to improved comprehension among struggling readers, and the retention of reading skills.

Children go on a journey that starts with learning to read, moves on to reading to learn, and progresses to reading for pleasure. However, some children get stuck at the pivotal moment, just before they realise the pleasures and treasures that reading can bring. Instead, they see reading as a 'chore' – as hard work.

These are often the children who can 'decode' the words on the page, but are not yet fluent enough in their reading to get past the literal points of understanding and move on to the deepening comprehension that is paramount across KS2 (as stated in the National Curriculum). They have a paucity of reading experiences, which in turn equals a lack of fluency.

Fluency is often defined as the ability to read accurately and quickly, but there's more to it than that. It's about being able to read with expression and without effort – dividing words into appropriate phrases when reading aloud, without having to pause and think.

As mature readers, our understanding allows us to put emphasis on the correct groups of words – even on the correct syllables – as we go. But it's a skill that takes practice.

Schools have invested vast amounts of time and money into decoding and the importance of developing children's 'automaticity'. What we must now focus on is developing the fluency required to bring the words on the page to life.

It bears repeating

The following model of teaching fluency originates from the 'Gradual Release of Responsibility' sequence of teaching (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983):

- **I do it – reading aloud to children**
- **We do it together – choral reading**
- **You do it together – choral reading without the text**
- **You do it alone – reading alone after practice**

1. I do it

My mantra here is 'Model, model, model'. With the teacher acting as the expert, children can watch and see how a text is read smoothly and with expression. They hear what fluent reading looks like and feels like.

As well as modelling reading, teachers need be explicit about what they did, and why they did it. For example, "Did you notice the way I raised my voice here? I did this because…". Or "I emphasised these words. Why do you think I did that?".

By being explicit in your explanations, children see how the way in which they read the text affects its meaning.

2. We do it together

Choral reading, where the teacher and the children read the text together, gives pupils the chance to see the text for a second time – hearing and saying it again within a supportive, teacher-led environment.

3. You do it together

Now the children read the text together. This could be as a whole class or in groups or pairs; it's a time for repetition and rehearsal that supports automaticity, accuracy and prosody. As children become increasingly familiar with the text, their confidence builds.

4. You do it alone

Eventually, the children reach the point where they can perform to others and show how well they have done.

There are lots of ways in which this sequence can be delivered. The following ideas could be used in the classroom and also shared with parents so fluency can be built on at home.

Choral reading

This is where groups of children read passages out loud. They do this multiple times in the same group – be it as a whole class, in small groups, or as trios / pairs. When using groups, give each one a different part of the same text to read. This way, once they have practised their own section, the class can hear the text read in its entirely, and with fluency.

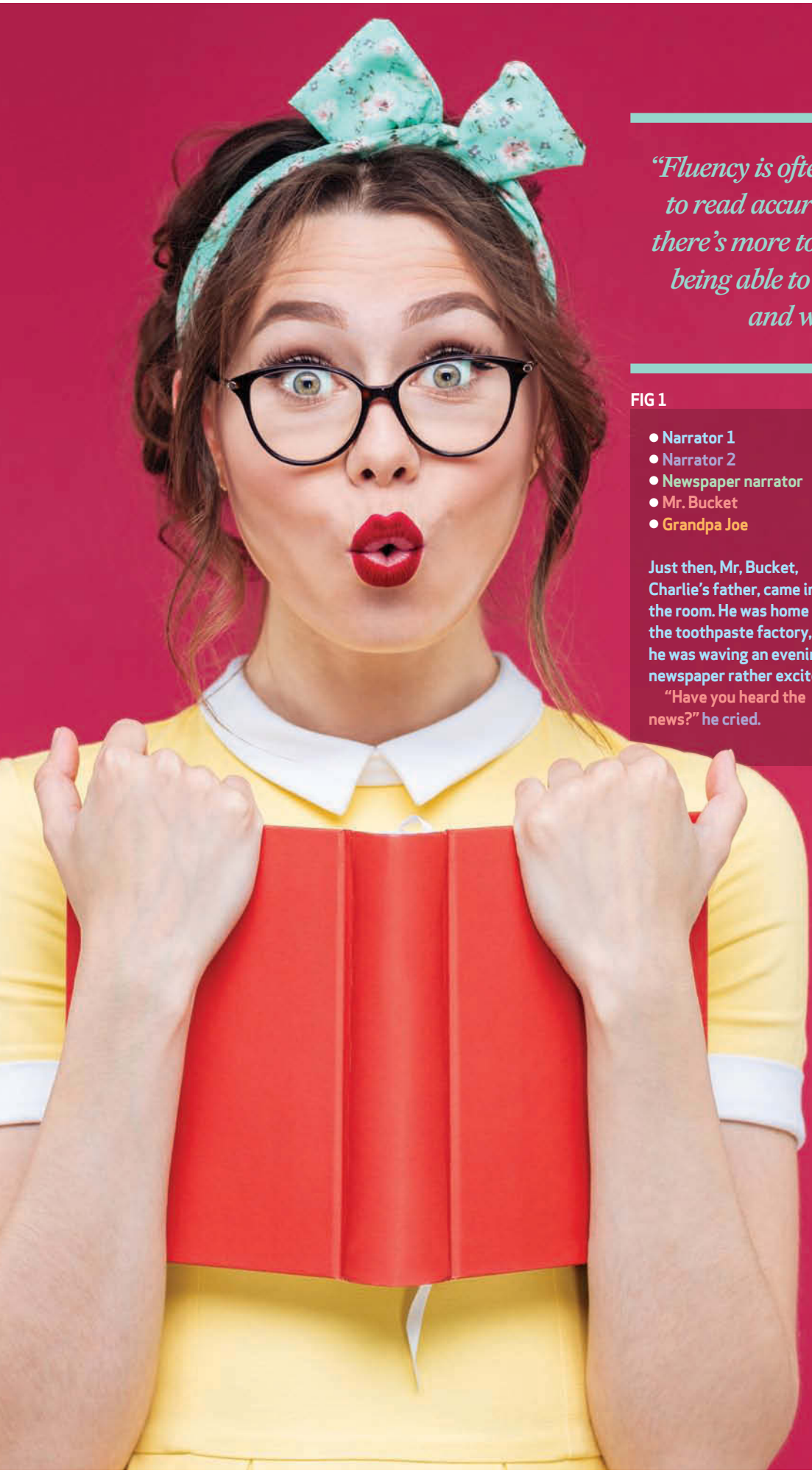
Bounce-back reading

This is where a lead reader (be it the teacher or a child) reads a line of text, after which the rest of the class or group 'bounce-back' by re-reading the same line, using the intonation and expression modelled by the lead reader.

Perform!

Using this technique (also known as reader's theatre), children are given a familiar text which they have to 'perform'. They must assign 'roles' and divide the text into a script, with each person in the group reading certain parts. Texts with dialogue are most useful for this.

For example, see FIG 1 (opposite page), which explains how roles could be allocated for a section from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl, where Charlie and his family hear the exciting news that the Wonka factory will be opened to a lucky few.



"Fluency is often defined as the ability to read accurately and quickly, but there's more to it than that. It's about being able to read with expression and without effort."

FIG 1

- Narrator 1
- Narrator 2
- Newspaper narrator
- Mr. Bucket
- Grandpa Joe

Just then, Mr. Bucket, Charlie's father, came into the room. He was home from the toothpaste factory, and he was waving an evening newspaper rather excitedly.

"Have you heard the news?" he cried.

He held up the paper so that they could see the huge headline.

The headline said: WONKA FACTORY TO BE OPENED AT LAST TO LUCKY FEW.

"You mean people are actually going to be allowed to go inside the factory?" cried Grandpa Joe. "Read us what it says – quickly!"

"All right," said Mr. Bucket, smoothing out the newspaper. "Listen."

As Chapter 5 continues, Grandma Josephine, Grandpa George, Grandma Georgina, Charlie and Willy Wonka all make an appearance, providing multiple roles for children to 'perform'.

Children practise their reading repeatedly until they are fluent and can convey the meaning of the text through their voice and expression.

You might also choose to assign each role to different pairs or groups so the environment is more supportive for struggling readers.

Snowball choral reading

Just as a snowball gathers snow as it rolls, one group begins to read while other groups join in sentence by sentence (or paragraph by paragraph) until the whole class is reading together. Of course, this can be reversed, so the whole class starts reading, with one group or child finishing the passage.

PIE CORBETT is an educationalist and author

Poppy, Waldo AND THE GIANT

Enjoy sharing **Pie Corbett's** 'meeting story' with your class, take it apart to see what makes it work, then let children use the parts to create their own fiction (and non-fiction) masterpieces...

The day that Poppy thought she saw a giant was the first day of the summer holidays. It was walking down the alley at the back of the house. At first, she noticed the shadow. Then she felt the ground shuddering. Finally, she heard the heavy crunch of giant footsteps.

Poppy stood on tiptoe and peeped out of the bathroom window. She caught a glimpse of the giant's head. Amongst its hair, bushes grew and tiny trees sprouted. She could see bird's nests and several crows cawed as they circled round.

Poppy froze, ducked down and waited. The giant thudded past and made its way towards the park. When she dared to peek over the windowsill, it had disappeared.

Of course, nobody believed her. Her mum thought she was telling tales. Her dad didn't even hear what she was saying. Only Waldo believed her.

That summer holiday they often saw the giant: standing in the park, rooted to the ground like a vast oak tree; sleeping in a hedge; wandering at night when the coast was clear. People up and down the street complained about their gardens being trampled and trees uprooted. Strange dents appeared on car bonnets. Dustbins were overturned and allotments raided. Everyone had a story.

How do you get rid of unwanted giants? Poppy and Waldo went to the library. There they discovered it was probably a hedge giant or perhaps the lesser-known tree giant. They designed traps and discussed digging deep pits.

One night, when the rain lashed the streets, something woke Poppy up. Something tapped on the window. Something scratched against the glass. She crept out of bed and peered into the night. A muddy voice whispered, "Poor Tom's cold and so alone." She heard a great sigh and the shadow outside shuddered.

Poppy blinked but dared not open the window any wider. The darkness hissed and the cold air slithered in. Then she heard the thud of giant footsteps. She could just see a vast, hunched shadow move down Park Road, round the corner and forever out of sight.

Perhaps the strangest thing was that the next day Waldo had a similar tale to tell. He too had been visited. Perhaps the giant had visited other children? Everyone they passed in the street seemed to have closed faces as if they were holding a secret, but no one dared breathe a word.

LET'S GET STARTED

Ever met a giant? Ever looked at hillsides, outcrops of rocks or great trees and thought that you might be looking at one? Since the BFG hit the screens, giants have been all the rage. And in this 'meeting' story, two children discover a giant and even get to meet it! The model would suit any year group at Key Stage 2.

Getting immersed in the story

Draw story maps and use actions to retell the story as a carousel, perhaps with small groups working on different paragraphs. Discuss any vocabulary or expressions that might present a barrier to understanding, e.g. alley, shudder, peeped/ peered/ peeked, glimpse, crows cawed, ducked down, dared, windowsill, oak, the coast was clear, car bonnet, allotments, lesser-known, out of sight, breathe a word.

Ask the following sorts of questions:

- In the first three paragraphs, which words or phrases suggest that the giant is frightening and Poppy is scared?
- Describe what is unusual about this giant.
- Discuss possible reasons why no one else seems to see the giant.
- Give the five reasons why the giant is 'unwanted'.
- Why do Poppy and Waldo go to the library?
- What are the two ideas for getting rid of the giant?
- What atmosphere is suggested in paragraph seven and how does the author create this effect?
- Why does the giant leave?
- How does the author suggest what the giant feels in paragraph seven?
- Describe Poppy's feelings throughout paragraph eight.
- What is the effect of the image, 'the darkness hissed and the cold air slithered in'?
- What is the effect of using 'a' rather than 'the' in the line, 'a vast, hunched shadow…'?
- Why do you think that 'no one dared breathe a word'?

Explore the story through drama

Use drama to help the children experience and emotionally engage with the story at a deeper level, as if they were the characters:

- Hot seat Poppy about the first sighting of the giant.
- Draw the first three paragraphs as a simple cartoon and use 'thought bubbles' to suggest what Poppy is thinking.
- Role play the scene between Poppy and her parents.
- In role as local people, 'gossip' about what has been happening ('everyone had a story').
- Produce a local news bulletin about the events, including an exclusive interview with a local gardener.
- Role play Poppy and Waldo discussing the giant, what they know and what to do, after their visit to the library.
- Role play Poppy and Waldo meeting the next day.
- End by spreading 'rumours' about what has happened with the children, commenting on how Poppy and Waldo have changed and what might have happened.

Put grammar in context

Use the story to teach a relevant 'grammar for writing' focus. For instance, notice the presence of the colon and semi colons in the fifth paragraph and tease out the use of these. Then use this as a model for writing, imagining

Illustrations Tom Knight

a different mythical creature, e.g. a goblin, dwarf, or elf. For example:

They often saw the elf: swinging through the trees in the park; hiding behind parked cars; riding on the back of night-time cats.

Story structure and innovation

Box up the story with the children to find the underlying pattern they will eventually use when writing their own 'meeting' story. Complete the planner, with the class giving ideas for a new story. The children can then create a planner for their own story.

Create a writing toolkit

This can focus on learning to build suspense using similar techniques to the story, e.g.

- Use empty words: something, it, a shadow.
- Hold the scene in the dark – night time or a dark place.

Underlying pattern	New ideas
Main character (MC) sees a mythical creature/ character	**Lukas sees a goblin in the playground**
No one believes the MC, except for one friend	**Only his best friend Ethan believes him**
They often see the mythical creature/ character	**They often see the goblin in school and where they live**
The mythical creature/ character destroys things or is naughty	**The goblin plays tricks on local people and in school**
The two MCs investigate how to get rid of the creature/ character	**They discuss how to trap the goblin**
The mythical creature/ character visits the MCs and then leaves	**The goblin visits Lukas and Ethan, telling them that it has to travel north to fight the dwarves in Iceland**
End – did anyone else see the creature? Has it really gone?	**End – everything is back to normal… or is it?**

● Make it cold and use bad weather – snow, storm or fog.
● Use sounds rather than seeing the creature – tap, scratch, whisper, sigh, hiss, slither, thud.
● Show the main character's feelings by her reactions – crept, peered, blinked, dared not.
● Keep the creature/threat hidden so that the reader has to use her imagination.

Use shared writing to create a class version of the story, with the children planning and then writing their own. Either stretch this over a number of days so that their stories gradually emerge or let them write their tale in one go.

From fiction to non-fiction

There are several places in the story that could be used as a springboard into other forms of writing. When they go to the library, Poppy and Waldo discuss different ways to get rid of the giant. This could lead into writing a set of instructions, 'How to trap a giant'. The class might then debate and write a balanced discussion, 'Should giants be captured'? Finally, they discover from a reference book that their giant is either of the 'hedge' or 'tree' variety. This could lead into children creating entries for 'Giants of the British Isles'. To do this, every child creates a different type of giant – from storm giants to rainbow giants. Brainstorm with the class the different sections needed in the writing such as – description, habitat, diet, life-cycle, strengths/weaknesses, special features, etc.

Here is a model information report about a tree giant:

The Tree Giant

Tree giants have become very rare and can be difficult to recognise. Like most giants, they have long legs, the body of a large man and a huge head. Typically, they are about the size of a house and are often mistaken for an oak tree as they are similar in stature. However, a few have been spotted that are much smaller and may easily be mistaken for bushes. The main feature of the male tree giant is that its skin peels rather like the bark of a rough tree.

Female tree giants, however, are slender with silvery skin and pale green hair. For this reason, they often hide amongst willow trees. This allows them to blend in without being seen. Furthermore, these delicate female giants have amazing teeth that are like small millstones and are used for grinding their food. Fascinatingly, they scatter thousands of skin scales as they move along, rather like autumn leaves.

Like the common giant, tree giants lives in small groups. They are very shy. During the daytime, they sleep in forests or small clumps of trees. However, at night, dusk and dawn, tree giants emerge and, if you are lucky, can be seen trimming hedges and tending to their gardens. They are easy to detect because they make a low rumbling sound as they breathe. However, if they think they have been sighted, they freeze and become indistinguishable from trees.

Tree giants have a fairly limited diet. They live on the following: all green and succulent leaves; the silvery bark of the willow tree; hedgerow and garden flowers and other forms of vegetation that they cultivate in the wild. However, they can also be tempted with various fruits and are fond of nuts and garden vegetables. Be careful if you come across a tree giant in case it mistakes you for a large form of turnip!

The most amazing thing about tree giants is that if you meet one, it may grant you a magical wish. For this reason, they have been hunted across the world. This has led to them becoming almost impossible to find.

Other ideas for writing include: listing the contents of a giant's sack; discussing whether they make good pets; instructions on how to tame a wild giant; creating the perfect giant's menu or writing an alphabet of giant past times.

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DEBRA KIDD is an author, speaker and trainer

Facing a DILEMMA

Deft use of drama can guide children to the heart of a text, taking their understanding of themes such as war, sacrifice, courage and honour to a deeper level, says **Debra Kidd**...

"T was brillig and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe.
All mimsy were the borogoves
And the mome raths outgrabe."

We're standing in a circle, a Year 5 class and I, playing with the sounds and language of the opening to Jabberwocky. I recite the verse, half a line at the time, attaching a movement to each unfamiliar word and they repeat until we all have the words fixed in our minds. It doesn't really matter what the movement are. What they do is help to fix the word and its order into the memory of the child.

In groups of three, they are given one of the nonsense words in the poem and asked to create a dictionary entry for it. At this point, they've still not seen them written down. What is the spelling of the word? Is it a noun, a verb, an adverb or adjective? What is its definition?

We're beginning on safe ground – GaPS ground – but we're sowing seeds, inducting the children into an unfamiliar world of the imagination.

I use the task as a chance to assess. Are their spellings phonetically plausible? Are they drawing on known cognates? Are they applying the spelling rules we have learned? Do they understand syntax and sentence structure and how articles and determiners, prepositions and connectives can indicate the function of other words? Finally, have they created and crafted beautiful definitions to show that no other word would have done but this one?

The task may seem mundane, but it's a necessary stepping stone into appreciating the beauty and possibility of language. And it creates some stunning collective writing as we pull the definitions together and change the poem into prose:

"It was the kind of cold that creeps under your skin and makes you feel as if something bad is going to happen. The small, thin, slimy toves, were stumbling

in circles, their eyes weeping with acid. In the deepest, densest and darkest parts of the forest, borogoves stood, miserable and morose, their three eyes downcast at the ground. Somewhere in the distance, at the edge of the oyster ponds, the mome rath turtles shrieked – their shark-like mouths open wide, calling out a warning. Beware!"

"Is this a safe place?" I ask the children. They agree it is not. Beware…

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son,
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch
Beware the Jub Jub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch."

Who is speaking to whom and why? Having set our scene, we are now considering who the key characters in this tale may be. In pairs, the children create an image of the two people speaking. We thought-track them to find out what they are really thinking. Joining into larger groups of four, I pose the question "Why would a young man leave the safety of his village and venture out into this danger?" and the children are asked to come up with a brief scene to explain. They can have two still images and no more than ten words.

Condensing and constraining help them to focus on the key elements of plot and rationale. They encourage the children to be judicious in the way they select and present their material. They come back with a number of possibilities…

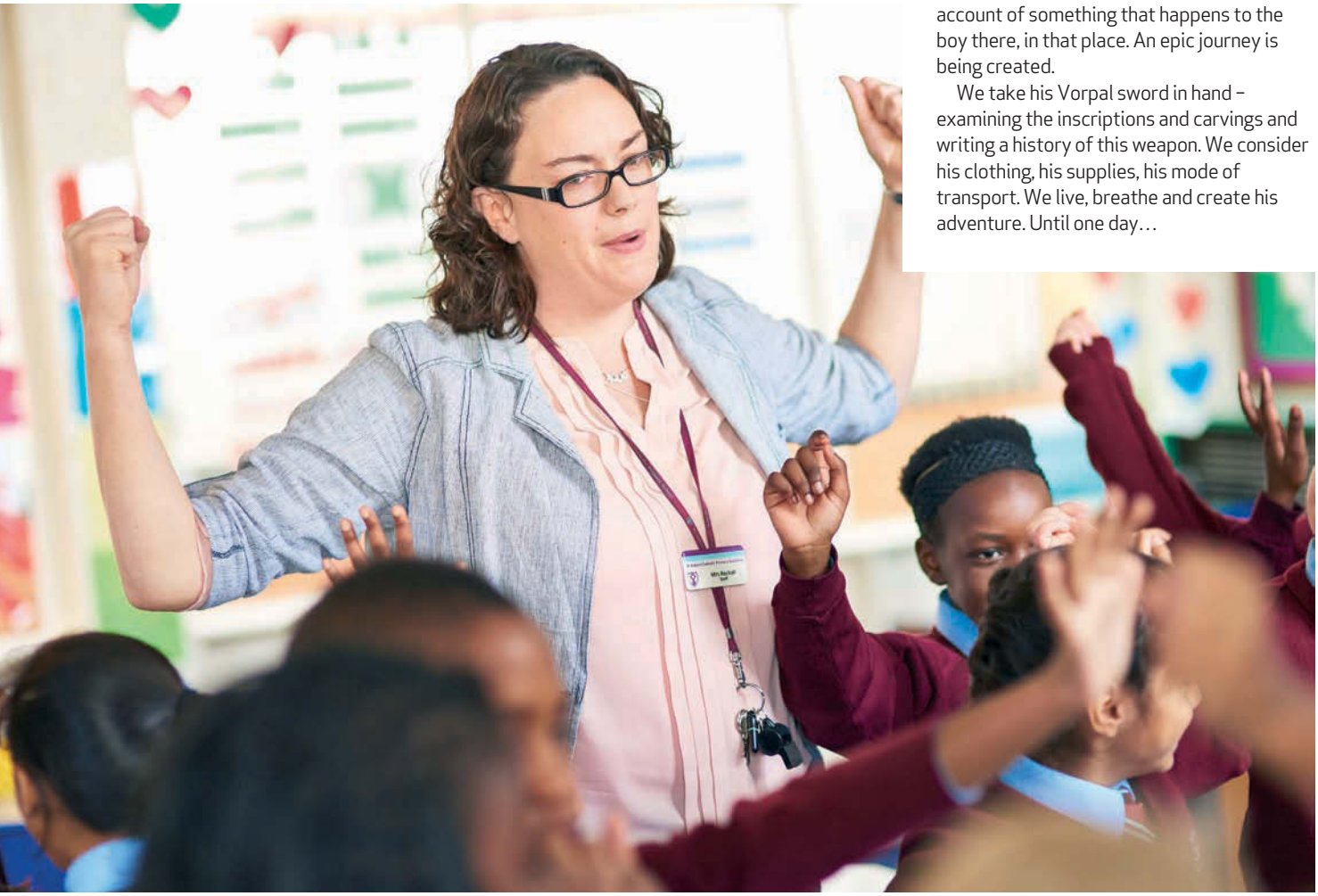
- It is a rite of passage – an initiation into manhood.
- There is sickness in the village and only the Jabberwock can provide a cure.
- The Jabberwock has been attacking the village and needs to be stopped.

We explore the possibilities and I read them the rest of the poem. Knowing that his quest is to return with the head of the Jabberwock, which do they think is the storyline they would like to pursue? Of course, any of them would fit, but they choose one – the third option.

We prepare our hero for his departure by giving him gifts to take and creating a ceremonial prayer to wish him well. We develop a deeper understanding of the creatures mentioned in the stanza – the Jabberwock, the Jub Jub bird and the Bandersnatch – by firstly creating enormous moving images of them in three groups, with each member of the group becoming a part of the creature, then by filming them, creating a David Attenborough style commentary for a wild life documentary on each creature. They explore how he uses language, particularly similes in his descriptions of a Blue Whale in Blue Planet and they create their own scripts and film clips.

We place large sheets of flipchart paper on the floor, each one labelled with a grid reference letter and number, and create a large map of the story environment, from the village to the distant lair of the Jabberwock, over in the Tum Tum Forest. In pairs, the children take a part of the map and write an account of something that happens to the boy there, in that place. An epic journey is being created.

We take his Vorpal sword in hand – examining the inscriptions and carvings and writing a history of this weapon. We consider his clothing, his supplies, his mode of transport. We live, breathe and create his adventure. Until one day…



"And has thou slain the Jabberwock?
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!
He chortled in his joy."

Our hero is returning. His quest has been successful. What celebrations await him? How will we welcome him? What songs, poems, prayers and rituals will we create in his honour? What will we do when he walks into our village hall to be welcomed home? The children work hard on his return. They give him a hero's welcome. They gather round him (one of their classmates) to ask questions. Then there is a knock at the door and I enter, in role as a messenger. I read…

From: Chief Alrun the Great of the Tumbultuous Forest Tribe
To: The Chief and Villagers of the Timiditus Lowland People

It has come to our attention that a member of your tribe has crossed the boundary of the territory that has, for centuries, marked the separation of our two tribes. As such he is in breach of the Ancient Peace Settlement of 428. In addition to this, the trespasser has done grievous harm to a creature that our tribe has long worshipped and who is sacred to our way of life. Indeed we have reason to believe that the villain has slain our beloved Jabberwock.

Such an insult will not go unpunished. We hereby demand he be handed over to us to face Tumbultuous justice within 24 hours – for a crime this heinous, nothing short of the death penalty will do. The villain will be sacrificed to the Jub Jub bird forthwith.

Refusal to comply with this request will be viewed as an act of war and our vengeance on your people will be great.

Yours

Alrun The Great and Terrible.

There are moments in drama where actions pivot; where perceptions shift; where tensions drive deep thinking. This is one such moment. The children are knee-deep in dilemma. They must act, but what should they do? Hand him over? Go into a war they are unlikely to win (the clue is in the etymology of the names of the tribes). Seek a diplomatic solution?

All texts are portals into the imagination. But they also offer us an opportunity to explore, at safe distance, the common experiences of human beings. Of war, sacrifice, courage and honour. Of fear, confusion and dread. Of understanding the differences between people and their values and beliefs. This scheme starts with spelling. It ends with the world.

HOW TO DELVE DEEPER WITH DRAMA

1. **Map making is a great way to get children thinking about the setting of a story. You can lay out large sheets of paper and get them to draw a map, or they can label a classroom space with post it notes to imagine their way into a new environment.**
2. **Using still images to distill meaning helps children to focus on details that help their writing. You can then tap the characters in an image to reveal their inner thoughts – getting children to think about subtext and motivation. They can also caption their images.**
3. **Creating and making significant and symbolic artefacts brings DT into the story telling, but it also gets children thinking about semiotics and how colour, shape and design convey messages.**
4. **Drama depends on tension. When you're planning a dramatic inquiry, you need to build in points of difficulty and unexpected interventions. The letter from a rival tribe is a typical example. To get children thinking, you need to pivot their perception regularly.**

Francesca Simon

"It didn't occur to me that reading might be difficult for some"

Francesca Simon has loved books all her life – and it's a passion she's determined to help pass on to as many children as possible

I learnt to read so fast, that I have no recollection whatsoever about how it happened. I do know that the process started in America, with those terrible Janet and John books; but I quickly left them behind, thank goodness. When I was about six, my parents took me into a book store and bought me a copy of *The Pancake*. As I stroked the lovely soft, purple cover, I fell in love – and I've been in a deeply passionate relationship with reading ever since. School got in the way a little, but I volunteered to work in the library so I always got first dibs on returns; I learnt the Dewey Decimal system alongside my lessons, and made my way through the shelves in alphabetical order. Sometimes I'd be reading for six hours a day – I never had enough of it.

When something comes easily to you, it can be hard to understand why others struggle. For a long while, it literally didn't occur to me that reading might be difficult for some people. Then, when I was 50, I learnt to ski. I didn't really want to, but we were on holiday, and my brother was willing to give up his time and energy to teach me, so I felt obliged. It was a revelation; as adults, we are generally able to avoid things that we think might be painful or too challenging – but of course, children have to learn to read, regardless of how steep and perilous the slope might seem to them. And for some of them, it's an incredibly daunting task.

The other insight I gained through learning to ski was the importance of being able to relish achievement in the moment. When I was finally able to do it, I was happy to stay on the same run for an entire day, coming down over and over again – because I *could*. One of the troubles children face with reading is that everyone is always trying to 'move them on'; as soon as they are able to read a book fluently, they are told to choose something harder. But there is such comfort and pleasure to be had in doing something well, at whatever level; I think it's important to allow more time for emerging readers to enjoy the stage they are at, rather than constantly rushing them forward.

"There is such comfort and pleasure to be had in doing something well, at whatever level; I think it's important to allow more time for emerging readers to enjoy the stage they are at, rather than constantly rushing them forward."

My own son, Josh, didn't really learn to read well until he was eight or so. Yet when he started school at four, he was given a reading age of six – I couldn't understand why, but the teachers told me it was because he knew how to hold a book, that in this country we read from left to write, and that text conveys meaning. I found that profoundly sad. The truth is, some children simply don't have the experiences at home that enable them to get to that point by the age of five, which is why investing in the early years should be such a priority for governments. It's also why closing libraries, with all the amazing services they are able to offer to families, is like putting a dagger in the heart of every child.

I never set out to become a children's writer. It was something that just happened, really, after Josh was born and I started to come up with ideas. Retrospectively, I discovered that I have a lot of qualities that make me good at storytelling for a young audience – I'm funny, and logical, with an offbeat way of looking at the world and plenty of energy – but it was not a career I planned for myself, so it's lovely when I hear how series like Horrid Henry are appealing to such a wide range of readers, and perhaps even encouraging some children to get excited about books for the first time.

Organisations like the Book Trust and the National Literacy Trust do such good work in helping to get the message out that books can be friends, and that reading is supposed to be a pleasure, not a chore. One of the reasons why I am a Trustee of World Book Day, as well as being one of this year's authors, is that I am a great believer in the transformative power of giving every child in the country a free book. Whatever plans they may or may not have for March 2nd 2017, one thing that teachers can definitely do is make a huge deal of that little voucher with their pupils; it's not just a slip of paper, it's a magic passport - a golden ticket – giving children the right to walk into any book store and choose something for themselves, to own, enjoy and keep. The idea is to make books part of the conversation, for everyone.

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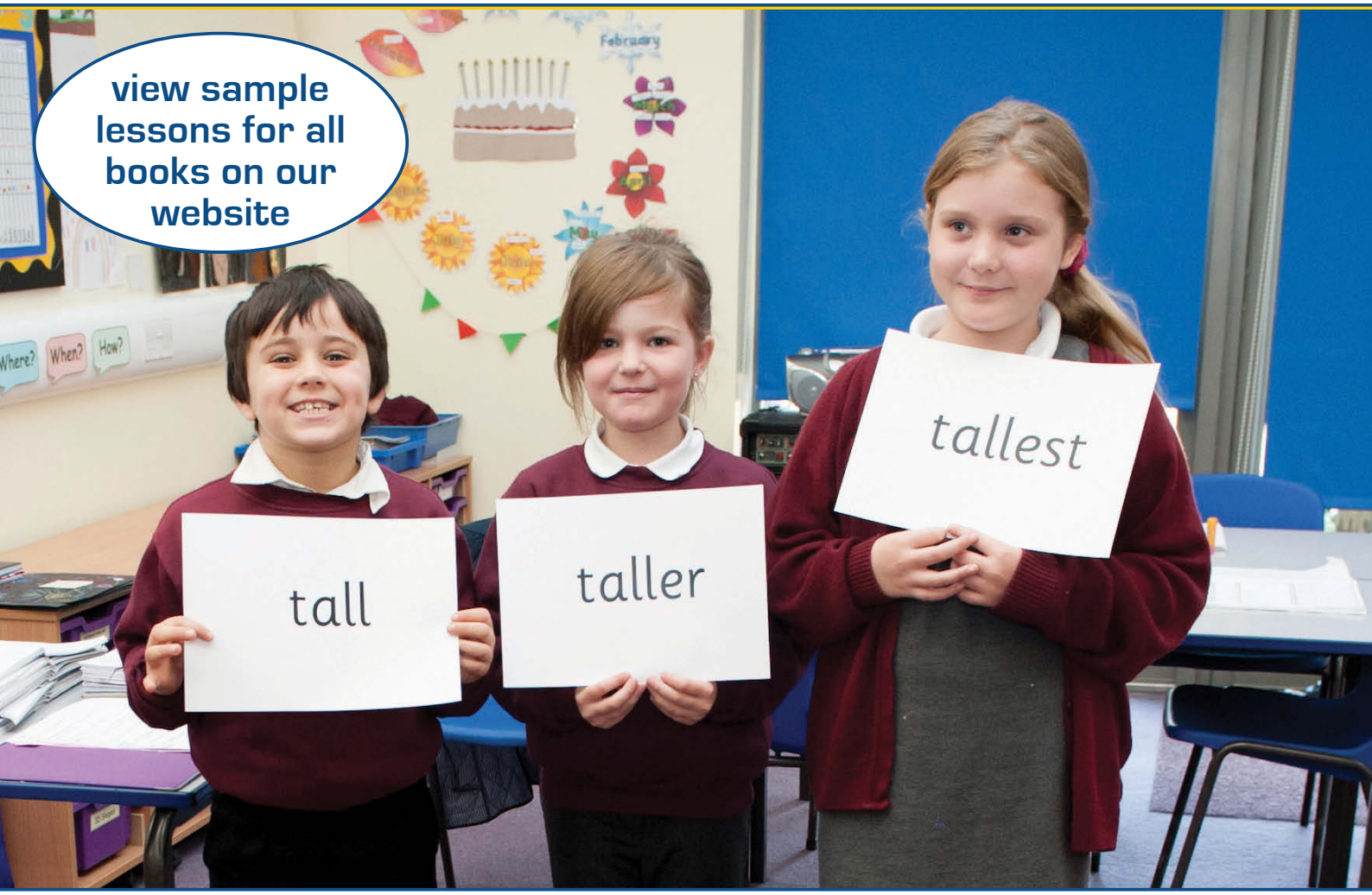

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JANE ANDREWS is a teaching and learning adviser at Herts for Learning

A touch of MAGIC

A single picture could do more to inspire genuinely creative writing than any number of 'success ladders', suggests **Jane Andrews**

Some children write with a natural flair – demonstrating just the right tone, language choices and fluidity - whilst others, even with the same voracious reading habits, fail to connect with their reader as skilfully. How can we take a little of that stardust, then, and sprinkle it around the class?

Whilst success criteria are useful - and sometimes necessary - scaffolds to support progress and assessment, there is always the danger that pupils will try to 'please the teacher' by shoe-horning every single checkpoint into their writing, then sit back congratulating themselves (after triumphantly ticking the list) on a quality piece of work. Such writing may be teeming with 'wow-words', adverbial phrases, semi-colons and, if the author is feeling really clever, the subjunctive. But is it a pleasure to read? Not always. The skill that is often missed is to interest and hook the reader, by considering *their* needs.

The following suggestions were inspired by Deborah Myhill, Aiden Chambers and Neil Mercer, as well as The National Gallery's 'Take One Picture' scheme for primary schools – and of course, some beautiful books. With a single picture you can spark children's imagination, develop their reading skills and refine their understanding of authorial impact; you can capture and develop their creative thoughts and support them to turn these into innovative writing.

Between the lines

With your pupils, take a look at the picture shown right. It's from *The Arrival* by the award winning author Shaun Tan (published by Hodder Children's Books) - a multi-layered book which tells a powerful tale of immigration without a

"This is where their grammar skills will come into their own, allowing them consciously to control their writing."

single printed word. This illustration is from the beginning of the story, as the husband and father prepares to leave. Like Anthony Browne, Shaun Tan offers us a rich understanding of the narrative beyond text, including a plethora of detail and symbolism within each individual picture.

The first prompt to provide is the Aiden Chambers, 'Tell Me' approach: "Tell me about this picture". The use of an open question ensures there are no incorrect responses and values a broad spectrum of replies; the children will not be fishing for the answers in the teacher's head. Indeed, they may well make observations that have not occurred to you. This activity can be carried out as small group or whole class discussions. The children can record their ideas on Post-it notes, gathered on large pieces of paper or scribed by the teacher/teaching assistant. As pupils contribute, the teacher should promote the freedom to make any relevant statement by not commenting on the quality of the answer e.g. 'lovely', 'good', 'that's right'. Instead, respond by asking for more contributions: 'keep going', 'and another idea?' Remind children they mustn't forget to state the obvious, which they sometimes do in an effort to say something 'clever'.

To develop the quality of the contributions, encourage learners to justify their comments e.g. 'I think …. because ….'. Of course, this will be modelled by the teacher throughout the curriculum, not just in reading lessons. The Spoken Language Programme of Study provides the detail of what should be taught e.g. articulate and justify answers, arguments and opinions; use spoken language to develop understanding through speculating, hypothesising, imagining and exploring ideas.

Possible responses could range from, 'They might be poor because the teapot is cracked and you would probably have bought another one if you had enough money' to 'She is trying to make him feel better because her hand is on top of his and this is how people show they care.' Once children have had an opportunity to make a range of statements, they should then be given a key question, devised to focus their thoughts in one particular direction. For example, 'Why do you think the author/illustrator chose to place the suitcase on the kitchen table?' or 'Why do you think the author/illustrator chose to set this scene in the kitchen?' In the 2016 KS2 Reading test, only 58% of children nationally responded correctly when the question was focused on vocabulary in context in both strands 1 and 7.

Acting out

Drama is a key component in the teaching of inference. To support the children's understanding of the picture from *The Arrival*, you might ask them to come up with a freeze frame/tableau. Perhaps they could recreate the positions of the two people in the illustration, or imagine what happens just before or after it, or when the couple's daughter walks in. Once the freeze frame is in place, another child places their hand near one of the actors and becomes the 'thought bubble', saying what they believe the character is thinking. Once ideas have been generated, their differences and similarities can be explored.

Freeze frames may lead into role play. For example, you might take the mother, father or daughter and hot-seat them; the teacher acts as one of the characters and the children decide what to ask them. The Reading Comprehension Programme of Study requires that children 'ask questions'; and exercises like these encourage the quality of their queries to be developed. Which questions will really allow us to know what the characters are thinking and feeling and what they might do next?

Now the drama has transported the children into the world of the narrative, it is important to transfer those captured thoughts and feelings into writing. By this stage, activities based around the illustration have probably enabled the class to build up a broader picture of despair, fear and pain. As they produce written work, remind pupils that all vocabulary and structural choices should be focused on how to give the reader this feeling or impression. This is where their grammar skills will come into their own, allowing them consciously to control their writing. For example, Year 3 pupils may be focusing on adverbs and can be considering:

- 'how' the characters are acting/feeling: *Anna gently placed her hand on top of Joe's.*
- 'where' the people/objects are: *The suitcase sat in the middle of the kitchen table reminding them of their painful goodbye in the morning.*
- 'when' events take place: *After packing the his small amount of belongings, he stood in silence by the kitchen table.*

Year 4 learners could be learning to use determiners to subtly add detail:

- *There had been a few tears earlier in the day but, with each minute that ticked by, the family grew stronger.*

A Year 5 class might consider relative clauses non-restrictive (with parenthesis) and restrictive (without parenthesis):

- *The table, which had seen sharing and laughter, was now the centre of sadness.*
- *The person whom he loved more than any other stood silently by his side.*

And in Year 6, understanding of the passive tense can shift the focus to the suitcase, rather than who is packing it:

- *The suitcase was packed and the finality of the clasp clicking into the lock sent them into a spiral of despair.*

As an added stimulus, you might also find an old suitcase in the loft or a charity shop and fill it with items such as boat tickets, maps, foreign language dictionary, photos of the family and keepsakes. The children could focus on individual objects; again, the process should begin with discussion prompted by key questions, supporting an understanding of the characters involved – with this in turn being used to inform and make subtle writing choices.

Herts for Learning is the UK's largest not-for-profit schools' company, providing school improvement and business support services to schools and academies nationally. To read further articles from Jane and Herts for Learning's Teaching and Learning team, see www.blogs.hertsforlearning.co.uk.

PICTURE THIS:
Two more illustrations to promote better writing

From *The Lost Happy Endings*, by Carol Ann Duffy, illustrated by Jane Ray (Bloomsbury)

Start a discussion about the image with the prompt, "Tell me about witches" – ascertain who they are, the stories we know them from, how we would feel if we met one. Then turn it around using Role on the Wall (see p70) How does the witch feel about herself and the characters she has met along the way; how does she view the world? What is she waiting for? Why are the bones hanging up? How would she describe the cave – the view from it? Pupils might write a reflection (recount) of her life and her hopes and plans for the future.

From *The Pirates Next Door* – starring The Jolley-Rogers, by Jonny Duddle (Templar)

I'm a huge Jonny Duddle fan and urge you to explore his books. When you share this picture, ask the class who 'nice people' are to get them thinking and talking. Then play Conscience Alley: assign half the group to be the pirates and the other half some angry neighbours. Each side should argue their case for the pirates to stay or go. Interview each side for a current affairs programme (actually video the outcome and keep it for next year to set the standard – and then raise it). These arguments can be the basis for persuasive letters to the local council, ensuring the language choices reflect the depth of feeling of the person writing and are designed to influence the reader. Children of all ages will enjoy the opportunity to discuss people seen as 'not like us' - whoever they may be.

STEVE BOWKETT is a children's author who runs creative workshops in schools

LIGHTING THE SPARK

Children's brains a little rusty? Get them in the mood for learning and develop their thinking skills with these quick and easy lesson starters...

1 Penny for your thoughts

This is a flexible activity that can be focused into diffezrent topic areas. Children can either work alone or in pairs. Initially give each child (or pair) two pennies and ask them to spot as many differences between them as they can. Prompt the children by asking them to look at patterns of wear, degree of polish or dullness, as well as more obvious differences such as dates, wording and images. Develop children's observational skills by showing them pictures of flowers, insects, shells and so on that look almost the same. Try the game with similar words – where / were / we're for instance. At this stage it's not important for children to be able to explain the differences, merely to notice them.

2 Stellar stories

Prepare a template where you scatter dots randomly over a sheet of A4 paper. Make copies to give out to groups. Prepare the class by looking at pictures of well-known constellations: Taurus, Orion, Ursa Major, etc. Ask the children to create their own join-the-dots people, objects and creatures on the templates. You can extend the activity by telling them some of the legends behind constellations before asking them to create stories explaining their own inventions.

3 Playing with patterns

You will need plenty of coloured counters for this game. Create some patterns and ask the class if they can work them out, giving a few examples beforehand. So, for instance, five red counters and two blue could be weekdays and the weekend; and four green, four yellow, four orange and four blue would represent the twelve months of the year through the four seasons. When children have worked out some of your patterns, invite them to create new ones of their own.

4 A cloud of questions

Show the class an everyday object, such as a pencil. The task is to ask as many questions as possible about the pencil in a certain time, say two minutes. Give a few examples beforehand – why is it called a pencil? When were pencils first invented? How do you get the lead inside the pencil? And so on. Ideally the questions should be noted down. Extend the activity by doing a 'questions analysis'. Which questions can be answered easily? Which questions theoretically have an answer but it can never be found (e.g. how many pencils exist in the world?). Which areas of knowledge do the questions apply to – history, science, literacy etc.

Take things further by encouraging children to question a statement such as, 'Napoleon died on St Helena. Wellington was very saddened'. Who was Napoleon? When and how did he die? Where is St Helena? Why was he there? Who was Wellington? Why was he saddened? This activity helps children to become more proactive in their learning, rather than be the passive recipients of facts and opinions.

5 The maybe hand

Use a vague sentence such as 'Jones lay slumped on the sofa'. Invite the children to open their hand palm upwards and imagine that the sentence is written in the middle. The fingers and thumb represent 'maybes' in answer to a prompt question such as 'Who or what is Jones?' Maybe he's a child, maybe a man, maybe a woman, maybe a cat, maybe a dog. The maybe hand is a visual and tactile representation of speculation as a thinking skill. The words or object imagined on the palm is the focus for the thinking while the fingers and thumb represent five possible answers. The technique also encourages children to think beyond a single answer.

6 Penny for your thoughts

Explain to the class that 'because' is a 'sticky' word; whenever you use it you have to stick a reason on to it. Again use a vague sentence, such as the one in 'the maybe hand'. Invite children to come up with an interesting and appropriate reason each time you say 'because'. So – Jones lay slumped on the sofa because? (He was tired.) He was tired because? (He'd been working hard.) He'd been working hard because? (He needed to save £500.) He needed to save £500 because… And so on.

7 Indefinite definitions

Begin by giving children a definition to think about. For example, 'bird'. 'A bird is a feathered animal that flies.' Ask how many children agree with that description before you begin to challenge it. What about flightless birds such as ostriches? What if a bird is dead? What if it is in a cage? What if its wings have been clipped? Encourage the children to wrangle with these questions in an attempt to refine the definition.

8 The ultimate 20 questions

This old favourite can be used to sharpen children's reasoning and questioning skills. As a variation on the familiar game, prepare a grid focused on a particular topic such as animals. Place a picture of a different animal in each box and write vocabulary related to the topic around the grid. Then run the game as normal, encouraging the children to incorporate as much of the vocabulary as possible into their questions. Extend the activity by doing a questions analysis afterwards. Which were the most useful questions in working towards an answer? Which questions were not so useful and why? Which were the most frequently asked questions?

JAMES CLEMENTS is an English adviser and the founder of ShakespeareandMore.com

BYE BYE *text types?*

The old curriculum may have kept us shackled to genres, but there's no need to abandon them altogether – so long as we don't let them cage children's creativity, says **James Clements**...

For the last decade in primary schools, much of the teaching of writing has been based on mastering the features of different text types. This is the approach the Literacy Strategy used and it reflected the demands of the assessment regime – first through the old writing tests and APP and then through annual teacher assessment, where significant credit was given for children showing control over the text-level features.

But things changed with the 2014 National Curriculum. It makes no specific mention of text types or genres and the teacher assessment descriptors focus almost solely on use of key features such as grammar and punctuation.

As teachers, we know that using text types to teach writing can be tremendously helpful: they allow pupils to understand the purpose of a text, learn about different language features, and they provide a frame on which children can hang their own writing. Research also suggests that a familiarity with different genres supports reading comprehension.

The difficulty comes when an approach based solely on text types is poorly organised, as this can easily lead to formulaic writing. If each time they write, children are given a great shopping list of success criteria, it can be difficult for them to learn to tailor their writing to a particular audience and purpose independently.

As children grow older, the writing they produce won't fit neatly into one of the primary school text types. If we want a generation of children who can use language with confidence, selecting words and phrases to communicate their ideas clearly and powerfully, then we need to teach them to be flexible in their writing. Aside from that, playing with the different genres can be a lot of fun, which is an important end in itself. So, if you're looking to put a fresh spin on text types, here are some tried and tested suggestions:

1. Combine narrative and non-fiction

From TED talks to popular science books, using a story as an introduction for explaining an idea is a well-used technique for engaging an audience and making an idea stick. In primary school teaching, it has the added advantage of exploring two different types of writing at the same time, learning about both by considering their different demands. Children might, for example:

- Tell the story of a famous scientist before they explain a specific concept – for example, Sir Isaac Newton figuring out gravity or Edward Jenner pioneering vaccination. This links well with the science strand of the National Curriculum, which includes the

"As children grow older, the writing they produce won't fit neatly into one of the primary school text types."

history of science.

- Retell a story from history and then discuss the implications of this in the next paragraph – e.g. the story of Claudius' invasion of Britain and the Romanisation of the country.

2. Tell a story through instruction

Neil Gaiman and Charles Vess's exquisite book *Instructions* tells the story of a quest through a series of instructions. Trying this idea for themselves provides an interesting way for children to practise the language of instructional writing in a motivating and creative context. It certainly beats writing the instructions for how to make a cup of tea. Again.

3. Write persuasive newspaper articles

In school, newspapers are often approached as non-fiction writing, promoting a detached writing style that presents the facts impartially. As adults, we know this isn't the case and that every newspaper will cover a particular issue differently. Asking children to write two articles, each from a different point of view, is a terrific way of practising persuasive writing, as well as thinking about bias in the media. A task like this is excellent for stretching very confident writers. For them, the challenge is to communicate their feelings on an issue and persuade the reader in a subtle way. Can they present a biased argument, but make it appear to be balanced? The Guardian newspaper's *Three Little Pigs* advert (search online) is a good way of introducing different points of view in reporting.

4. Take writing online

The nature of the texts with which we interact has changed greatly in the last few years. While books are still central to what we read and write in schools, engaging with information through online texts is increasingly common.

An information text that is written to sit online is different from a non-chronological report and needs different writing skills. Being able to write about a particular topic and then link to another page that gives more detail is an interesting way of exploring how children organise their ideas (and can be useful for explaining paragraphs, for example). Using resources such as Weebly to create online texts can be very motivating, and sites such as DK Find Out! or the InFact books on OxfordOwl.co.uk (both easy to find online) give an excellent model to share on the IWB.

The importance of text types as a scaffold to support children's writing means we shouldn't discard them just because they don't feature in the 2014 National Curriculum, but if we want our children to become genuinely creative writers, then we shouldn't be afraid to treat them flexibly either. They need to know the rules, but be able to break them too.

SPACE TO THINK

Now we're no longer wedded to text types, there's plenty of room for encouraging creativity...

Coverage is the enemy of good learning. Trying to build a school curriculum that includes every text type each year can result in pressure to move on to the next genre before children are confident in their writing. Teaching fewer units, but spending more time on each, might be a better model for children to develop as writers.

We know how motivating it is to have a purpose for writing. Moving beyond a model where all genres need to be taught each year can provide an opportunity to make rich links between the writing children produce and other areas of the curriculum – writing for a real purpose.

Working to success criteria can be helpful for children, giving them clear expectations for what will make an effective piece. But too much detail inhibits creative writing. For stronger writers, it can be useful to move towards a model where they write without criteria, aiming to communicate clearly to their reader, and then having the opportunity to return to their writing and make changes after feedback has been given.

Developing writing skills doesn't have to mean a written outcome: preparing for a debate, writing a presentation or performing a play all give opportunities for tailoring language to a particular purpose.

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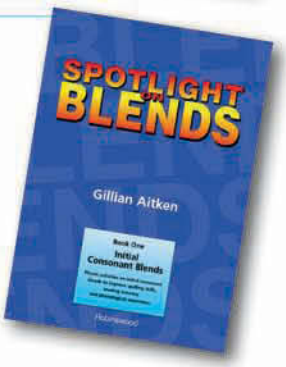

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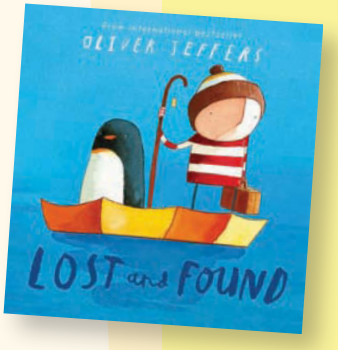
The best book I EVER TAUGHT

Sharing a well-chosen story with the class is more than a lesson, it's a life experience – for both children and teachers. Here, 10 of our Teach Reading & Writing contributors recall their most memorable adventures in literacy...

1 Lost and Found

(by Oliver Jeffers)



DEBRA KIDD

"We spend time in France, Portugal, Morocco, Ghana"

Lost and Found offers a whole world that takes weeks to explore. When, in the book, the boy "packs everything they would need", I bring in a suitcase and the children draw and label an item they would pack. They have to persuade the penguin that it is necessary – he may say no!

Over the next few weeks, we track the boy and his penguin on their journey. They stop off in different countries for supplies and so we spend time in France, Portugal, Morocco, Ghana, South Africa. In each place, we hear a traditional tale, we learn some of their language, eat some of their food, sing some of their songs… We write postcards home.

When the weather is bad and there is a storm, we soundscape and create a phonic musical score. When it is good, we think of the stories they will share to keep themselves amused. And when the boy and his friend finally make the return trip, we create our own class book – *The Journey Home*.

2 The Time Machine

(by H. G. Wells)

STEVE BOWKETT

"It's a springboard for creative discussions"

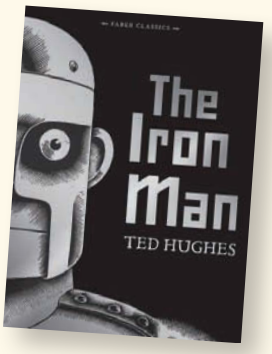
This was a regular class reader with my Year 9 groups. The book is short, the writing is relatively accessible and the story is exciting, with some beautiful and quite moving descriptive passages: the time traveller's visit to the world of the far future when the Earth is dying still brings a lump to my throat.

The story also serves as a vehicle for social commentary. At a deeper level than 'scientific romance', Wells was talking about the class divisions that existed in Britain in late Victorian times and the sinister consequences that such a rift might bring. In that sense, the story is very dark and takes on the qualities of a parable or cautionary tale.

As well as the text being a rich source for lessons on figures of speech, descriptive writing and the nature of allegory, it serves as a springboard for creative discussions such as: Where / when would you go to in a time machine? What do you think the future could be like? If you could meet any person from the past, who would it be and what would you talk about?

3 The Iron Man

(by Ted Hughes)



It's the magical opening chapters I recall in particular. I hadn't encountered the book as a child, and was stunned by its craft; it was still fresh when I read it aloud to my first class. The quality of the writing – the figurative and rhetorical language – demanded a theatrical reading. Twenty-two years on, the creation of mystery through unusual perspective still shocks: even the narrator doesn't appear to know what's going on!

As I read, I had to stop myself from asking my class questions – reminding myself that they needed to experience it uninterrupted. These scenes now seem presciently cinematic, and I can see it was this that led to our class discussions around how to represent the mystery graphically. Children drew their own storyboards, selecting frames for close-ups and long-shots. This led to costume-creation and use of percussive sound effects, and eventually a film-short, shot in Appleton Primary's 'Wild Garden'.

CHRISTINE CHEN

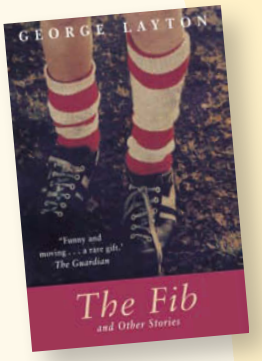
"I had to stop myself from asking questions"

4 The Fib (The Balaclava Story)

LINDSAY PICKTON

"It's perfect for drama"

(by George Layton)



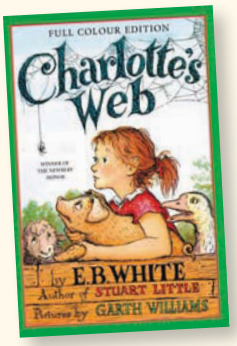
Children don't have to know what a balaclava is to love The Balaclava Story. It speaks to the longing to be part of the 'in crowd', and does so with a first-person immediacy that makes us feel the narrator's pain (while gasp-laughing at his misadventures). It can also be readily rewritten to make it more contemporary – or sci-fi, or set in a time / place familiar from history study. But the real pull for me is that I discovered this book around the same time I really started to 'get' using drama for story-exploration, and it lends itself perfectly to a range of strategies. You might use (SPOILER ALERT): paired-improvisation to bring the initial argument with Mum to life; freeze-frame (and thought-tracking or thought bubbles) to examine George's isolation in the playground; a conscience-alley to study his motivations in the act of stealing; mime to delve into the turmoil created by his mother's gift; and then a tableau for the final, 'punch-line' scene.

5 Charlotte's Web

(by E. B. White)

PIE CORBETT

"I closed the book to a terrible silence"



I didn't see it coming. It was the end of the day, 40 years ago, and story time. The chapter was titled 'Last Day' and that should have warned me. As I read, the room stilled. I reached the final heart-wrenching words, 'no one was with her when she died' and made the mistake of looking up, straight into 35 sad faces. My voice wobbled and tears swam.

I closed the book to a terrible silence. So, even though it was home time, parents had to wait while I read on till our spirits lifted as Wilbur recovered.

Great books are deep experiences that change us. Charlotte's Web celebrates friendship and sacrifice. In our imaginations, we stood in the barn; we felt sorrow and redemption that bound us together. It was probably our first taste of grief, but we also felt how sadness can fade and knew that true friendship enriches life.

6 Wonder

(by R.J. Palacio)

SHAREEN MAYERS

"A powerful whole-text approach"

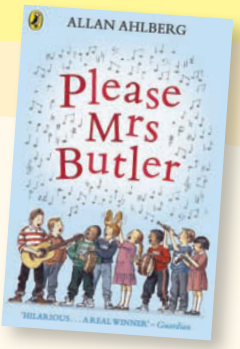
A fellow teacher and consultant (Maddy) recommended *Wonder*, by R.J. Palacio to me, and it's one of my favourite books to teach. It's about boy with a facial disfigurement who attends a school and it documents his experiences.

My colleague thinks this book is perfect for upper KS2 as it cleverly engages all pupils, and I completely agree with her.

Having read the book to a Y6 class, I've found the using the 'whole-text approach' particularly powerful for teaching reading and writing. We were able to have detailed debates about what it would feel like to be different from others. There were plenty of writing opportunities too: we wrote an additional chapter in the style of the book; a diary entry; a discussion text; a narrative and a poem – all using the same text.

7 Please Mrs Butler

(by Allan Ahlberg)



RACHEL CLARKE

"Allan Ahlberg saved my teacher-life"

I've taught some 'interesting' groups of children – legends remembered in school folklore only as 'that class', with more personalities than The Bash Street Kids. These pupils have the potential to terminate the most illustrious of careers. But not mine, because *Please Mrs Butler* by Allan Ahlberg saved my teacher-life. Several…Times…Over.

Let me explain. As a young teacher I learned fairly swiftly that some issues need immediate intervention and some need soothing – with poetry. A quick rendition of 'The School Nurse' was enough to diffuse the tension between Sophie and David and so avoid escalating their anger by issuing a yellow card. 'Dog in the Playground' provided a longer respite in which Jack and Hamid could forget just why they were arguing about Pokemon cards. And 'The Headmaster's Hymn' came on special request when we'd managed an afternoon without bickering, because "Miss actually sings it with the real tune and it's really funny."

Allan Ahlberg, thank you.

8 Wind in the Willows

(by Kenneth Grahame)

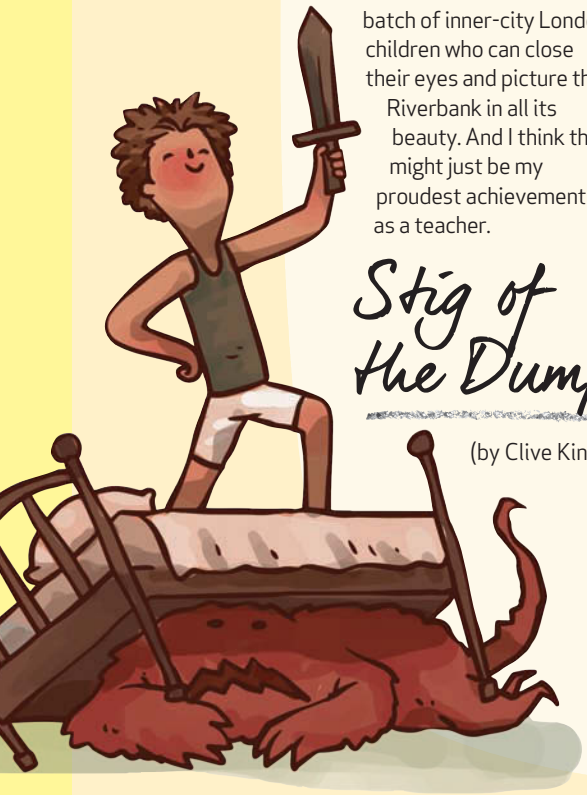
ISABELLA WALLACE

"We have a Jeremy Kyle style chatshow"

Choosing a favourite story is like deciding between your children, but if I had to pick one desert-island book to teach it would be *The Wind in the Willows*. I've managed to sneak it onto the curriculum in every class I've ever taught – from writing new adventures based on the characters in Y1, to analysing how Kenneth Grahame creates suspense through his control of language with Y4. I've even held a discussion with Y8 about whether the weasels and stoats are engaged in a legitimate act of revolution. Mostly, I just love reading it aloud and I like to think there's a whole batch of inner-city London children who can close their eyes and picture the Riverbank in all its beauty. And I think that might just be my proudest achievement as a teacher.

JAMES CLEMENTS

"I just love reading it aloud""



9 The Witches

(by Roald Dahl)

I love teaching *The Witches* by Roald Dahl. It's funny and fabulous and has just enough peril to keep children on the edge of their seats. Secretly, I adore reading aloud in the Grand High Witch's voice. "Down with children! Do zem in!"

To explore the characters, we bring them together in a simulated Classroom Chat Show, Jeremy Kyle style (but with a little less controversy!). Some children research and play the characters. They are introduced to the show one by one and remain in role throughout – drawing on their knowledge of the text. Other classmates act as outspoken, argumentative audience members. They carefully revisit sections of the text and prepare provocative questions they can put to the characters. Of course, yours truly gets to play the chat show host, which conveniently allows me to control levels of excitement without being a spoilsport!

10 Stig of the Dump

(by Clive King)

From the moment Barney fell into the quarry and encountered Stig (a caveman with a talent for inventing things) my Year 5s were captivated. The book inspired a whole term's work, including a visit to the local dump to write poetry and an investigation into homemade pigments for cave-painting. Everyone loved creating 'Stig inventions' from discarded materials – the eye-shaped oval cut from Perspex sticks enters my mind, as does the glee with which its inventor told me it was "Stig's contact lens". Excavating the 'caveman bones' I'd buried in a sandpit was also popular. The children's engagement with Stig made such a difference to the way they thought and talked and wrote, and for me as a teacher it was a turning point. I realised that books could kickstart the most amazing work across the whole curriculum – and life in my classroom was never quite the same again.

CAREY FLUKER HUNT

"It was a turning point for me"

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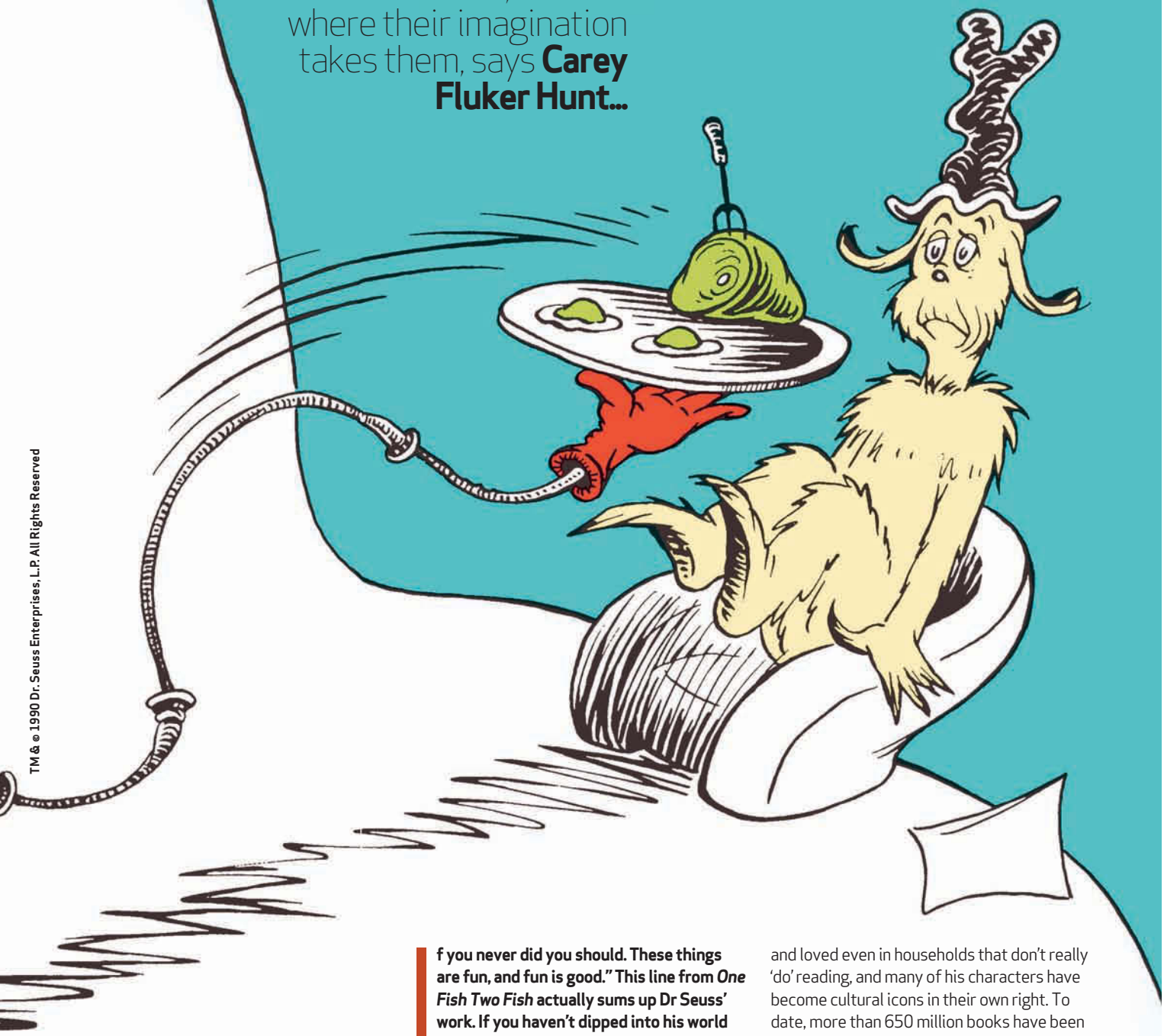
CAREY FLUKER HUNT is creative projects manager at Seven Stories

Oh, the Places You'll Go

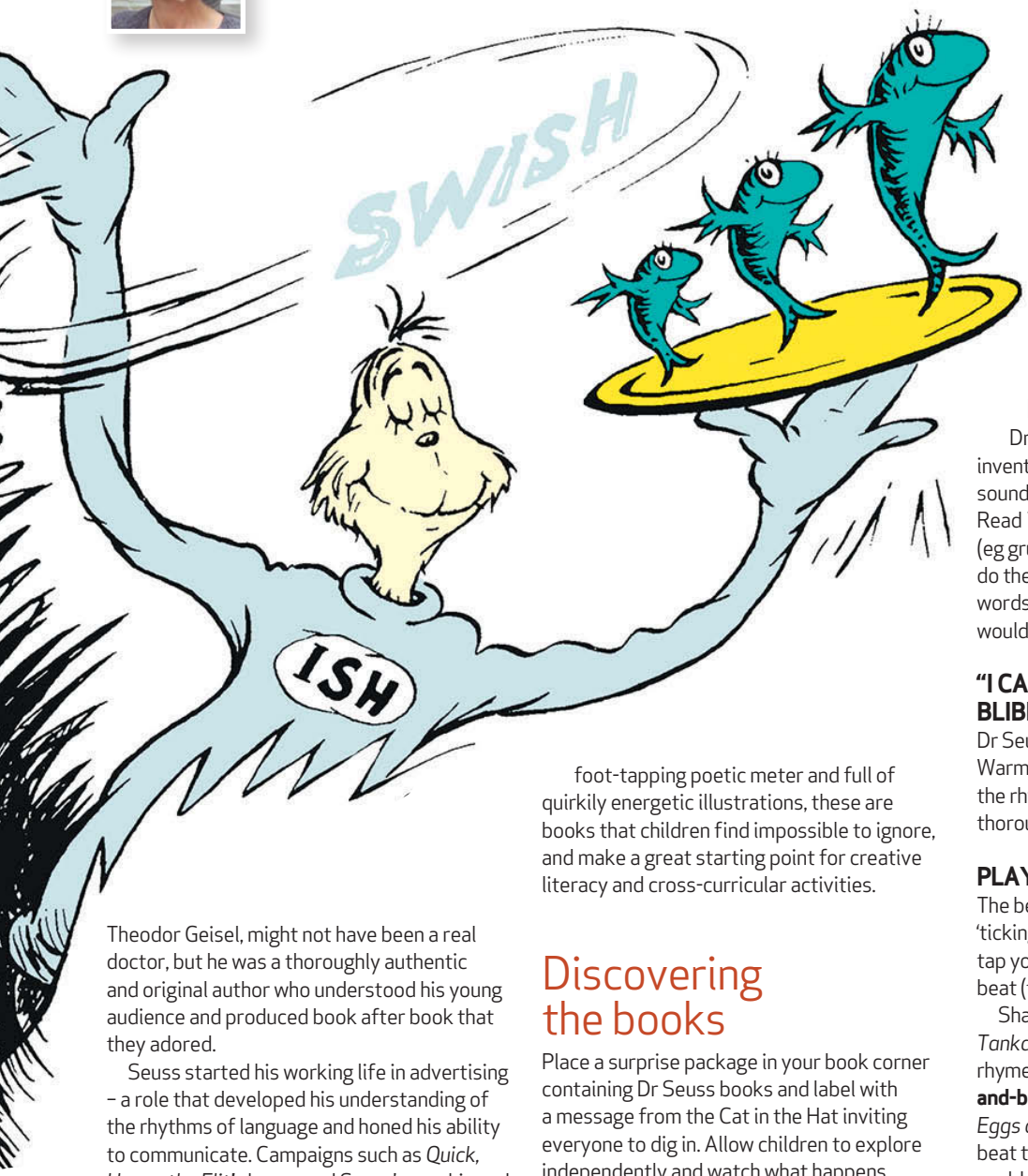
Let children loose in the world of the 'American Poet Laureate of Nonsense', and see where their imagination takes them, says **Carey Fluker Hunt...**



If you never did you should. These things are fun, and fun is good." This line from *One Fish Two Fish* actually sums up Dr Seuss' work. If you haven't dipped into his world of zany humour and repetitive rhymes, you really, really should. Titles such as *The Cat in the Hat* and *Green Eggs and Ham* are known and loved even in households that don't really 'do' reading, and many of his characters have become cultural icons in their own right. To date, more than 650 million books have been sold in more than 20 languages.

Affectionately known as 'The American Poet Laureate of Nonsense', Dr Seuss, born

CAREY FLUKER HUNT is creative projects manager at Seven Stories



Theodor Geisel, might not have been a real doctor, but he was a thoroughly authentic and original author who understood his young audience and produced book after book that they adored.

Seuss started his working life in advertising – a role that developed his understanding of the rhythms of language and honed his ability to communicate. Campaigns such as *Quick, Henry, the Flit!* showcased Seuss' anarchic and hugely creative mind and the kind of energy, irreverence and humour that would be found in his books.

HarperCollins has just reissued four of his best-known and most playful texts in handsome new editions, but Seuss wrote more than 60 titles in total, many of which are still in print. His ability to manipulate a limited vocabulary and turn it into riotously joyful text led to success in the 'beginner reader' market, but Seuss wasn't just interested in teaching children to read, he wanted to teach them to think.

Books such as *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, *Horton Hears a Who!* and *The Lorax* deal with issues such as consumerism, environmental disaster and the arms race in ways that children find enticing, accessible and fun. Seuss never spoke down to his audience, but neither did he lose sight of the need to entertain. Written in a catchy, foot-tapping poetic meter and full of quirkily energetic illustrations, these are books that children find impossible to ignore, and make a great starting point for creative literacy and cross-curricular activities.

Discovering the books

Place a surprise package in your book corner containing Dr Seuss books and label with a message from the Cat in the Hat inviting everyone to dig in. Allow children to explore independently and watch what happens. Which books are they drawn to, and what do they tell each other about their choices?

Once you've had time to get to know the books, talk to your class about their response. Which titles do they prefer, and why? Were they familiar with any of these books before today? Who they would recommend these books to, and why?

Explain that you're going to find out about the man who wrote these books. As a class, come up with questions about Dr Seuss and his works. Display these in your reading corner, along with some of the comments your class made earlier, and refer back to them as you find out more.

Wordplay

RHYMES

Rhyme is a major feature of Dr Seuss's work. Play rhyming games by taking turns to think of a word that rhymes with an object in the room, or giving clues such as, "What's a word that rhymes with red? It's where you go to sleep at night". Read other rhyming stories and poems, and compare.

REPETITION

A limited and repeated vocabulary makes Dr Seuss's books accessible to beginner readers. Learn some of the text in *Green Eggs and Ham* and *The Cat in the Hat* by heart and perform it.

INVENTED WORDS

Dr Seuss loved playing with words and inventing new ones. Try making some new sounds and work out how to write them down. Read *The Lorax* and find the invented words (eg gruvvulous, snergelly and rippulous). What do they mean? How can you tell? Invent some words to describe everyday objects. Which would you use in a poem, and why?

"I CAN'T BLAB SUCH BLIBBER BLUBBER!"

Dr Seuss was a great fan of tongue twisters. Warm up with Peter Piper before you tackle the rhymes in Fox in Socks, though. They're thoroughly fiendish!

PLAYING WITH BEAT AND RHYTHM

The beat (or pulse) in Dr Seuss's work is the 'ticking of the clock' behind the poetry. If you tap your foot as you speak, you're marking the beat (the rhythm follows the words).

Share Steve Webb's picture-book *Tanka Tanka Skunk*, then beat time to some familiar rhymes (see **letsplaykidsmusic.com/rhythm-and-beat** for ideas) before tackling *Green Eggs and Ham*. Give everyone the chance to beat the pulse while others read aloud. You could try moving in time to the beat while you read, too!

"HE SHOULD NOT BE HERE WHEN YOUR MOTHER IS OUT…"

'Misrule' is a feature of Dr Seuss' books, and it appeals to children enormously. It also places Seuss in a storytelling tradition that stretches back to our earliest folk tales. Read *The Cat in the Hat* and talk about the Cat's (and the children's) mischief. Role play the events, then make up some more tricks, games and near-disasters before writing and illustrating your own stories.

Fiction can explore things we wouldn't want to happen in real life. Read some traditional stories such as *The Wolf and the Seven Little Kids*. Talk about safeguarding and why we shouldn't open the door to strangers.

THE ISH WISH DISH

The Ish in *One Fish Two Fish* has a magic dish.

Make some 'big swish swishes' over a suitably magical-looking dish and dream up some wishes of your own. Draw and write about what happens next.

Cross-curricular opportunities

FUN-IN-A-BOX

When Dr Seuss had writer's block he would go to a hat-filled cupboard and try them on. Sometimes creativity comes in sideways, and playing can be the key to unlocking good ideas.

Make a collection of hats and put each one inside a cardboard box. Label the boxes 'HAT belonging to the CAT'.

Read *The Cat in the Hat* and talk about the games the Cat dreams up. He doesn't write stories or paint pictures, but he's still being creative. Give each child a box and explore what's inside. Where could the Cat have found this hat – and what could it help him invent?

Talk about ideas and where they come from. Like Dr Seuss and the Cat, put your hats on and dream up some new ideas (questions you'd like answered, ideas for stories or pictures, inventions that solve a problem, new ways of doing things).

How could you record your ideas so that you don't forget them? In writing, in pictures, as audio recordings, with labelled diagrams or a mixture of everything? Is it difficult to think of ideas while you're sitting still? Where and how might you have better ideas?

"I AM THE LORAX. I SPEAK FOR THE TREES"

Read *The Lorax*. What does the Once-ler mean when he says he *"went right on biggering…"*? And what are the outcomes of his greed? Have a go at swaying like a Truffula Tree, humming like a Fish and singing like a Swomee-Swan, then show what happens when they meet the Once-ler.

"He was shortish, and oldish. And brownish. And mossy. And he spoke with a voice that was sharpish and bossy." Where might the Lorax have come from, and what did he do before the Once-ler arrived? Role play the conversations between the Lorax and the Once-ler, then write a report for a newspaper, as if you've just spoken to the Lorax about what happened in the book – or tell a story about what happens when he leaves.

The Once-ler lives in a Lerkim. Design your own Lerkim and label its special features. Perhaps you could build a Lerkim den in the school grounds – or make one in your reading corner using a clothes airer and old curtains! A den needs gadgets. What can you invent? Make a whisper-ma-phone using cans and string, and send messages. Can you improve it in any way? Write instructions for the Once-ler, telling him how to make and use a whisper-ma-phone.

"Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not." Find out about ways to help the environment. Perhaps you could plant some Truffula trees of your own?

A LOAD OF OLD NONSENSE

Having got familiar with Dr Seuss' work, try exploring these related reads…

- ***The Jabberwocky* by Lewis Carroll and Joel Stewart**
- ***Tanka Tanka Skunk* by Steve Webb**
- ***The Puffin Book of Nonsense Verse* edited by Quentin Blake**
- ***The Boy on Fairfield Street: How Ted Geisel Grew Up to Become Dr Seuss* by Kathleen Krull**

SCRAMBLED EGGS SUPER-DEE-DOOPER-DEE-BOOPER

Read *Scrambled Eggs Super* and explore the impact of adding extra ingredients to your egg mix. Peter T Hooper went for things like ginger and prunes – but you might prefer grated cheese. And why not turn your eggs and ham green (or even blue) with a little colouring? Design an investigation to discover what people think about food that isn't the right colour, then display your results as graphs and charts.

Also, try setting up a Green Eggs and Ham role-play café. Make 'food' from plasticine or painted salt dough and create menus, price lists and order pads, then play at serving and eating there. The waiters can take orders and prepare bills, the cooks can write and draw their own cookery books and the customers can write magazine reviews. You can find more recipe ideas such as Beautiful Schlopp and Pink Ink Yink Drink at seussville.com.

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A deeper understanding

Nikki Gamble suggests some strategies to support and enhance children's reading comprehension, at a time when expectations have never been higher

Reading comprehension is a hot topic. The National Curriculum demands that children read more challenging texts and sets an expectation for deeper levels of understanding than previously required. The good news is that research from the past ten years has increased knowledge of comprehension processes. Kitsch and Rawson's situational model of comprehension (2005) is implied in the National Curriculum which refers to vocabulary (linguistic knowledge) grammar (microstructure) and world knowledge (macrostructure).

Top tips for developing reading comprehension

1. READ ALOUD TO YOUR CLASS

Choose texts that are engaging, and open up worlds of reading that children might not access on their own. Children implicitly learn how texts work and about sentence structure from exposure to the rhythm of the text. Thoughtful questions and incidental vocabulary teaching can be used to deepen the response.

2. PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUSTAINED READING

Set aside a regular 20 – 30 minutes a week to promote independent reading and offer as many opportunities as possible for sustained voluntary reading.

3. MAKE CONNECTIONS

Encourage pupils to connect reading with their existing knowledge and experience. Use prompts to help them understand an emotional experience, a physical setting, a historical context, etc. Interaction with other pupils will help them connect the text with experience – knowledge is constructed in social groups. For older readers you might organise a 'silent discussion':

- After reading a text, work in small groups. Invite the pupils to note their thoughts without discussion. You might offer prompts to get things moving.
- After two minutes have them all pass their notes to the pupils on the right, so they all have someone else's notes.
- Each pupil reads the notes they have been given and then writes a response.
- Repeat this until the pupils get their own paper back. Have them read the full conversation.
- Now open up the discussion. Did anyone read an idea that made them think differently about the text?

4. DEVELOP QUESTIONING

Help children to monitor their own understanding by encouraging them to pose questions when they have read something that they do not understand. Encourage authentic questioning and help pupils analyse questions.

- For example, after reading invite them to write any questions they have on cards or Post-its.
- Use a T diagram – one half labelled 'one answer' and the other 'more than one answer'.
- Discuss each question in turn and decide on which half of the diagram it should be placed.
- Talk about the differences between the questions on each side of the diagram.
- Have them reread the passage and then revisit the questions. Which were they able to answer? Which questions remain unanswered? Why?

5. RICH AND ROBUST VOCABULARY TEACHING

Vocabulary teaching is essential, but different approaches need to be taken for different kinds of words. The goals of vocabulary instruction are to develop both breadth and depth. High concept words are those that we might assume are easy, but actually can cause problems if a pupil understands the word in one way but not another. Semantic mapping can be used for depth of understanding:

- Select a target work such as 'wild'. Give a short time limit (two minutes) and ask the pupils to list all the words they associate with the target word
- Share ideas. Offer your own suggestions to encourage them to think more widely
- Discuss how words from the generated list could be grouped (e.g words to do with nature, words to do with insanity etc.)
- Refer back to the text and consider which aspects of the words are relevant to the context.

Develop routines for teaching skills and make it explicit to children how they can use them independently to support their understanding before, during and after reading.

Nikki Gamble is Director of *Just Imagine* and is series editor for OUP's *Oxford Reading Tree inFact* and *Oxford Reading Tree Story Sparks*. Find out how Oxford can support comprehension teaching and learning in your school at www.oxfordprimary.co.uk/comprehension.

Launch pad to success

Check out **Rising Stars Reading Planet**, a fresh, new reading programme for Reception and Key Stage 1 with over 200 exciting reading books that are packed with wonderful characters and engaging storylines, from the best authors and illustrators around. Underpinned by the latest research into literacy development, Rising Stars Reading Planet helps children gain the skills they need to become confident, independent readers. **Visit risingstarsreadingplanet.com/eval to order your evaluation pack, and trial Reading Planet free for 30 days.**

A mighty force

"A pioneering belter of a resource" (John Dabell, Teach Primary 2016). Mighty Writer is a brand new, stand-alone whole-school resource designed and proven to transform the teaching of writing and create confident writers. Aimed at primary children, it supports the teaching of the National Curriculum, developing speaking and listening, composition, vocabulary, grammar and punctuation. Research has proven its effectiveness with all teachers who trialled it rating it 10/10 when asked if it significantly improved their pupils' writing **www.mightywriter.co.uk**

FRESH Adventures

4 great ideas to boos pupils' literacy across the curriculum

Write now!

CUP's **Penpals for Handwriting** makes learning to write fun and engaging, allowing children to develop the skills to write with confidence, express themselves and take pride in their work. Comprising clear and easy-to-follow Teacher's Books, engaging digital content, pupil Practice Books and Workbooks, Penpals is tried, tested and loved by teachers. The scheme starts from the essential foundations of fluent handwriting: developing motor skills, effective pencil grip and correct posture, and builds on these steadily, allowing children to gain confidence in each stage. Support for teachers means a consistent and measured approach to handwriting can be adopted throughout the whole school, offering children a clear progression.

Competition time

If you're struggling to find high quality assessment resources for grammar and punctuation, then SPAG.com could be ideal for you. It offers 100 online tests and activities for children from Year 1 to Year 6. With all the tests marked instantly, it saves time on marking and also provides in-depth gap analysis. However, schools are finding other ways to use SPAG.com too. A Twitter user recently said, "I used SPaG.com as a whole class quiz yesterday and have never seen Year 6 so excited for SPaG!". For a free demo account or more information, please email **support@spag.com**

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SHAREEN MAYERS is an experienced primary school teacher and lead English adviser for Sutton Education Services

Checks and BALANCES

Effective writers need strong editing and proof-reading skills, says **Shareen Mayers** – so here's how to develop them

Perhaps one of the most often overlooked aspects of the 2014 English national curriculum is its salient focus on pupils being able to edit their writing, and to proof-read for punctuation and spelling errors. Both skills, and the latter especially, require explicit modelling from teachers if they are to be successfully developed in pupils.

Whenever I run training on teaching writing, the issue of editing and proof-reading always generates the most discussion. Very often it is because these skills are not always explicitly addressed in the busy world of teaching English. Editing requires pupils and their peers to propose changes to vocabulary and grammar in order to make their writing more interesting to read; so, for example, a simple phrase like 'I was scared' could be exchanged for, 'I felt apprehensive – anxious that no one would find us!' Learners might also check that they have used the correct tense throughout their work. The best way to teach editing is to model the process to pupils, perhaps spending time with small groups to demonstrate how it works in practice.

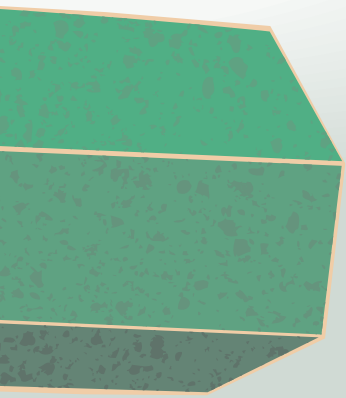
Proof-reading involves pupils checking their work for punctuation and spelling errors only - for example, they should note whether they have used brackets and full stops correctly. The spelling rules they use while proof-reading should focus on the patterns they are studying as a year group; this enables pupils to explore challenging vocabulary.

Model and share

One of the most effective strategies for teaching writing is to show examples of model texts to the whole class, and demonstrate how changes can be made to real pupils' work. Websites like Pobble.com are great for finding examples of

authentic writing to share with your class, so you can make positive adjustments to grammar and vocabulary together. This is also a good opportunity to ask pupils to help with spelling errors or to support particular rules. For example, 'I am not sure how to spell 'playful'. Can someone help me? Can we sound this out?'

Proof-reading should be seen as a separate skill and may require a separate lesson initially so that pupils understand the disparity between it and editing. One of the fundamental differences between the old curriculum and the new one is the focus on pupils applying their knowledge of spelling to their writing. Many teachers have expressed that some learners find it difficult to spot errors. However, it is important to point them out (sensitively) to pupils initially, before expecting them to find mistakes independently in their own writing.



"It is also important to remember that making 'phonetically plausible attempts' no longer features in the new curriculum. Pupils should discuss their errors and learn alternative spellings."

This can be tackled as a whole class rather than with individual pupils (unless there is a particular error unique to one learner). It is also important to remember that making 'phonetically plausible attempts' no longer features in the new curriculum. Pupils should discuss their errors and learn alternative spellings.

Purposeful progress

A key aspect of the national curriculum is to write for a range of purposes. There is, of course, still room to teach text types but changing the focus to an emphasis on 'purposes' is a particularly significant way to improve editing and proof-reading skills. For example, if the purpose is 'to persuade', you could follow this process:

Step 1

READ, COMPREHEND, ANALYSE

Begin by using a quality persuasive text as the stimulus for all writing. Unpick the key features and learn from its grammar, vocabulary and punctuation used for effect. This is also a good time to teach comprehension skills, asking questions about the content.

Step 2

PLAN, DRAFT, WRITE, EDIT AND PROOF-READ

Using the stimulus text, pupils should plan, draft or write a persuasive advert, making notes of the key features of persuading, e.g. using facts and figures, groups of three (e.g. fun, fit and fabulous) and rhetorical questions. Model explicitly how to edit, improve and proof-read pupils' work, using an example created as a class.

Step 3

APPLY TO A RANGE OF WRITING WITH THE SAME PURPOSES

Once pupils have had the time to be explicitly taught a particular purpose and have edited and proof-read the grammar and punctuation for their year group, give them opportunities to apply this knowledge to a few more pieces with the umbrella purpose of persuasion. They can then write a persuasive speech or poster but this time, they should evaluate and edit their work independently. Having a focus on the purpose for writing means that pupils can apply their editing and proof-reading skills in a different context, without having to re-teach the purpose and ensuring independent application.

PUPILS SHOULD BE ABLE TO...

YEAR 1

- ✔ Re-read what they have written to check it makes sense.
- ✔ Discuss what they have written with the teacher or other pupils.

YEAR 2

Make simple additions, revisions and corrections to their own writing by:

- ✔ evaluating their writing with the teacher and other pupils.
- ✔ re-reading to check that their writing makes sense and that verbs to indicate time are used correctly and consistently, including verbs in the continuous form.
- ✔ Proof-read to check for errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation.

YEARS 3 AND 4

Evaluate and edit by:

- ✔ assessing the effectiveness of their own and other's writing and suggesting improvements.
- ✔ proposing changes to grammar and vocabulary to improve consistency, including the accurate use of pronouns in sentences.
- ✔ Proof-read for spelling and punctuation errors.

YEARS 5 AND 6

Evaluate and edit by:

- ✔ proposing changes to vocabulary and grammar, to enhance effects and clarify meaning
- ✔ ensuring the consistent and correct use of tense throughout the piece.
- ✔ ensuring correct subject and verb agreement when using singular and plural, distinguishing between language of speech and writing and choosing appropriate register.
- ✔ Proof-read for spelling and punctuation errors.

Shareen Mayers (@ShareenMayers) is a published educational author and series editor. Her new book is called 'Fill Grammar Gaps,' and it supports teachers to teach grammar in context using real texts.

Roddy Doyle

"For a writer, failure can be a good day's work"

Mistakes are a crucial part of the creative writing process, says **Roddy Doyle** – so why don't we let children make them?

It was 1963 when I started school, and I was five years old. I don't know exactly how many kids were in my class, but it was huge – and as a relatively quiet child, it was easy for me to go unnoticed in the chaos. After a while, though, my mother realised that I wasn't learning to read there, and so she started teaching me herself, reading comic books with me at home. I recall very vividly sitting with her, moving my finger along underneath the words in *The Beano* or *Sparky* until finally, the speech bubbles started to make sense.

I was always a little late to pick up the basics; things like tying my laces and buttoning my coat didn't come easily to me. I'm left-handed, too, which meant that learning to write was excruciating. I was very happy in school, and the teachers were lovely, but I suppose I was missing the fundamentals. If it had been 2013, with today's class sizes, this would have been noticed of course, and no doubt there'd be a set of letters brought out to describe me. But I'm not curious at this point, and don't think a label would be particularly useful now. I've managed pretty well without one so far.

I don't want to be sentimental about it, but once I was able to read, there really was no stopping me. I became – and still am – a voracious reader, devouring anything I could get my hands on. I have two older sisters, so the house was full of Enid Blyton books; I ate up the *Just William* series, too. My father would bring me to the library every second weekend, and there always seemed to be something around that I could read and enjoy.

One book I really loved (and still have, actually) was *Benjy*, by a man called Edwin O'Connor, who would have been a big literary name at the time. It arrived in one of the

boxes my uncle used to send us from America; my father would take the blade out of his razor to slice the boxes open. The story was about a spoilt little lad with an overbearing mother, and what I particularly remember is the way O'Connor seemed to suggest things that weren't explicit in the text. For example, there's a policeman who keeps coming to visit, and I got a definite sense that there was something funny going on between the cop and Benjy's ma. I relished the sense that I was in on something, as the reader – like the author and I were sharing a secret.

Writing for children is a very different process from writing for adults. There's a little bit of madness in most of the books I've written for kids – the Monty Python fan in me gets out, and it's a chance for me to play with all those things that are constantly bubbling away in my sense of humour, but that I have to keep shoved down when I'm writing for grown ups. Interestingly, although I can spend all day working on a novel for adults, I can only spend a couple of hours at a time on a children's book. I can't sustain the style – or the craziness – for any longer.

With Fighting Words, the creative writing centre I set up in 2009, we are trying to make writing – the whole creative process – as inviting and open as possible. We want to encourage children to experiment, take risks, and change their minds. The way the education system is set up in Ireland at the moment, there's no room for failure – yet for a writer, failure can be a good day's work. Deleting passages can be a positive thing, for example, but because kids are being geared towards exams and taught by rote, there's no space for them to learn this. And when you are writing something that has to be delivered quickly, grammar and punctuation become immediate concerns, when really, they shouldn't matter until much later down the line.

The trouble with fitting creative writing into schools is that it's not easy to measure; education seems to be all about assessment and comparison right now. When teachers see what happens with organisations like Fighting Words, and the Ministry of Stories, in London, they find it very reassuring. You don't need to be a great writer to encourage kids to write well, just as you don't need to be a fantastic footballer to coach a team. And when children start to write with confidence, you see facets of them that have been hidden before. It's hugely enjoyable.

"We want to encourage children to experiment, take risks, and change their minds. The way the education system is set up in Ireland at the moment, there's no room for failure – yet for a writer, failure can be a good day's work."

LIZ CHAMBERLAIN is a senior lecturer in primary education at the Open University

Places to find POEMS

Similes, metaphors and all kinds of evocative language await discovery in the local environment, says **Liz Chamberlain**...

Poetry is often viewed as the poor relation when planning literacy units, which is a shame as it allows children both to communicate complex ideas through words and phrases and to connect emotionally though their own and other people's writing. Despite its apparent brevity, it also requires a knowledge of language that can be squashed and reshaped – but it doesn't have to be difficult. Favourite poems by Kit Wright, Jackie Kay, Michael Rosen and Brian Moses demonstrate that poetry can be just a list of things found in the pockets of shipwrecked sailors or special items added to magic boxes. And simply watching the world and noticing regular events can lead to funny observations best captured in pithy phrases.

Words, after all, are everywhere and can be found in the most random of places: on buildings or posters that demand your attention. Even very young children take notice: one of the first things they do is try to read words found on boxes in supermarkets, and they quickly learn to recognise those iconic golden arches and what they mean.

To capitalise on this, we can look for poetic opportunities in our local environment. You might, for instance, create a poetry wall by asking each child to write her favourite word on card, laminate, and add magnets before placing on a steel background. Then stand back and watch what happens. Over playtimes, children can create their own poems that can be captured with photographs and displayed on screen or exhibited in class displays. The same idea can be used in the classroom with a dedicated poetry wall and sticky notes – add a word, change the order, substitute or delete. The process of children deliberating to select the right word encourages a meta-language for talking about and justifying their choices.

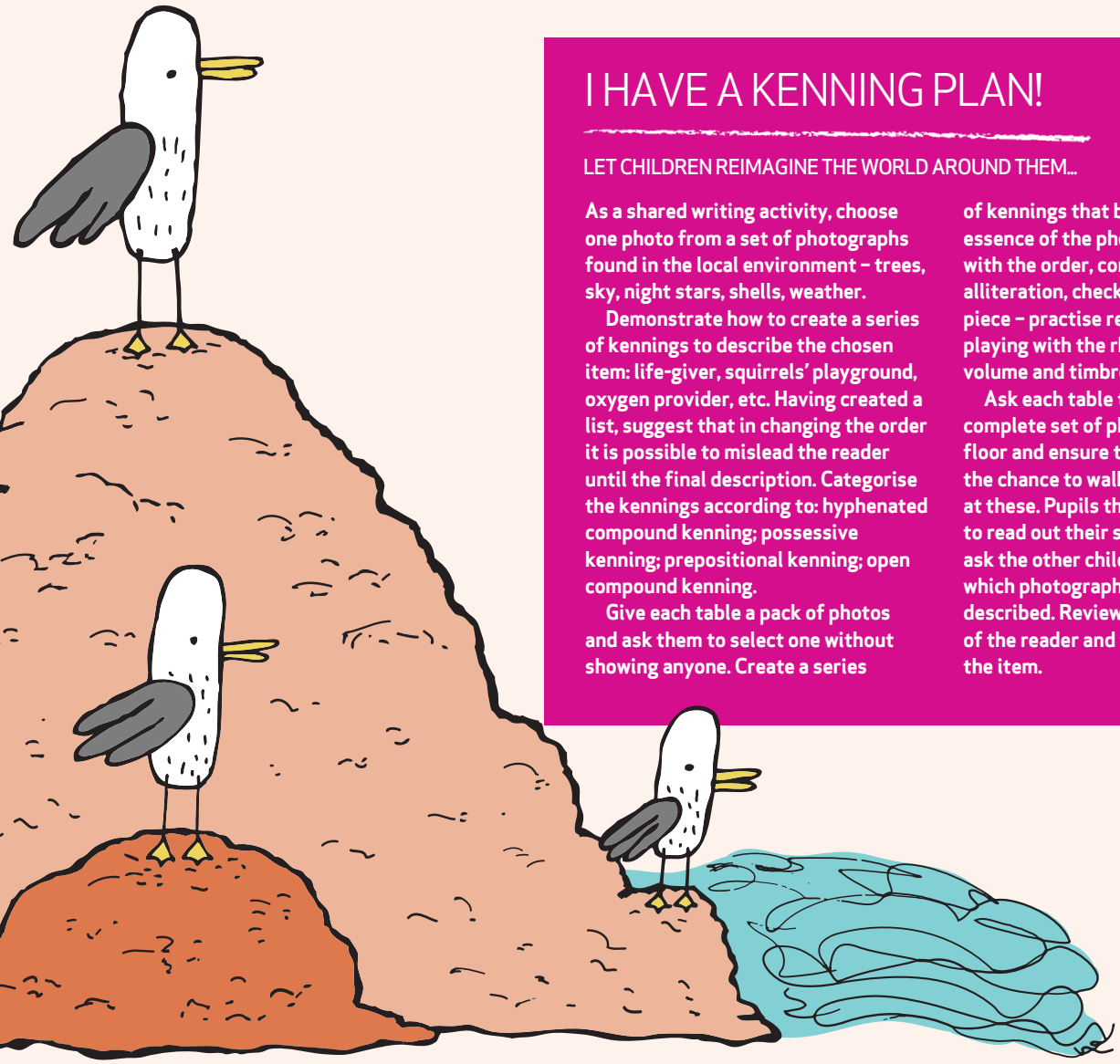
"Words, after all, are everywhere and can be found in the most random of places: on buildings or posters that demand your attention."

In a similar way, artists have used words to produce stunning images of haikus created within the environment; decided not by people, but by animals. Poet and artist Valerie Laws was inspired by the landscape and painted individual words of a poem on sheep to celebrate quantum theory. It was then up to the sheep to rewrite the poems simply through movement, resulting in the possibility of 80 billion haikus (or haik-ewes, even).

Discover new meanings

Poetry is not a new invention. The narrative poem *The Odyssey* was written in the eighth century, and the Anglo-Saxon story *Beowulf* came even earlier, with its beautiful use of kennings to describe the everyday objects of the times. However, capturing the meaning of something in just two words requires creativity and craft. What do you image a bone house to be, or a wave-floater? (Answers: the human body and a ship.)

The idea of using compound words in this way can be extended to phrases as children are encouraged to design, or 'de-sign', the



I HAVE A KENNING PLAN!

LET CHILDREN REIMAGINE THE WORLD AROUND THEM...

As a shared writing activity, choose one photo from a set of photographs found in the local environment – trees, sky, night stars, shells, weather.

Demonstrate how to create a series of kennings to describe the chosen item: life-giver, squirrels' playground, oxygen provider, etc. Having created a list, suggest that in changing the order it is possible to mislead the reader until the final description. Categorise the kennings according to: hyphenated compound kenning; possessive kenning; prepositional kenning; open compound kenning.

Give each table a pack of photos and ask them to select one without showing anyone. Create a series of kennings that best capture the essence of the photograph. Play with the order, consider the use of alliteration, check the rhythm of the piece – practise reading aloud and playing with the rhythm, tempo, pitch, volume and timbre.

Ask each table to lay out their complete set of photographs on the floor and ensure the children have the chance to walk around and look at these. Pupils then take it in turns to read out their set of kennings and ask the other children to predict which photograph they think is being described. Review the effectiveness of the reader and the description of the item.

school environment with sticky notes or prepared pieces of card. The children who de-signed the 'silent parlour of study' were not describing the staff room; it was the library that conjured up this image (staff were too busy in the 'chatterbox room'). Other ideas might include 'sparky holes' or 'darkness eliminators' for plug sockets or light switches. All this involves children in decision making and encourages discussion about language choices and the effect on the reader.

Poetry with parents

At Maple Park Primary School, pupils were involved in generating poems that hung from the trees in the playground, lined the borders of the gardens, stretched across footpaths, with favourite words carved onto stepping stones. In transforming an under-used corner of the grounds into a new outdoor theatre space, children now had an area where poetry could be performed, plays enacted, and speeches delivered. The playground was saturated with language and poetry, with pupils keen to use the outdoor space during playtimes.

To use a similar idea, why not invite parents into school to accompany the children on a number of local walks – in the school grounds, the woods, a local park – in search of a tree? Having found one, ask pupils to draw a quick sketch and label the different parts, thinking of as many words as possible to describe each. Write a list, select favourite words and then use their prior knowledge of similes to compare each part of the tree with something suitable: 'Spindly branches reaching out to me like a witch's claw'. For many parents, this technical vocabulary may be unfamiliar, so it will be up to the children to do the teaching. To consolidate parents' learning, ask the pupils to create a treasure trail of words around the school, using a range of poetic forms to describe key places. Parents can then follow the trail using the clues from the poems, before working with their children on a shared piece of writing. As a starting point, use the words generated on the first trip and categorise them into adjectives, verbs and nouns, writing the words on individual coloured cards before placing them in three different jars. The parents choose three words from each jar and, using only these words, they write their own poems to share in a celebration assembly.

CHARLOTTE HACKING is the learning programmes leader at the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE)

Quality counts

Want to engage and motivate children as readers and writers? Then choose brilliant books, and use them brilliantly, says **Charlotte Hacking**

The use of high-quality books within the reading curriculum should be at the heart of any school's approach to engaging and supporting children to become motivated and independent readers. Quite simply, if children enjoy reading, they will do it more frequently and become better at it. So, from CLPE's research into the role of core books for teaching English – and through our work with schools that have implemented this approach – what have we learnt about how to choose and use texts in the classroom?

First, it's important that schools have a collection of books from a wide and diverse range of authors, illustrators, genres and forms. There are various resources that can help with this: CLPE's Core Books Online database contains books that have been tried, tested and found to work successfully in classrooms, while websites such as Books for Keeps (booksforkeeps.co.uk) and Letterbox Library (letterboxlibrary.com) and magazines such as Carousel (carouselguide.co.uk) share regular reviews of new children's books and offer further suggestions for a diverse range of choices.

It's also essential that staff become familiar with the ways in which different books can be used to support a variety of reading experiences. Build up a bank of titles that you enjoy, and that you know work in particular contexts. For example, consider stories which lend themselves especially well to reading aloud, those that can be used to support teaching, and those that are better for groups or for individuals.

If all those who work in schools know about the best children's literature available they will be able to share that with the youngsters they support, and encourage them to be inspired and motivated to read for themselves. Having a bulletin board in the staffroom or a regular slot in staff meetings for teachers to share good books they've read or used in class will help spread knowledge of great reads. A dedicated bookshelf where new texts can be sourced and displayed in a central place will help teachers to keep abreast of what is available, and contribute to making reading more accessible and irresistible throughout the whole school community.

Illustration: Chris Judge, from *The Lonely Beast* (Andersen Press, 2011)

Active involvement

Secondly, when choosing and using texts for teaching, the ideal is to plan a sequence of activities that allow deep understanding, and explore different genres within that to enable writing for purpose. Slowly revealing the content of a book works well and captivates children. Reading a book together, engaging in talk about it, and basing drama around it, will draw out meanings and understanding pupils might not otherwise have had. For example:

1 Using Chris Judge's *The Lonely Beast* (Andersen Press, 2011), 'Role on the Wall' is a perfect introductory activity to get children to understand the perception of the Beast by others. An imposing giant, he strikes fear into the citizens of the city upon his arrival. Observing this scene through the illustration which comes towards the middle of the story is an ideal starting point to get the children to look at the Beast through the eyes of others before learning how to build empathy for the character and his plight of wanting to find a friend. Role on the Wall is a technique that uses a displayed outline of the character to record feelings (inside the outline) and outward appearances (outside the outline) at various stopping points throughout the story. Using a different colour at each of the stopping points allows you to track changes in the character's emotional journey. This text also offers opportunities to produce poetry and non-chronological reports about the different sea animals the Beast meets on his journey, and newspaper articles to convey the Beast's story.

2 David Almond's *Mouse, Bird, Snake Wolf* (Walker, 2013) provides opportunities to explore the idea of rights and responsibilities within the context of an engaging illustrated short novel. When the Gods of Ben, Sue and Harry's world become lazy and nonchalant, they forget to fill the 'spaces' left in the world. The children take it upon themselves to create new beasts to fill the gaps, becoming more adventurous at each step. 'Conscience Alley' is a useful technique for exploring any kind of dilemma faced by a character, providing an opportunity to analyse a decisive moment in greater detail. Here, it can allow pupils to step inside the story and consider the benefits and consequences of the children's actions, looking at the choices they make from both sides. The class forms two lines facing each other. One person takes the role of the protagonist and walks between the lines as each member of the group speaks their advice, before the protagonist makes their decision. Debate and argument arising from this activity can also lead to writing arguments for or against the choices the children make.

Find CLPE's Core Book database with a range of texts and a selection of free teaching sequences for children across the primary years at: www.clpe.org.uk/corebooks

Learn more about a range of creative teaching approaches, and access a wealth of texts and related teaching sequences for teaching English through CLPE's Power of Reading project: www.clpe.org.uk/powerofreading

Illustration: Dave McKean, from *Mouse Bird Snake Wolf*, by David Almond (Walker, 2013)

CHOOSING AND USING BOOKS: 4 things to consider

1 Start with a text that enthuses you rather than shoehorning books in to fit a set topic.

2 Recognise that texts need not always be books. Explore a variety of formats and approaches, including multimedia. This is the case across the full range of literature but has particular pertinence when it comes to information texts.

3 Provide books that allow children to see themselves reflected in what they read and to have the opportunity to investigate other lives, worlds and perspectives in their reading.

4 Ensure there are texts that children can engage with in a variety of ways depending on their views, responses, maturity, tastes and choices.

CARYS RICHARDS is senior lecturer at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David

Off screen

Technology is a great enabler across the curriculum, says **Carys Richards** – but to succeed in literacy, oracy must come first

Technology enhanced learning, computer literacy and software savvy are common terms within the teaching profession. Today's so-called 'digital natives' have grown up in a world of mobile devices and instant internet access; for them, it's always been this way. However, given the time spent by our current young generation engaging in screen activities, might it perhaps be worth investigating whether there's any kind of link between the apparent decline in literacy standards we see around us and the surge of computer use in classrooms and leisure pursuits?

Education policies and curricula highlight the importance of including technologies regularly within lessons. With this in mind, there is perhaps a tendency towards overreliance on screen-based activities as opposed to the experiential and social tasks that secure the building blocks of early literacy and communication. Ensuring quality language development during early childhood is imperative, as it lays the foundations for more sophisticated thought and learning at a later stage. Embedding the spoken word and a broad vocabulary creates neuronal pathways in the brain, forging new connections from the experiences in which an individual has participated.

Oracy and socialisation develop initially through listening, mimicking, repetition and recall. Exchanges between adult and child through 'intentional pedagogy' (a term coined by Iram Siraj) extend the talk from description to sustained shared thinking - making the learning audible about a topic, occurence or interesting object. If children are constantly engaged in screen activities these interactions are few and far between; when adults are observing children during their play or exploration, on the other hand, this gives rise to any number of linguistic interactions, and increases the child's well being. Knowing when and how to join in and extend the learning is a skill unique to social encounters that cannot be replicated to the same extent by technology.

Matter of mind

Mindfulness, a technique that encourages thinking and focusing at a deepened level, drifting from the concrete to abstract, is gaining increasing credence in academic and educational circles. Lazar, Broderick and Metz and Hollenbeck amongst others highlight the potential benefits of using mindfulness as a learning tool; these include heightened self-efficacy, increased personal and interpersonal skills, and a better working memory and performance. In a digitally charged world of fast moving bright images children need a degree of calm and quiet time to contemplate and reflect. Classrooms can become overloaded with 'visual noise'; a stimulus that is meant to support pupils' learning but in fact, often interferes with their thought processes.

In terms of supporting research, Schonert-Reichl & Lowler (2010) investigated the possible effects of mindfulness on children's wellbeing and social and emotional competence, whilst Houston, Turner and Page (2007) used Langer's work on 'mindful learning' to analyse second language learning and instruction. The studies found that social interaction was a crucial factor to the success of many aspects of development, one of those being language and communication.

Developing children's language requires interaction, a to-ing and fro-ing of speech, and creating environments that support and stimulate communication in a developmentally appropriate manner. Employing methods to focus and deepen thoughts enables youngsters to embed their new found skills or vocabulary – giving them meaning. But literacy is more than words, and

"Much research shows that nothing can replicate the quality interaction of highly skilled practitioners and their impact on children's standards"

learning the rules of language, socially accepted behaviour and articulation of feelings and thoughts develop from role models practising their preachings. Children develop sensitivities to the spoken word, appropriateness and processing by observing the cues and clues modelled by the 'more able others' or adults around them. Computer screens can show clips of characters gesturing or reflecting various behaviours, however, the subtleties of discussion are not present. Often, the signals sent through expression and gesture, eye focus and intonation of voice all play a critical role in children's understanding and language acquisition. Non-verbal communication can heighten the experience beyond sound or the printed word to include emotive content.

5 WAYS TO AVOID 'SQUARE EYES SYNDROME'

- **Avoid googling and get thinking**
  Encourage children to use their imagination, ask questions, and share what they already know in innovative ways.
- **Location, location**
  Avoid using the carpet area and IWB for the introduction/ plenary; go outside, in the hall, under a blanket…make it exciting!
- **Have a purpose**
  Be intentional not lazy in your use of technology – make sure it's an enhancement, rather than a default.
- **Celebrate sound**
  Play music without video; as a stimulus or thinking tool it can focus and calm or inspire enthusiasm.
- **Stimulate the senses**
  Try to use them all as you explore and investigate. What colour is Christmas? What does it sound like?

Time to talk

By reducing the use of screen based activities, then, and embracing a social interactional model as proposed by Vygotsky, Laevers and more recently Siraj, we are ensuring pupils have the best possible opportunity of developing their early reading and writing – although caution must be taken not to forge ahead and focus on these aspects before the child is armed and ready with a sound basis of talk and communication; as failure early on can have far ranging implications for the individual's enjoyment of and confidence in literacy at a later stage.

Technology can and does support some forms of learning, and children should be exposd to advances – but they should always be enhancements, not replacements. Much research shows that nothing can replicate the quality interaction of highly skilled practitioners and their impact on children's standards, development and yearning to learn.

Poor oracy does have a direct effect on children's ability to read and write; knowing this fact is surely a motivator to ensure that children are given ample opportunity to chat, talk, discuss, debate, question and describe – alongside using technology appropriately as part of the learning process – as opposed to an overloaded digital diet of searching, dragging and dropping, activating, tagging and hyper linking. Let's avoid the mute and press the reset button in order to ensure a balanced diet of digital and dialogue.

MARTIN STEWART is the author of Riverkeep (Penguin)

Forbidden attractions

Should teachers be worried that increasing numbers of KS2 pupils are devouring graphic and gory dystopian fiction aimed at young adults? Far from it, says **Martin Stewart**

I have a very strong memory of reading *Jurassic Park* when the film was in cinemas: it was 1993, and I would have been ten years old. I had gone straight from Enid Blyton to adult novels, because that was what we did back then - the connective tissue of Young Adult didn't exist.

YA fiction is a uniquely diverse, genre-crossing world. Within its walls can be found books for any reading ability, written with wit, creativity and skill; and representing racial, sexual and gender issues with consideration and love.

Given all this variety, then, the apparent stranglehold of dystopian fiction on YA has raised questions for the curators of young people's reading in school and at home. Why are these stories - *The Hunger Games, Maze Runner, Divergent* et al - so popular with the nation's youth, often including children who are considerably younger than the ostensible target audience amongst their fans? Are they suitable? Are they having a deleterious effect on young readers?

A fast fix

The appeal of dystopia is no mystery. Fictional characters are driven by loss and need, and dystopian protagonists are the purest distillation of that drive: they have lost their liberty, their dignity, their safety – and they need everything. Their lives are structured by the antagonist - the oppressive state/occupying force/space aliens - so the enemy is clear and powerful and loathsome.

Dystopian characters are hard-wired with the need for freedom, reflecting the desire of young readers beginning to push against the boundaries of their own parent-controlled world, and their stakes are built into the setting; into their habits and behaviours and clothing. Everything a book needs is on the first page, instant and sweet: dystopia is the energy drink of plot, and it's no surprise that young readers guzzle it down.

Before I was a writer, I was an English teacher for six years, and I know that judgements on suitability are tricky and subjective; ten and eleven year olds are unique in their interests and maturity, and no two are alike. Which books children should be reading is only answerable on an individual basis, and that's up to librarians, teachers, parents and, ultimately, the readers themselves. Young people know best what's too scary or too violent for them, and they'll put a book down if it makes them uncomfortable.

The violent content of many dystopian novels has been a cause for concern for some guardians, but it's important to consider it in context. A violent scene in a book will place the reader inside the skin of the victim, the perpetrator, or both; and the imaginative agency required of them means the consequences of violence are explored with greater depth than in a video game or film. The acts of violence in YA novels, which might sound excessive if described in

isolation, are given a resonance in context that allows a young reader to explore their consequences safely.

Positive choices

It's almost trite, but it's true: no reading is bad reading. The benefits of reading fiction on cognitive and empathic development, as well as the honing of language, are well established, and these apply to YA's dystopian staples as much as any other text. And there's more.

The essence of a dystopian world is the stripping away of the comforts and securities we take for granted. Experiencing that kind of privation through a book demands that the reader considers the means by which humanity could be maintained in such adversity – in other words, what it means to be human without the structures of civilised society to guide our behaviours. And what this always amounts to is love, compassion, courage, and friendship. Noble values, and universal; recognisable in all the greatest fiction.

So how should we, as custodians and promoters of reading, respond to a dystopia-obsessed young reader? The answer must surely be, with delight and encouragement. Hollywood adaptations have created a misconception among certain commentators that YA fiction is nothing but dystopian Chosen Ones battling their sinister overlords. This is, of course, bunkum.

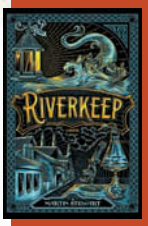
Your hungry reader might chew their way through a slew of dystopian series in quick succession - and once they do, they'll be looking for their next fix. This is where we, the curators, can help, encouraging them into new areas, different genres and styles, and yes, into new dystopian worlds.

Discouraging or deriding any kind of reading is never a good idea - nor should we shy away from acknowledging these pop culture behemoths in classroom discussion. Instead, we should think about how dystopia draws on universal literary concerns. What makes the tough choices of Thomas in *The Maze Runner* so different from Ralph's in *Lord of the Flies*? Or Katniss' *Hunger Games* dream of a safe, free life so different from George and Lennie, grinding away on dry ranches in *Of Mice and Men*?

Tough choices and dreams are the lifeblood of fiction. No stories exist in a vacuum - their characters and themes intersect, and harnessing these big ideas could lead pupils more confidently towards a deeper understanding of set texts later on in their learning journey, and unlock their literacy skills in a manner that could help them succeed in other curricular areas.

Dystopian fiction is a safe and thrilling space in which young readers can challenge themselves with satsifyingly scary, adult-free, non-didactic stories about what it means to be human, and to consider the means by which authority is wielded. Rather than fear them, we should be excited when they grab the attention of a young reader, and do our best to shine light on the page.

SIX GREAT TITLES FOR YOUNGER DYSTOPIA FANS

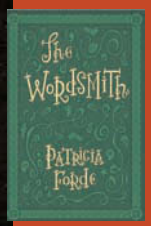


Riverkeep
(Martin Stewart, Penguin)
More fantasy than dystopia – but satisfyingly dark and strange, this atmospheric tale will captivate readers who already love Patrick Ness, Neil Gaiman and Margo Lanagan.

Lockwood & Co: The Creeping Shadow
(Jonathan Stroud, Corgi)
Stroud's clever, funny and scary series recalls a kind of cross between Sherlock and Ghostbusters. Rick Riordan thinks the author is a genius - will your pupils agree?

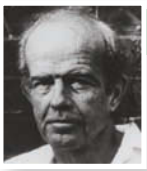
Movers
(Meaghan McIsaac, Andersen Press)
A thrilling and cinematic science fiction series with an original time travel twist, set in a futuristic world where some are born with the power to move people from another time.

Slated
(Teri Terry, Orchard)
Terry has won multiple awards for her series about a girl whose memory has been erased. Is Kyla a terrorist, as the government claims, or is there something else going on?



The Wordsmith
(Patricia Forde, Little Island Books)
Pacy and exciting speculative fiction that will start children thinking about the role of language and arts in society, and what the world would be like without them.

Black Light Express
(Philip Reeve, OUP)
In Railhead, Reeve created a breathtakingly original setting in which sentient trains traverse the galaxy – Black Light Express is its equally brilliant sequel.



John Burningham

"I can spend weeks trying to construct a sentence"

John Burningham has been writing for children for over six decades – and it's still as challenging as it is enjoyable

I must have learnt to read at some point, I suppose – but in all honesty it was such a long time ago now that I simply can't recall ever not being able to do it. Our house wasn't an especially bookish one, but my mother was very good about reading to us, and I have fond memories of sitting with her as she turned the pages and told the story. It's a wonderful thing, to be read to – but of course in this day and age, with television and computer screens everywhere, it can be a battle for families to find the time.

I've never been a particularly good reader, it must be said. As a child I was more likely to be climbing trees and getting muddy than sitting quietly with a book – and as an adult, well, reading is something that I'm always intending to get back to. It's so easy to get out of the way of doing it, especially if, like me, you are very slow at it. My wife, on the other hand, reads constantly – as well as working – so I know it can be done.

It seems to me that schools have a part to play in encouraging a love of reading and again, I believe that ensuring there is the opportunity for children to be read to is important. If you tell a child, 'you must finish this chapter before lunch,' then it becomes a chore and something that he or she will be glad to get away from once school is over – but finding even just ten or fifteen minutes in the day when someone who can do it well is able to read aloud in the classroom can be very inspiring.

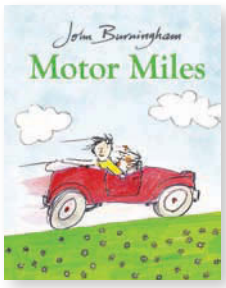
My own education was a little unusual, in that I went to a total of nine schools before ending up at Summerhill for the last five years, which is an independent boarding school with an ethos of democratic governance – decisions are made at school meetings, with all children and staff having a vote if they want to use

it, and everyone is free to do as they please, as long as their actions don't cause harm to others. This meant that I had the advantage of never being pressured into anything. There is so much testing of children these days, and they are expected to reach certain targets at particular ages – but of course, they all develop in their own way and time. A.S. Neill, Summerhill's founder, understood that, and he also knew that if young people go to lessons when they want to go to lessons, they'll learn.

Like many young people, I left school with no idea of what I wanted to do next. Two and a half years of alternative military service involved some extraordinary work and places, but it wasn't until I bumped into another ex-Summerhillian on Waterloo Bridge one day and asked what he was doing now that I knew what my next step would be. He was studying art and graphic design at Central, and as soon as he said it, I thought, 'what a good idea!'. Luckily for me, they let me in on the strength of my portfolio, without a prediploma course – and everything just sort of happened from there. My first children's book, *Borka*, won the Kate Greenaway Medal... and I've been writing and illustrating ever since.

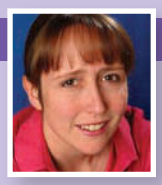
I'm often asked where the ideas for my books come from, and my answer is not unlike the one that Tom Stoppard apparently gave to the same question: if I knew, I'd go there. That said, my most recent book, *Motor Miles*, is most definitely based on our current dog. He absolutely loves cars, detests walking, and is generally appalling really.

I do think that I have the ability to be able to communicate with children – even though I don't spend a lot of time with them, or go into schools or anything. Some people have the idea that writing for little ones is easy, but it's not at all. I can spend weeks trying to construct a sentence that will describe something in a way that I'm sure they'll accept. The thing about children is they are totally tactless; if they don't like something, they'll just push it away and refuse to go near it again. So you have to get it right.



John Burningham's latest book, *Motor Miles* (Penguin Random House Children's), is out now.

"I've never been a particularly good reader, it must be said. As a child I was more likely to be climbing trees and getting muddy than sitting quietly with a book – and as an adult, well, reading is something that I'm always intending to get back to."



SUE COWLEY is an author, teacher and trainer (www.suecowley.co.uk)

SAME DIFFERENCE

With a bit of a twist, the most familiar stories can teach children some unexpected lessons, says **Sue Cowley**

One of the wonderful things about traditional fairy and folk tales is their longevity; the way they are passed down from generation to generation gives them real resonance within a culture. There is generally a lot of subtext hidden behind the apparently simple story lines, and the plots may be rather dark (for the disturbing origins of some well-known fairy tales - although definitely not ones to share with pupils - see ow.ly/3wca304Txw7). These are narratives that often reflect the fears, attitudes and prejudices of a society that is long gone – one in which princesses were helpless, wolves were evil and stepsisters were ugly. Teachers have a wonderful opportunity to help their children understand stereotypes and to challenge their perceptions, then, by using familiar stories retold in a modern format.

Start by encouraging your class to think about traditional tales as a genre. What do pupils think are the main/required ingredients of a folk or fairy story? How many such stories can they name? When and where did they first hear them? How are they passed from one generation to the next – and why do we end up with different versions of the same story? Discuss the plot lines children would expect to find in a traditional tale, and what phrases and vocabulary they think are likely to be used in the telling of them (make a list, starting – of course – with 'Once upon a time'). Do your learners know any traditional stories from other countries?

Traditional tales tend to have a moral of some kind – talk with the children about what this means. Can they identify morals in the stories they've already discussed? As a fun prelude to playing around with established narratives, share the book *Mixed Up Fairy Tales* with your class. Which familiar stories can pupils spot? Why does it make them funny when we mix them up together?

Popular pigs and wicked wolves

The 'Big Bad Wolf' tends to get a bad press – he is the villain in stories like *Little Red Riding Hood* and *The Three Little Pigs*. Why do the children think that wolves are used as 'baddies'? There are some delightful new versions of *The Three Little Pigs*, told from various different angles. *In The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, an Americanised wolf explains that he was only trying to borrow a cup of sugar from the pigs, and it wasn't his fault that he sneezed and brought their houses down. After reading the story:

- Talk about the language in the book – how has the original wording been adapted to create the new version? For instance, "Way back in once upon a time time" / "I huffed and I snuffed and I sneezed a great sneeze".
- Write scripts of a police interview with Alexander T. Wolf, and record these. Use the US version of the 'Miranda Rights' for added authenticity.
- In the book, the story appears in "The Daily Pig". Discuss how a wolf reporter might have reported the story differently. Get the children to write an alternative version for "The Daily Wolf".
- Create a talk show episode on which the wolf and the pigs appear, to be interviewed and to put their sides of the story. Your talk show could have the tagline: "Wolfie Strikes Back".
- In *The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig* the characters are reversed, with the wolves attacked by the pig. The building materials are modernised; as is the way the houses are demolished. After sharing the book:
- Identify the phrases from the story that the children recognise from the original. Why does the author echo words from the traditional tale?
- Explore why the author describes the wolves as "three cuddly little wolves with soft fur and fluffy tails". How is the reader meant to feel about the wolves from this description? Get the children to write their own descriptions, using lots of adjectives.
- In this version, the wolves get bricks from a kangaroo, concrete from a beaver, metal from a rhinoceros and flowers from a flamingo. Why do the children think that the author chose these particular animals? Write some descriptions of the creatures, with adjectives to help the reader understand their characters.
- Discuss why the wolves choose flowers as their final building material. Was this a good choice? Why does the Big Bad Pig change his mind about eating the wolves? What is the moral here?

Changing stories

Once you've worked on some versions of traditional tales told from a different perspective, the children should be ready to develop ideas of their own. They could:

- Draw story maps of some of the original tales, and use these to identify which characters or parts of the plot they could change.
- Write a story with an alternative title, based on the familiar structure. For instance, The Three Little Flies and the Big Bad Spider.
- Compose a version of Cinderella where the ugly sisters explain why they have been misunderstood, and how they weren't actually horrible to her.
- Create Top Trumps style cards for different fairytale characters, adapted so that they are the opposite of what we would normally expect.
- Come up with a version of a story where the traditional 'villain' is swapped with the traditional 'hero'. For instance, three trolls trying to get over a bridge that has an evil goat lurking below.
- Rewrite a traditional story from the viewpoint of an inanimate object (see *The Pea and the Princess* for inspiration).
- Dramatise some scenes in which various fairytale characters appear in surprising incarnations – as happens in the popular film series *Shrek*.
- Look at some traditional tales from other cultures – how are these similar and different to stories from Britain? Which parts of the narratives might we change to update them?

Perfect princesses and pucker princes

The princesses in many well-known traditional tales are not great role models. Use rewritten stories to challenge old-fashioned stereotypes; first, ask the children to brainstorm what a storybook 'princess' would be like. Now read Babette Cole's *Princess Smartypants*:

- What words would they use to describe this princess?
- How is she different from a traditional storybook princess?
- Why does Princess Smartypants turn the prince into a frog?
- Introduce the word 'stereotype' to the class. What kinds of characters tend to get stereotyped in stories?

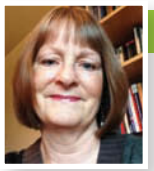
Of course it is not just girls who get stereotyped in stories – boys do, too. Read a traditional version of *Cinderella*, and then read Babette Cole's *Prince Cinders*:

- How does Babette Cole's version of the story differ from the original? What similarities are there?
- Why do the children think the author makes the fairy godmother appear dirty and the spells go wrong?
- What words would we normally associate with a prince? What words would we use to describe Prince Cinders?
- Why do the children think the book ends with the ugly brothers being turned into house fairies?

THE READING LIST

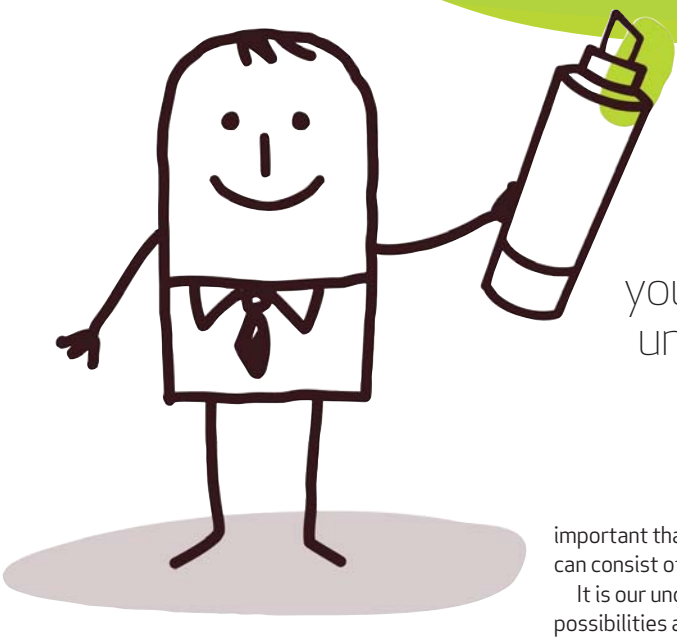
- ***Mixed Up Fairy Tales*** by Hilary Robinson and Nick Sharratt (Hodder Children's Books 2005)
- ***The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*** by Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith (Picture Puffin 1991)
- ***The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig*** by Eugene Trivizas and Helen Oxenbury (Egmont 2015)
- ***Princess Smartypants*** by Babette Cole (Puffin, 1996)
- ***Prince Cinders*** by Babette Cole (Puffin, 1997)
- ***The Pea and the Princess*** by Mini Grey (Red Fox 2004)

For a description of various kinds of traditional tales see **crickcrackclub.com/MAIN/TYPES.PDF**



DEBRA MYHILL is a professor, pro vice chancellor and executive dean at the University of Exeter

So you think you know sentences?



Debra Myhill's masterclass takes you through all the elements of this vital unit of meaning, from capital letter to...

It's actually quite difficult to explain what a sentence is – if children are taught rigid definitions or rules, they are likely to be puzzled by examples that don't conform to expectations, and they may be less likely to take risks and experiment with variation in their own writing. Instead, teaching should emphasise how flexible the sentence is as a unit of meaning, and build children's understanding of the choices available to them that will achieve specific effects in different writing contexts.

All the elements

A sentence can consist of just one clause (a simple sentence with one finite verb) or a number of clauses that are linked through coordination or subordination. Each clause in a sentence is made up of different combinations of the following elements: the subject (S), the verb (V), the object (O), the complement (C) and the adverbial (A). It's important that children know each element can consist of one word, or several.

It is our understanding of syntactic possibilities and probabilities that can help us notice unusual sentence patterns. Look at this sentence from Michael Morpurgo's *Arthur, High King of Britain:*

"And, to my amazement, up out of the lake came a shining sword, a hand holding it, and an arm in a white silk sleeve."

The order of elements in most sentence subjects is subject + verb (SV), but here, the subject is placed after the verb. Moreover, both the subject and the finite verb come late in the sentence, after the adverbial element (... to my amazement, up out of the lake...). Subject-verb inversions delay the revealing of the subject, for different purposes according to context. Here, you might think it builds up the drama, or even represents grammatically the visual effect of Excalibur rising out of the water. In another context, it could create suspense or surprise, or allow the writer to foreground different information at the beginning of the sentence. Manipulating syntactic structure, therefore, is an important way of achieving sentence variety.

According to type

All sentences can be grouped into two main categories: minor (or irregular), and major (or regular). The former do not follow all the syntactic rules. They are common in signs, labels, titles and idioms, as well as in many of the texts children read, and are a frequent feature of effective writing. In this example, from Michael Rosen's *Don't Forget Tiggs*, only the second sentence is complete:

"And then, Mr Hurry. Off he hurried. Out of the house, down the road, off to work. Whoosh!"

Major sentences are the most common type, and typical of more formal writing. They always contain a finite verb, usually a subject and may contain other clauses, such as an adverbial:

Hurry! (implied second-person subject + finite verb)
They hurried. (pronoun subject + finite verb)
The children hurried down the road. (noun phrase subject + finite verb + adverbial)

You will see from these examples that the finite verb is the vital component in a major sentence and it's worth spending time to secure children's understanding of this.

Sentences are also classified according to the function they perform, and there are four different types, each with distinctive grammatical patterns.

A **statement** (or declarative sentence) is the most common type. Typically, the subject comes before the verb and is often placed at the beginning of a sentence, a 'normal' pattern that helps us spot variations, like this one: *Never before had the Iron Man seen the sea.*

A **question** (or interrogative sentence) can start with a question word (who, what, how etc.) or an auxiliary verb (are, do, have etc.). It can also end with a tag that invites confirmation (e.g. didn't you?). A rhetorical question is structured as a query, but doesn't require an answer: *Who can say where the Iron Man came from?*

A **command** (or imperative sentence) has an implied subject (you) and a verb in the imperative mood. It may start with 'Do' for emphasis or to sound polite (Do come inside), or Don't to create a negative. In some forms it has a stated subject: *Everybody, listen up!* It is always in the present tense.

An **exclamation** expresses strong emotion, such as surprise, pleasure, humour or anger. The exclamation mark suggests the necessary tone of voice and emphasis. They are often minor sentences or interjections: *A giant! Crash!*

Different kinds of texts often have characteristic sentence types that children will need to be able to imitate in order to 'sound like an expert' – for example, instructional texts have a high proportion of commands.

"Confident writers deliberately vary the sentence types and structures they use. However, children's understanding of how to do this can often be limited to such techniques as 'adding more adjectives' and using lots of short, snappy sentences'."

Infinite variety

Confident writers deliberately vary the sentence types and structures they use. However, children's understanding of how to do this can often be limited to such techniques as 'adding more adjectives' and 'using lots of short, snappy sentences'. Of course, there is no intrinsic merit in either of these, so it's helpful to frame such features as possible choices, depending on the writing's purpose. Other options include:

Different sentence lengths – short ones can be effective for making key points in an argument; stating a topic sentence in an information text; creating a quick pace, or emphasising ideas. Longer sentences can add descriptive or explanatory details. You might also consider the rhythmic patterns created when writers deliberately contrast long and short sentences.

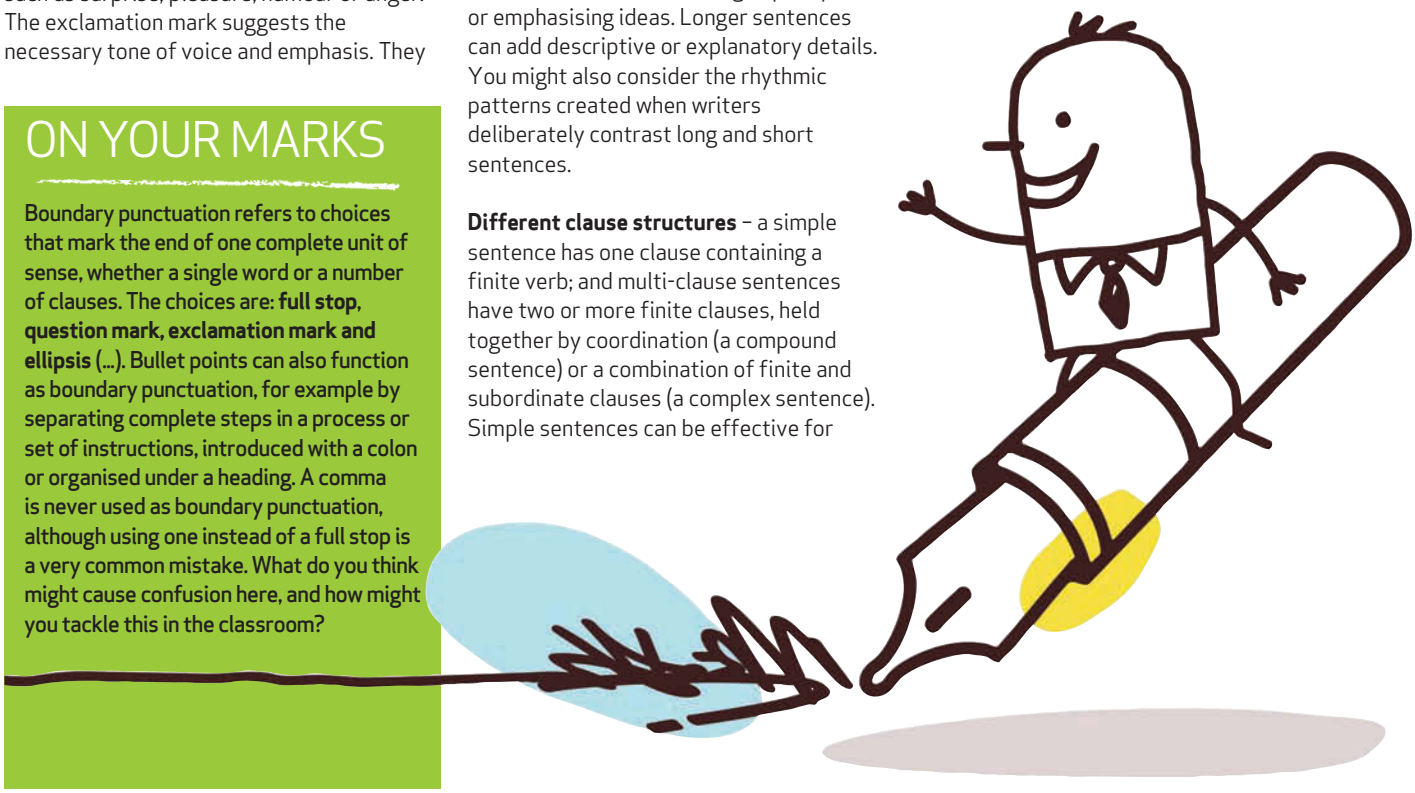
Different clause structures – a simple sentence has one clause containing a finite verb; and multi-clause sentences have two or more finite clauses, held together by coordination (a compound sentence) or a combination of finite and subordinate clauses (a complex sentence). Simple sentences can be effective for focusing attention on a single idea or argument, or drawing attention to an expressive choice of verb; coordinated clauses work to chain ideas and create pace, balance ideas and provide contrast; and subordinate clauses can be used to add layers of detail or stress the relationship between ideas.

Different sentence starters – there are many ways to create thematic variety by starting a sentence in a different way, but the most common are probably: adverbs; adverbial phrases of time; prepositional phrases; finite subordinate clauses; non-finite subordinate clauses. All of these tend to perform the adverbial function in a clause, but it is helpful when teaching to consider this range of grammatical possibilities.

Debra Myhill is the co-author, along with Susan Jones, Annabel Watson and Helen Lines (all researchers at the Centre for Research in Writing, University of Exeter) of *Essential Primary Grammar* (Open University Press, £22.99)

ON YOUR MARKS

Boundary punctuation refers to choices that mark the end of one complete unit of sense, whether a single word or a number of clauses. The choices are: full stop, question mark, exclamation mark and ellipsis (…). Bullet points can also function as boundary punctuation, for example by separating complete steps in a process or set of instructions, introduced with a colon or organised under a heading. A comma is never used as boundary punctuation, although using one instead of a full stop is a very common mistake. What do you think might cause confusion here, and how might you tackle this in the classroom?



Spellodrome

Contact: uk.spellodrome.com **Reviewed by:** John Dabell

If you've heard of Mathletics, then the chances are Spellodrome will be on your radar too. I had been dipping in and out of Spellodrome for a few years, although not recently. That was until I checked back in with the website to see what was what, and was more than pleasantly surprised to see there have been many changes that add real value. Now, I'm under its spell.

Once you've signed in to the Spellodrome Teacher Centre you're able to access a whole range of tools to enhance children's experience. This is a real power station of dynamic tools, reports and exciting resources. For starters you can easily create classes and ability groups using a simple drop-down menu to add students. For more intricate manoeuvres, Spellodrome provides a console help guide that can take you through whatever you need to do step by step.

The console lets you set and edit word lists that have been developed in accordance with the national curriculum's statutory requirements for spelling. You can select by topic or by word; and within topics you can pick whole categories or individual words and drag them over to make your own list of up to 30 spellings (you can create up to 40 lists to save and use). Differentiation is really easy too, letting you assign separate lists to different groups with a click of a button.

But what Spellodrome excels at is assessment, diagnostics and target setting. The system has been set up so that you can instantly assign tests for individual spelling and reading ages, which are then marked automatically. I can hear you cheering from here. The Assessments platform within Spellodrome is a real treat, and tracking progress is so much easier as you can access real-time data allowing you to pinpoint weak spots and areas for development.

While Spellodrome is an online spelling programme, there is always learning to be had away from the screen too. So you'll be glad to find thousands of pages of printable worksheets and workbooks that enable deeper and wider exploration of spellings, comprehension, grammar and language – all of which is great for both class and homework.

It gets even better. Spellodrome has massively expanded to include a range of exclusive visual literacy resources developed in association with authors, illustrators and media providers. They are perfect for supporting learning conversations, higher-order thinking and improving written literacy skills.

For children, Spellodrome is a hub of excitement with plenty to engage them. Activities have been designed to encourage independent learning and develop critical spelling awareness. Word lists are brought to life with brilliant games and activities such as Word Detective, Words in Pieces and Word List Workout, with bonus games such as Crossword and Find a Word.

There's also something called LIVE Spellodrome (it's the same formula as LIVE Mathletics), a real-time spelling race challenge where children can compete against friends in school and players and around the word. This offers children a fun way to test their spelling powers, increase their speed and boost their confidence. The activities available will make them want to keep playing, so it can also help increase their vocabulary, comprehension and writing.

The clear and immediate feedback, combined with plenty of rewards and recognition, keeps children motivated, and you'll be pleased to know all four areas of spelling knowledge are covered – visual, phonological, morphemic and etymological.

Spellodrome is a powerful resource for teachers and children alike that focuses on empowerment and making spelling a fun and educational experience, and the user-friendliness is something that really stands out. Under the bonnet teachers can easily control what to do by using the console (which boasts a treasure trove of treats). If there is one thing I'd like to see included it's a comprehensive dictionary including sound, so children can check words for meaning.

VERDICT:

Lost for words

Spellodrome has really evolved. At one time it was quite a basic platform, but now it has gone upmarket, and will give you some sophisticated and classy resources that are bound to make spelling a pleasure, not a burden. It has new content, new features and better games and interactive activities that children really engage with.

Technology is a key driver in supporting pupil engagement in spelling and Spellodrome is one of the best digital platforms available.

The Grammar 6 Handbook

Contact: jollylearning.co.uk **Reviewed by:** John Dabell

When it comes to making grammar pleasurable and accessible, one of my fail-safe resources has always been The Grammar Handbook – a structured programme that provides an astonishing wealth of really practical advice for teaching the subject. It comes from the creative people at Jolly Phonics, who produce materials that use the synthetic phonics method of teaching letter sounds in a fun and active way. This is ebullient grammar at its best, and I'm pleased to report that the programme now covers Reception to Year 6.

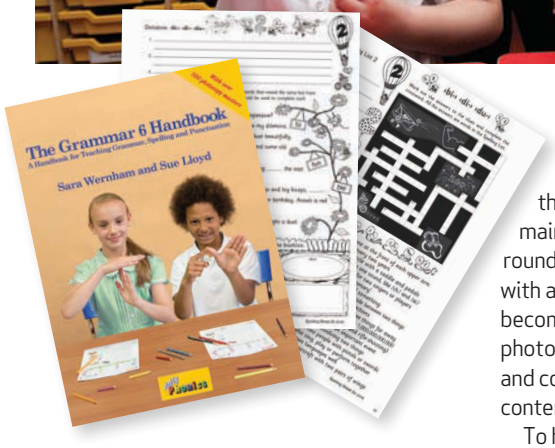
The Grammar 6 Handbook that I reviewed is an authentic, tried-and-tested teaching resource. It uses the term 'grammar' broadly, and covers acres and acres of English ground (with plenty of signposts so you always know where children are heading). As well as being supremely instructional, it offers glorious creativity, reassuring reliability and real challenge for developing writing skills.

The content of the handbook is designed to extend and polish children's understanding of grammar and introduce them to new elements. It teaches new spelling patterns, supports a greater understanding of sentence structure, expands vocabulary and comprehension, and cultivates dictionary and thesaurus skills. It's very ambitious, but it meets its own high expectations with aplomb.

If you are not yet familiar with the Jolly Phonics way of teaching, then don't worry; it mirrors what every good primary teacher will be doing anyway. It is characteristically multisensory, dynamic and whips along at a challenging pace. What might be new, unless you're Montessori trained, is that each part of speech is associated with its own action and colour. Don't worry, though – this is easily learned.

The authors are confident that using the Handbooks will mean you will see dramatic improvements in children's writing and I can vouch for that. Like most things, however, this only comes through consistent use and a commitment to this style of teaching.

The classes I have taught using this method have learned to spell better, punctuate with more precision, employ a broader vocabulary, and gain a greater insight into how sentences work. These gains are hard won and will depend on how much room you give Jolly Phonics to grow. If you have the flexibility to teach using a wide variety of materials, then this resource is a must. But even if your school has a more structured programme, I'd try to find a way to sneak it in.



The Jolly Grammar Handbook is primarily made up of over 100 shrewdly written photocopiable activity sheets and has enough lesson plans and activities for two lessons per week. Each one-hour lesson has a clear focus. The first of the week is devoted to spelling and the second to grammar, while parts of speech, punctuation and vocabulary feature in both. The result is 36 spelling and 36 grammar lessons for a full year of teaching.

I was looking at the Y6 Handbook, which, as you'd expect, doesn't cover the basics. It does still consolidate and refine learning from previous years, but it wastes no time in introducing parts of speech such as countable and uncountable nouns; gerunds; relative pronouns; relative and modal adverbs; past participles and many more. It's an education in itself.

Lesson sheets are found in the photocopy section. Here the spelling notes all follow the same format of revision, main point, spelling list, two spelling sheets, and dictation. The grammar notes have their own format too – aim, introduction, main point, grammar sheet, extension and rounding off activity. Both notes provide you with a clear and identifiable structure that becomes a useful classroom routine. The photocopiables themselves are child-friendly and communicate ambition using challenging content with fun and friendly illustrations.

To help you tackle learning on more than one front, the Handbook contains a helpful advice letter for parents, all the spelling lists, and grammar action cards that can be cut up for children to create their own grammar action sentences.

VERDICT:

Outstanding results

Some countries have adopted Jolly Phonics as government policy and so from humble beginnings to mainstream popularity, these resources have worldwide appeal and can boast outstanding results. The Grammar 6 Handbook will help children develop more mindful control over the intelligibility and quality of their writing. It's a grammar resource your class deserves.

This Is Me

Contact: www.outoftheark.co.uk/this-is-me.html
Reviewed by: John Dabell

It's time to talk about me: I like sphagnum mosses and chimney pots, waistcoats and lemon meringue pie, bubblewrap and orangutans, farfalle pasta and the sound of the London underground trains. I could go on - because we all love talking about ourselves, don't we? Well, not everyone. For many, especially children, self-esteem and being 'me' is often confusing and hard won in our busy, information drenched, multicultural society.

Building a sense of identity, recognising our uniqueness and valuing our personal qualities and strengths is a complex process that takes time. Developing children's self-awareness, self-confidence and self-acceptance is woven into every part of school life explicitly and implicitly; it's a constant work in progress. But if there is one part of the day when we can help pupils develop their 'me-ness' and extend their mutual understanding with real gusto then it is during an assembly.

Clever collection

This Is Me is a wonderful assembly songbook, collaboratively produced by the co-creators of Out of the Ark Music and Stewart Henderson, Radio 4 broadcaster and KS1&2 performance poet. There are 10 songs to share, neatly collected together in an 'at a glance' information sheet where you can see what's on offer, with musical styles and subject links. The summaries are just the job for getting a flavour of each song and how they might fit into your assembly objectives. There are all manner of musical styles, including a reflective ballad, anthemic pop, electronica into swing, a swoopy cockney musical, a gliding baroque and even something a bit stroppy! Also included in the information sheet are the vocal ranges, keys, musical elements and delightful ideas for song activities that you might decide to run with and develop.

The themes of each song cover some key areas of PSHE, helping pupils to develop the knowledge, skills and attributes they need to thrive as individuals, family members and members of society. They focus on 'self' in all sorts of ways through some fabulous lyrics, and are tailor-made for performing. The list-style ditty that kick-starts the resource is inspiring and would effortlessly lend itself to creative writing sessions where children could imitate and invent their own poems. Then there is a fun and cheeky song to encourage children to dream, followed by one that recognises that we are valuable with all our imperfections. 'Sometimes' is a thought-provoking song all about mixed feelings, and is adapted from Stewart Henderson's collection *Who Left Grandad At The Chipshop?*

'I'm Cross' is a brilliantly bellowing, bad-tempered number that opens up discussion about not being listened to, and 'I Take Me For Granted' revels in how each of us is a masterpiece magnificently made. Other themes that are covered in the resource include safeguarding and protection, the wonder of creation, bullying, thanksgiving and inclusivity. It's a wonderful collection, with plenty of opportunities for harmony, solo and group-singing, making it very versatile and suited to a range of assembly settings from whole-school to whole-class. All the songs are beautifully sung on the accompanying CD (a 'Words on Screen' disc is also available, so you can display synchronised lyrics on a screen as the music plays).

Something special

What you get throughout all the songs is a real sense of vibrancy and feelings galore. Whilst some may be a little more serious and reflective, the overwhelming vibe is one of happiness and celebration brought to life through fun lyrics that stoke deeper thinking, affirm individuality and help children develop their sense of being as a person, totally unique and special.

Within the book, alongside the superb music score (including piano, melody, chords and percussion) and lyric sheets for the 10 songs, you will also find super activity pages with teaching tips for each song, packed with fun and engaging ideas for connecting learning together within music, literacy, PSHE, art and design, maths, science and history. This includes thoughts and tips on helping children write poetry – at the back of the book there is even a 'Write Your Own Song' photocopiable template that gives children the chance to create their own piece in the style of one of the poems, with a focus on clear rhyming schemes and rhythm. All in all, this is a very practical resource with something for everyone.

VERDICT:

On song

This is a clever and exceptional resource for under £40 that is brimming over with creativity that will help you teach social and emotional values like nothing else. It is totally different, refreshing and inspiring and will help children to appreciate that it is 'great to be me'.

Mighty Writer

Contact: www.mightywriter.co.uk
Reviewed by: John Dabell

If a fortune teller told me: "I see a large blue mat surrounded by excited children," I'd have guessed she was describing one of my chaotic PE lessons. But what my future actually holds in store is an impressive new classroom must-have called Mighty Writer, a pioneering resource designed to help children develop core speaking and story-writing skills.

Mighty Writer centres on a mat, which acts as a huge visual aid for building sentences and stories. You and the children are gathered around it on the floor, meaning interactions are far more personal, natural and dynamic. Decisions and choices can be made collaboratively and it focuses attention on the teaching and learning of composition.

The mat enables children to create or recount their own stories, using the mat as a canvas and a number of detachable toolbars (good-old Velcro) that contain punctuation, sentence openers, conjunctions and themed images linked to a variety of topics to kick-start children's imaginations. A standard Mighty Writer set contains illustrations of various locations, living things, objects and environments, and more themes can be bought separately. Image toolbars include Real Life, Fantasy, Space, Three Little Pigs, Goldilocks, Little Red Hen and Jack and the Beanstalk. There are also hanging mobiles of the symbols available too.

What Mighty Writer does is equip teachers with everything needed to demonstrate each part of the writing process. You can therefore direct and control the type and number of images within a toolbar, as well as things like the amount of sentence openers to be included, and then model the writing process. Children aren't passive observers either, they can place images, words and punctuation, and rich discussions can take place based on their choices. The beauty of this resource is that children can see how the component parts of a sentence join together, how they can be changed and what options they have.

Help is also at hand on the Mighty Writers website, where you'll find the Teacher Zone containing two instruction guides, a curriculum reference sheet, 14 training videos and 22 Mighty Writer plans. Plus, there are nine lesson plans, including modelling a story, creating a beginning, creating a sentence and using a feely bag. The plans are no more than a couple of pages and focus on what you need to know, with ideas for shared work, group and individual tasks and extension activities. Experiences can be shared via a teacher's forum too.

Mighty Writer works on so many levels. For starters it is a tactile resource so children are in there, part of it, using it. But it's also engaging because it is colourful and this invites children in to splash around and make waves in their speaking and writing. This is also a very easy resource to set up and use, so it can slip into other lessons and complement other techniques and strategies. It lets children see first-hand how you write, what decisions you make with word choice and content, and it makes the writing process less intimidating. The focus is more on quality than on quantity, and it's definitely a resource that will enable and support children of all abilities to become independent, self-assured and accomplished writers of both fiction and non-fiction.

What's reassuring is that *Mighty Writer* has been very successful across a number of schools. Feedback has detailed accelerated improvement in writing sentences, use of punctuation and children being more confident in crafting stories. It's a very clever resource that promotes a vibrant writing workshop mentality.

A Master Set costs £349 which, as this is a very well-equipped and top-quality resource that you will use for years and years to come, works out as excellent value when you think long-term.

VERDICT:

Have a word

While the standard of writing in schools has improved in recent years it still lags 20 per cent behind reading at all key stages. Why is this? Perhaps it's because we focus far too much on the end-product, rather than the process, of writing. *Mighty Writer*, however, is what primary teaching is all about: rolling your sleeves up and playing with language in a hands-on way, and letting children experience the different textures of words. It's a resource to explore and discover, where they can have more of an authentic connection with words in order to build stories.

MEGAN THOMAS teaches Yrs 5 & 6 at Andoversford Primary School, Gloucestershire

"Dear Mrs Morgan..."

When children write about what really matters to them, those rhetorical expectations soon start falling into place, says **Megan Thomas**

"That was horrible" was the first thing I heard once we'd collected the reading papers on the first day of SATs last May.

"I'm so glad! I thought it was just me that didn't understand it!" was the next.

Their faces said it all.

As a teacher, what would you do in that situation? From reports following the test, at that moment all around the country children were in tears over what was deemed to be the "hardest ever" reading paper. I could see the confidence of the ten incredible children that I had nurtured for the past four years plummeting before my eyes, at the start of what was the most important week of their academic careers so far. I had a choice. Should I ignore it, so that we could start revising for tomorrow's GPS paper? Or should I do my best to re-ignite the fire inside them that they were going to need to get them through the rest of the week?

On topic

The subsequent letter that the children wrote to Nicky Morgan (the now former Secretary of State for Education) received attention from all over the country – the children were overjoyed when The Huffington Post wrote an article about them (you can read it at **ow.ly/0nhi304SaYd**). They were even more thrilled when they received a reply from her, via our local MP! And quite rightly; their letter was impassioned. It was wonderfully persuasive, factually correct and their tone was perfectly appropriate in addressing a government minister (once they'd decided that a sarcastic comment about her inability to spell 'sincerely' might not be entirely respectful...). They went through the year six writing expectations with a fine-tooth comb to ensure they had included all elements possible. I have never seen them more focused on their purpose, closer as a unit or more meticulous about their choices of punctuation and vocabulary.

But is it right for ten and eleven-year-olds to have spent precious hours of their primary education dabbling in politics? Should I have fostered the interest that they showed in standing up for their opinions, or quashed their complaints?

Primary teachers often come under fire (usually from those outside of the primary classroom) for straying away from the curriculum in this way, as though this is separate from what we should be teaching.

However, our school, like many, is a theme-based one. Teaching the curriculum using imaginative hooks to grasp the children's interest is what we do. Wherever possible, our writing is for a real-life purpose, as it was on this occasion. Through our themes, the children are absorbed and engaged by the context: whether writing persuasive letters to companies to ask for sponsorship to build a go-kart, creating posts on their blog page, or responding to a challenge found in their pirate ship theme corner from 'Captain Scally-bones'. Why should we expect children to write with passion and enthusiasm about something which they have no interest in or experience of, to do nothing more than reside in their English book for the rest of the year?

Author! Author!

This term, as part of our 'Wondercrump World of Dahl' theme, my boy-heavy year five and six class are writing and illustrating a book inspired by Dahl, to be self-published before Christmas. Their challenge (set in a letter from Roald Dahl HQ) is to write a story aimed at children of their own age. For a group of children who would generally rather play football or catch Pokémon than read a book, this has had a profound effect. They are engaging in reading and making notes for character ideas or interesting vocabulary in their homemade writing journals. The quality of their writing has improved enormously- as writers with purpose, they are beginning to recognise the conscious choices that they can make to affect the reader. With this as their purpose, they are not just children writing in our Cotswold classroom, they are authors.

So when I responded to the complaints of last year's year sixes with "Well, why don't you do something about it?", it wasn't out of the ordinary for them to respond as they did. A remarkable group of young people demonstrated their ability to write with purpose, persuasion and confidence whilst standing up- respectfully- for their own beliefs. Shouldn't we want this for all children?

Sam Angus

"Books can leave a thumbprint on the brain"

Sam Angus has almost certainly finished writing about animals in wartime – unless another story demands to be told

I was a very early reader. We lived abroad - and in those latter days of Franco's Spain, where I spent my formative childhood years, there was nothing on TV but a static advert until six or seven pm and little of interest for me after that, anyway. I didn't speak the language; so books became my entertainment and companions. I read, and read and read, from as soon as I could. And while I can still remember the trauma of having to learn my times tables, I had no difficulty with the alphabet that I can recall. My grandmother taught me how to pick out letters, and I have a very distinct and comfortable memory of sitting with her at the kitchen table, starting to make sense of the written word.

There were always lots of books around me to choose from – despite living in at least 17 houses across four countries, my parents always made sure our books travelled with us, and I still have all of mine from those years. Books were more prized back then. They were harder to get hold of, and more expensive than they are now; today you can order them in a matter of seconds, or even browse through them online without ever owning them at all. It's a very positive thing that books are so much more accessible than used to be the case, but the rise of self-publishing and the drop in printing costs mean that enormous numbers are being produced – around 11,000 new children's books are released annually in the UK alone! How are young people, and their parents, supposed to navigate through all those titles, and find their way to the ones that will really influence and stay with them? Especially as there are fewer trained librarians – custodians of the shelves and the treasures they contain – than ever.

Any reading is good, of course. Even if something isn't especially well written, it's a case of building the practice and the habit. Young people need to be 'caught' by books, any way we can catch them. Because if you miss that window, that chance to captivate them, you might lose them as a reader for good.

But we should remember, I think, the power and the impact that books can have on a young reader. A child's mind is very plastic so the stories he reads, the very best of those stories, can leave a kind of thumbprint on the brain, and the characters and adventures they read about will stay and can journey with that child through life. As an adult, you can barely remember something you were reading just a week ago.

I was such a dreamer as a child. Books help you to dream – to think about different worlds and other possibilities. And indeed, the great goal of children's literature is to make the reader look forward – to ask, 'What kind of an adult do I want to be? What sort of a world would I like to live in? What do I believe, and hold to be right and wrong?' Adult literature tends to look backwards; to consider a situation and ask how it arose – why we are where we are now and how we got into this situation.

I always knew I would write, and for children. That was a certainty. It's something to do with temperament, I suspect – I feel happiest in a world where as Wilde said, the good end happily and the bad unhappily, a world in which you know that finally, justice will be dispensed. CS Lewis once said that there were parts of him that felt 12 years old, and parts of him that were already 60 when he was only 12. I think many writers for children might feel the same. What I didn't know, however, when I was young, and not for a long time, was *what* I would write about. Then one, sweltering summer's day I was in the car and heard a radio programme about messenger dogs during the war. Despite the heat, I felt a shiver down my spine; I was incredibly touched. And I quickly discovered that no one seemed to know about these animals and the part they had to play in that terrible conflict. I spent a couple of years in the War Museum, researching, before *Soldier Dog* was ready to be written.

After three books about animals in war time, I'm almost sure I'm finished with that vein of stories – my latest, *The House on Hummingbird Island*, is a big departure. It still has a rich cast of animals, but they are at one step removed; they are important to Idie, the protagonist, but she doesn't have that intense relationship with one of them that was the primary focus of each of my previous books. I can't say 'never', though. The important thing when you write is that you feel deeply moved by something – you grasp a glimmer of an idea that will take you on the novel's journey. So although I have no plans to write any more tales of creatures during conflict... I know that I could easily stumble into another story waiting to be told, and find myself answering that call.

"Young people need to be 'caught' by books, any way we can catch them. Because if you miss that window, that chance to captivate them, you might lose them as a reader for good."

HARRIET MUNCASTER an author and illustrator, whose latest series, Isadora Moon, is published by OUP

Fangs & fairydust

Children don't fit neatly into little boxes, says author and illustrator **Harriet Muncaster** – and nor do the people who write for them

When I started to work on Isadora Moon, I have to admit I did not think much about whom I was writing it for. I just produced something that I would have enjoyed reading myself, and which appealed to exactly my tastes. I have always been a big fan of anything pink and glittery but also stuff that is darker and more gothic in nature. Mostly though, I love the juxtaposition of those two combined and wanted to include both in my book, which is why I ended up with a heroine whose father is a vampire and whose mother is a fairy.

As Isadora's story developed, it became clear to me that there was an important message in there about just being yourself; celebrating individuality and being able to like whatever you like without people telling you that it is 'not for you.' I definitely played up to this idea once I realised it was there because it is something I feel strongly about.

Anything goes

Personally, I have never struggled with feeling like I should or shouldn't like certain things, which is something for which I am grateful. The fact that I was very adamant from a young age about wanting to wear and do 'girly' things might have had something to do with this; it meant that I came up against no resistance. I think it probably stemmed from being born in Saudi Arabia where all little girls have their ears pierced when they are born. My mum refused to let the nurses do mine, so everyone thought I was a boy even if I was dressed in pink and wearing dresses! This caused me to refuse to wear trousers for a long time.

However, I am aware that not all children fit into their gender stereotyped box, and if they are not allowed to explore the things they are truly passionate about, they will be stifled. Children's interest and growth are delicate and can easily be crushed through fear of being seen to like the 'wrong' thing. I believe that one of the main reasons I was able to pursue my dream job of writing and illustrating was because I was always allowed to follow my interests, whatever they were at the time. I was never told that things were not for me, and I was never laughed at - even though at age fifteen I was still playing with dolls' houses and drawing fairies. This encouraged my creativity to flourish.

Nowadays I still happen to like pink and sparkle (alongside other things!) - not because I have been brainwashed by marketing but because, well, because I like them. That is why I included pink in Isadora's world even though I was aware there has been something of a backlash against that colour recently. As soon as you start thinking about your creativity as a marketing exercise you lose the vital energy behind your inspiration. I did actually get one reviewer saying that they thought Isadora's dad should have been the fairy to show that boys can be fairies too, but I think that person was missing the point; I had a vision of a lady with long wavy pink hair and a flower crown, and that's what I wanted to draw. Besides, if you go deeper into their characters, it it is actually Isadora's mum who is into nature and being outdoors and camping, whilst her vampire dad loves grooming and looking polished and pretty. It's important, in my opinion, to stick to your vision as an artist, and not change it purely to challenge gender stereotypes.

Ultimately I feel that books should be written from genuine passion and not engineered to conform to a specific audience. In an ideal world writers and illustrators would be able to create what they want to create – and readers would not be steered in any particular direction through marketing, but be allowed to choose what they want to read based on their true interests.

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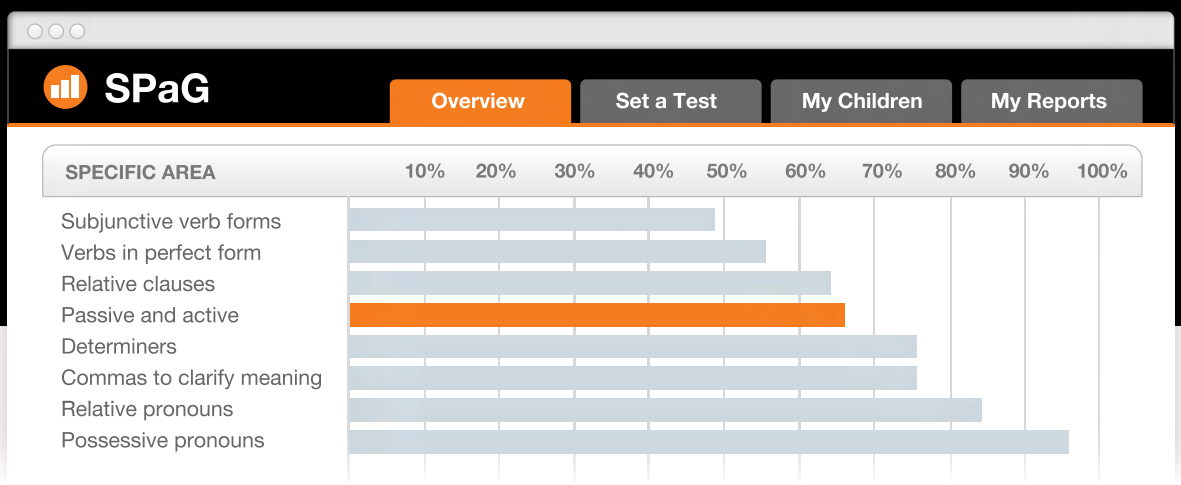

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