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Welcome...

We think a lot about how to get children to read, but how do we *keep* them reading? On page 9, Kelly Ashley examines three core aspects of reader motivation to help us better understand how to get children hooked on books. Jon Biddle explores this concept further on page 28 with tried-and-tested ways you can establish a flourishing reading culture in your classroom.

The titles that appear in our regular *10 books...* feature this issue would be difficult for any child to ignore. Chosen from among the winners and finalists of a decade of the Klaus Flugge Prize, these glorious picturebooks combine stunning artwork with plenty of teaching opportunities (p12). We stick with a prizewinning theme on page 18, where Nikki Gamble and Stephen Dilley look at some unexpected ways in which getting involved with book awards can make you an even better teacher.

On page 21 we have a really lovely new book topic from Jo Cummins, which uses Britta Teckentrup's *When I Feel Lonely* to help you explore some painful and difficult feelings with Key Stage 2 pupils.

There are some big emotions on page 54 too, where Georgia White demonstrates how to introduce primary pupils to *King Lear*. The RSC's active, rehearsal-inspired way of teaching Shakespeare has yielded some amazing results and is well worth checking out.

How confident are your children when it comes to sentence structure? On page 30, Amanda Webb shares her favourite methods for helping children really get to grips with the basics, so that they can write more fluently with ease. And speaking of nuts-and-bolts literacy, it's already time to be thinking about SATs... On page 52, Andrew Jennings looks at the role of inference in the Key Stage 2 reading comprehension paper and offers some strategies and practice activities to help your pupils fly through the different question formats with ease.

Wishing you a healthy and happy autumn term,

Lydia Grove
(editor)



Practical teaching tips and expert advice from classroom teachers and literacy leaders

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JON BIDDLE

Talking about books helps children build their reading identities

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VICTORIA DILLY

Libraries and librarians offer an antidote to many of the challenges schools face

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PIE CORBETT

A word of warning: this activity might lead some children to go one step too far!

p.35



Cover illustration taken from *The Bestest Big Brother, Ever* by Ben Mantle (Walker Books, £12.99 HB)



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Mrs. Harmer, Year 6 Primary School Teacher

*First News survey 2025.

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EDITOR

Lydia Grove,
lydia.grove@artichokehq.com

PUBLISHERS

Joe Carter, Sam Reubin,
Richard Stebbing

GROUP ADVERTISING MANAGER

Samantha Law,
01206 505499
samantha.law@artichokehq.com

ADVERTISING MANAGER

Demi Maynard
demi.maynard@artichokehq.com
01206 505962

ACCOUNT MANAGER

Kim Richards,
01206 505240
kim.richards@artichokehq.com

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ART EDITORS

Richard Allen
Sarah Barajas

ACCOUNTS

artichokemedialtd@integral2.com,

CUSTOMER SERVICES

primary@artichokehq.com



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“I was in my element”

What’s it like to create a book together?
Author **Tracy Baptiste** and illustrator **Dapo Adeola** tell all...

TRW Your book, *Super Goat Girl*, came out in July. What was working together on this project like for you?

DA My first thought on getting the brief was “This is gonna be fun!”. Most of the picture books I’ve worked on have tended to be in a domestic setting, so this was the first time I got to work on something significantly more fantastical in its premise. I got to have full rein on the visual aspects of the entire book, including the title type. Normally I’d be a bit lost without some direction from the publisher or author, but this time I was in my element.

TB The art notes I gave for this story were really minimal. I focused on things Dapo needed to know so the story would work, like leaving some of the impossibilium rope behind when the aliens leave, because Super Goat Girl uses it at the end. There’s also a note about how the kids need to move to create the black hole. Other than a couple of notes about Robo Kid’s attachments, there was nothing about what any of the characters should look like. I was really interested in seeing what Dapo would come up with.

DA I think I’ve always had a pretty solid approach when working with authors. My first book as an author was illustrated by a team of 18 artists, which led to me wearing an art director hat to advise on some of the spreads. This was a huge learning opportunity, and it taught me a lot about trusting my eye and my judgement.

TB It’s common to have no communication directly with the artist during the process, so that part was similar to other picture books I’ve worked on. But Dapo shared a few sneak peeks with me, and I was thrilled

“Dapo shared a few sneak peeks with me”

at every new reveal. I really enjoyed how much language I could cut from the story because Dapo’s illustrations captured my words so well. It’s a skillfully illustrated book on top of being gorgeous. But my favorite has been having an enthusiastic partner to share the book with readers.

DA Working on this book was so fun, but also challenging in the best of ways. It’s a significantly different, more energetic style and compositions than people are used to seeing in my work. I had an absolute blast exploring it. I got to work on hand-drawn type and special effects as well, which was a first for me. This was something I normally wouldn’t get to do with other books, but will definitely be pushing for in my work going forward. I hope I get the opportunity to explore this style and this world some more in future books.

TRW Have you had any particularly memorable comments about *Super Goat Girl* from readers?

TB Kids are really into sharing their own superpowers and their superhero poses. It’s been amazing to see them connect to the concept of people having different kinds of superpowers and that they’re all important. Absolutely everyone has been happy (and eager) to share what they’re super at. The book has been magic for bringing that out in readers.

DA I’ve had a lot of memorable comments on the artwork and how dynamic and action-packed it is. I’m glad the book is connecting with people as intended.

TRW What does the future hold for *Super Goat Girl*?

TB Now that *Super Goat Girl* has conquered the first day at her new super school, she definitely needs some fresh challenges. Unfortunately, I think the next challenge will be... a nemesis! But when and how that happens depends on Dapo’s schedule. He’s a very busy illustrator.

Super Goat Girl, written by Tracey Baptiste and illustrated by Dapo Adeola, is out now (Puffin, £7.99)

Dapo Adeola is an award-winning illustrator, author and character designer who rocketed into the picture book world with his greatly acclaimed illustrator debut, Look Up!, written by Nathan Bryon.

Tracey Baptiste is the author of several works of fiction and nonfiction for children including The Jumbie series, and The Totally Gross History of Ancient Egypt.



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SWITCHED *on*

Plugging children into reading isn't that hard – it's keeping the power going that really matters, says **Kelly Ashley**

A teacher who values reading for pleasure may find themselves asking “What will get my children reading... and what will *keep them going?*”

That first spark is often easy to ignite, but keeping it burning takes intention and care. In a world full of devices and distractions, how can we help young readers stay fully charged? Not just switched on temporarily, but with sustained reading energy for the long haul.

The answer lies in not just getting pupils *switched on* to reading, but in understanding *what's powering them*. In an age of instant entertainment, are they plugged into something meaningful, or running on a temporary charge?

Let's take a look at three different kinds of ‘reader power’ — extrinsic, social and intrinsic — and how we can fuel long-term reading motivation without blowing a fuse.

Mains power

Extrinsic motivators are everywhere — they include reading rewards, competitions and more. These strategies are widely

used, easy to implement and often deliver quick wins in the short term. Like mains electricity, they provide an immediate surge of motivation. The reward is tangible and the outcome is visible, but this kind of power doesn't last when unplugged.

Mains power can be useful, but it's not foolproof. Relying solely on external incentives means motivation often drops as soon as the rewards stop. A reading raffle might increase minutes logged, but it doesn't necessarily nurture a genuine desire to read.

These strategies can be effective as a catalyst — particularly for pupils who need a positive starting point or a timely boost. But when these approaches become the primary power supply, there's a risk of cultivating reward-seeking behaviours rather than

fostering sustained engagement over time.

Think of extrinsic motivators as the spark plug, not the fuel tank — ideal for igniting interest, but insufficient to drive the reader's journey long term.

The power grid

Social motivation draws strength from connection. Like a shared power grid, it relies on multiple sources feeding into a common current. You'll find it in the laughter following a shared read-aloud, in carefully curated peer recommendations, and in conversations sparked by familiar characters or series favourites.

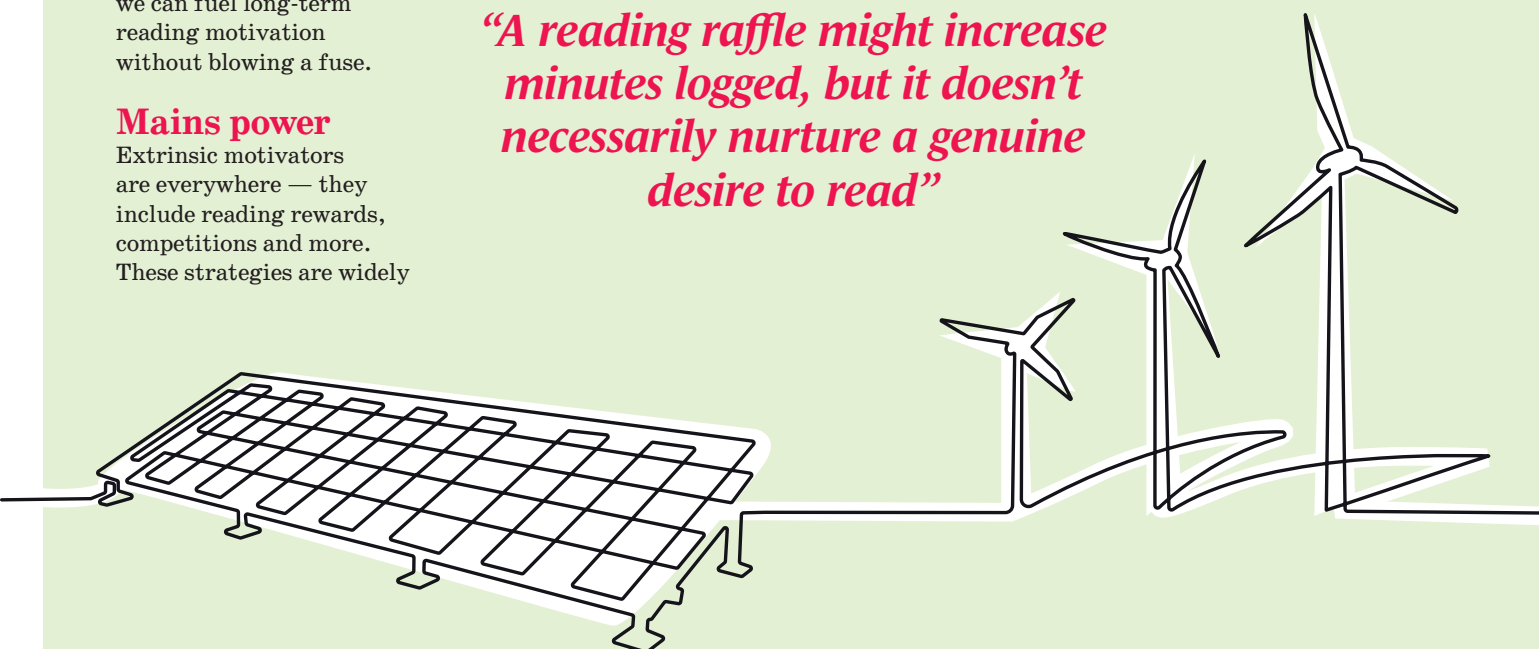
This type of motivation is generated through social interaction with both peers and adults. Its strength lies in adaptability: when one connection weakens, another can often reignite

(or maintain) the spark. Reading communities create sustained momentum that is difficult to replicate through individual effort alone.

When pupils become active participants in the communal culture of reading, their engagement is more likely to increase. Reading shifts from being a private pursuit to a shared experience, and the energy it creates is powerful. The role of the adult is crucial here: not simply to promote reading, but to model, to recommend and to ensure open discussion, value and enjoyment.

To strengthen the current, develop intentional social reading environments. Book clubs, paired reading opportunities, shared recommendations and family involvement all contribute to thriving and resilient reading networks.

“A reading raffle might increase minutes logged, but it doesn't necessarily nurture a genuine desire to read”



Renewables

Intrinsic motivation is the most enduring and self-sustaining source of reader energy. Like solar power, it originates from within and renews itself over time. This kind of motivation drives children to read not because they are required to, but because they are genuinely interested, curious and emotionally invested — because they see themselves as readers.

When pupils have a strong sense of reader identity — when reading feels personal and purposeful to them — they are more likely to choose books that speak to their interests, to revisit old favourites or to explore texts that make them feel or think differently. We see this motivation not in compliance, but in the quiet persistence of a child absorbed in a book of their own choosing.

Unlike external rewards, intrinsic motivation doesn't need constant top-ups to function. It builds gradually and depends on supportive conditions. Once established, it endures — and it is the strength of reader identity that makes this energy source truly sustainable.

However, intrinsic motivation requires the right conditions to thrive. To build confident, motivated readers, both the *will* to read and the *skill* of reading must be developed side by side. Structured, skill-focused materials such as levelled texts play a key role in supporting reading development, but when these are the only books available, or when pupils are restricted to a narrow range of choices, opportunities for personal engagement can be limited.

Similarly, when time for independent, choice-led reading is reduced in the timetable, a key source of fuel for lasting reading habits can become easily depleted. Ensuring regular access to rich, contemporary and diverse texts is essential for nurturing the will to read.

To activate this self-sustaining source of reader energy, pupils need time to read, genuine freedom of choice, access to a wide range of texts, and space to talk about what matters to them. Just as important is the presence of adult and peer role models who visibly value reading and share their own experiences. Developing solar-powered readers is a gradual process

— but when the conditions are right, they generate a light that lasts.

Keeping the lights on

Our role isn't just to get pupils *plugged in* to reading, it's to help them build a lasting, self-sustaining energy source. Extrinsic rewards have their place, but they should be balanced with the shared energy of reading communities and the steady, intrinsic motivation that comes from personal connection and choice.

The real measure of success? When the rewards are removed, and the motivation remains. Because readers who are truly switched on don't just *power up*, they *power themselves*.



Kelly Ashley is a Lecturer in Reading for Pleasure for The

Open University and the author of Word Power: Amplifying vocabulary instruction. Her professional interests are reader identity, reader motivation and language development.

 ourfp.org

POWER UP YOUR READERS

Plug in (extrinsic power — short-term boost)

- Use rewards sparingly and purposefully (for re-engaging, re-focusing or celebrating effort).
- Celebrate moments that build reader confidence (reading aloud, taking part in book talk or recommending to a friend).
- Keep the focus on reading, not the reward, by recognising meaningful engagement (exploring a new genre or sharing a personal response).

Connect the grid (social power — collective energy)

- Build in intentional time for informal book talk each day.
- Encourage pupils to curate pupil-led read-aloud and recommendation stations (as part of classroom displays or as special school library features).
- Encourage peer-led book clubs and cross-year reading buddy programmes.
- Invite families to share favourites and attend story time.

Soak up the sun (intrinsic power — long-term and lasting)

- Offer authentic choice. Trust pupils to follow reading interests and share their reader identities.
- Prioritise independent reading time — not a luxury, an essential!
- Use knowledge of personal interests to recommend reads — value what matters to each child.
- Be a visible reader — share your own habits, choices and enthusiasm.

With the right mix of power sources — jumpstarts, connections and sustained energy — we can help readers stay switched on.

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10

BOOKS COMMENDED BY *the Klaus Flugge Prize panel*

As the award, which celebrates the most exciting and promising newcomers to picture book illustration, marks its tenth anniversary, Mat Tobin chooses ten outstanding shortlisted and winning titles from the last decade

1

When Sadness Comes to Call

BY EVA ELAND, ANDERSEN PRESS 2020



About this book

What if sadness was a visitor you could welcome? In this gentle, empathetic picture book, Sadness is given form: a pale, green-blue figure who arrives quietly and lingers. Through sparse, reassuring text and soft pastel illustrations, Eland offers a way for young readers to recognise, sit with and



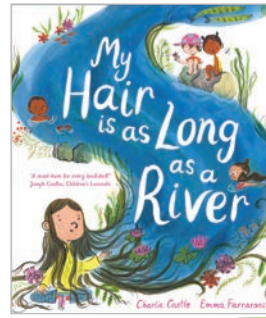
If you don't understand
each other, just sit together
and be quiet for a while.



2

My Hair is as Long as a River

ILLUSTRATED BY EMMA FARRARONS,
WRITTEN BY CHARLIE CASTLE, MACMILLAN
CHILDREN'S BOOKS 2024



About this book

Through a series of tender metaphors, a boy invites us to view his long hair not just as something he has, but something he is: a river, a jungle, a place of calm and colour. Emma Farrarons' swirling illustrations gently echo the movement of thought and imagination, weaving a tale of identity, pride, and joyful self-expression. This is a warm, poetic picture book that honours difference and reminds readers that being yourself is always something to celebrate.



Thinking and talking

- What does the boy mean when he says his hair is "like a river"?
- Why do some people question or dislike things that are different?
- What other things help you feel like yourselves?

Try this...

- Draw your own hair as if it were something magical: a garden, a storm, a story.
- Make a zigzag or spiral trail across a long paper strip, then fill it with symbols of your identity.
- Re-read the story but pause to guess what the next metaphor might be. Can you write one of your own?

ultimately befriend their feelings. There is no quick fix or 'cheering up' — just presence, kindness, and understanding. Ideal for conversations around mental health and emotional literacy, this tender book normalises sadness as part of life and encourages children to explore it without fear.

Thinking and talking

- What colour is sadness in this book? Would yours look the same?
- Why might sadness knock rather than sneak in?
- Can you name other invisible feelings you've had?

Try this...

- Create your own 'visiting emotion' character, using pastels or watercolours.
- Design a doorway and write what emotion might be waiting behind it.
- Re-enact the story's arc using freeze-frames to capture mood shifts.

3

The Café at the Edge of the Woods

BY MIKEY PLEASE, HARPERCOLLINS
CHILDREN'S BOOKS 2024



About this book

Rene dreams of serving exquisite food in her own woodland café, but her first (and only) customer is a grumpy ogre with a taste for bats, slugs and battered mice. When Rene despairs, her green-skinned waiter Glumfoot hatches a brilliant plan: disguise her delicious creations as the ogre's favourite swampy snacks. Mikey Please's retro-tinged illustrations, theatrical



lighting and animated style bring humour and heart to this rhyming tale of courage, creativity, and cross-cultural cooking. A gently grotesque, grin-inducing fable about finding common ground — even if it's maggot-shaped.

Thinking and talking

- Why does Rene nearly give up on her dream, and what changes her mind?
- What do you think the ogre



really wanted, deep down? What might all the creatures who visit Rene's café want?

- Can you think of a time when you changed someone just a little — and it made all the difference? Or perhaps someone helped or changed you?

Try this...

- Design a 'gross' menu where everything is secretly tasty! Name your dishes like Glumfoot did.
- In pairs, act out the scene where Rene and the ogre meet. Try it two ways: scary ogre... and shy ogre.
- Create a map of the area around the forest café. Where do the creatures come from? What magical paths do they take?

4

Grandad's Star

ILLUSTRATED BY
RHIAN STONE,
WRITTEN BY FRANCES
TOSDEVIN, ROCKET
BIRD BOOKS 2024



About this book

The little girl in this story adores her grandfather, a renowned astronomer and speaker. They spend hours together sharing stories of the night sky, but lately Grandad is forgetting things. He misplaces objects, struggles to answer questions, and sometimes even forgets names. "Our brains," Mum says gently, "are like the twinkles of stars — shining brightly or growing dim." As memories flicker and fade, the family responds

with love and care, building a 'Grandad-scope' to help him remember. Now it's the granddaughter's turn to guide. A luminous, tender story of memory, change, and holding on to the ones we love.

Thinking and talking

- Why are Grandad's memories compared to stars? What do you think this means?
- How does the little girl help Grandad — and in what



- ways did this help her too?
- Have you ever had to explain something important to someone older than you? What did you find a challenge?

5

The Dream Book

BY BIA MELO,
TEMPLAR
BOOKS 2023



About this book

Nina loves bedtime—not because she's sleepy, but because that's when dreams happen. Each night she visits vibrant dream worlds: cake villages, jungle cities and wild adventures. But when morning comes, her dreams slip away. Determined to hold on to them, Nina begins to sketch her dreams in a journal, capturing fragments before they vanish. Bia Melo's illustrations feel joyful and childlike, born from her own dream-and-draw routine. With playful textures, bold primary colours and quirky characters glimpsed through negative

space, it's a bright, fresh debut that invites readers to embrace the wonder—and occasional chaos—of imagination.

Thinking and talking

- What kind of dreams does Nina have? Which one would you most like to explore?
- Why does Nina write and draw her dreams before they disappear? Have you ever tried to remember your dreams?
- Which parts of the story feel fun, and which feel a little scary? Why do you think that is?

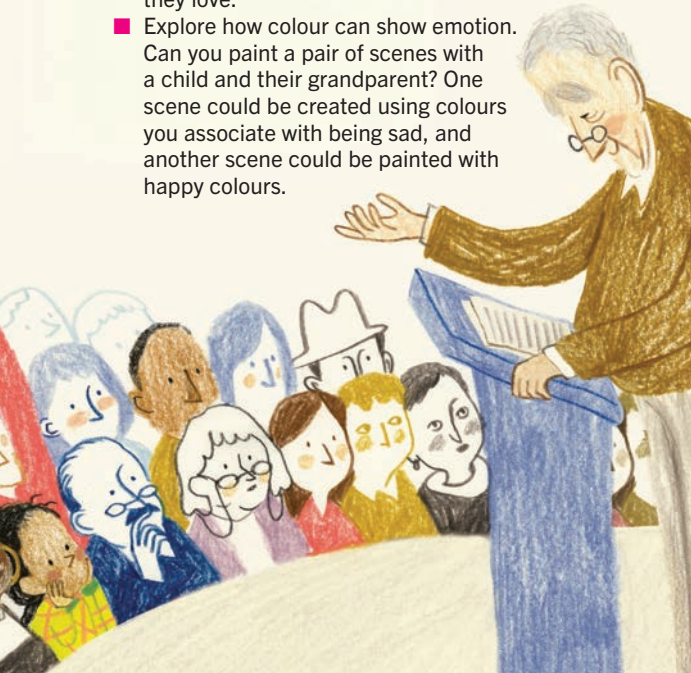


Try this...

- Create your own dream journal. Draw a special dream as soon as you wake up.
- Use crayons, pencils or collage to build a dream-scene of your imagination.
- Invent a quirky character (like Nina's bus or cake village)—what world would they live in?

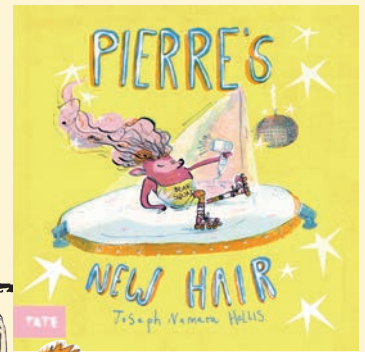
Try this...

- Make a 'memory sky' with paper stars. Write a special memory on each one.
- Design your own invention to help someone remember the things they love.
- Explore how colour can show emotion. Can you paint a pair of scenes with a child and their grandparent? One scene could be created using colours you associate with being sad, and another scene could be painted with happy colours.



6 Pierre's New Hair

BY JOSEPH HOLLIS, TATE PUBLISHING 2021



About this book

Pierre the bear cares deeply about two things: his perfect quiff and winning the Roller Stars Championships. But on the day of the big event, disaster strikes — and Pierre's fabulous hair is ruined. Can friendship and flair save the day? Bursting with movement, colour, and visual gags, this joyful picture book roller-skates across every spread with personality and pizzazz. Joseph Namara Hollis conjures a bold, buzzing world full of tiny details and big-hearted silliness. A hilarious and stylish tale about trying your best, fixing what matters, and leaning on your friends when things fall apart.

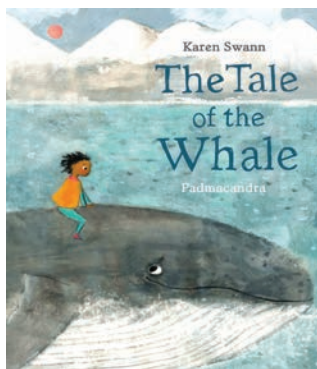
Thinking and talking

- Why does Pierre care so much about his hair — and what happens when it all goes wrong?
- How do Pierre's friends help him? What makes them a good team?
- What would your ideal hairstyle look like — wild, wobbly, sky-high, or full of glitter?

Try this...

- Use Freeze Frame to act out key moments from the Roller Stars Championship. Choose a scene — like Pierre's hair disaster or the team celebration — and bring it to life with still poses.
- Design a poster for Pierre's salon. What styles would he offer?
- Create a 'Hair Hall of Fame' with drawings, paper wigs, or crazy photo props.





7 The Tale of the Whale

ILLUSTRATED BY
PADMACANDRA, WRITTEN
BY KAREN SWANN,
SCALLYWAG PRESS 2022



About this book

A child and a whale meet at the shoreline and journey together through glittering oceans and glowing coral reefs. They dive deep, leap high, and revel in the rhythms of the sea — until they find something that shouldn't be there. Plastic. Rubbish. Waste. As the sea darkens,

both whale and child are changed. Padmacandra's textured illustrations carry the reader from wonder to heartbreak and back again, showing the joy of connection and the cost of carelessness. Poetic, powerful and hopeful, this story invites readers to notice, to feel and to act.

Thinking and talking

- How do the whale and child become friends? What do they learn from each other?
- What does the whale find in the sea — and how does that change the story?
- Why do you think the child promises to "tell the whale's tale"? What might that mean?

Try this...

- Use Freeze Frame to show the story in four parts: meeting the whale, journeying together, discovering the plastic, and making a promise.
- Create a 'sea panel' showing what the ocean looked like before the rubbish appeared — and after.
- Write a message in a bottle to the future. What would you say to protect the sea?

8 Gustavo the Shy Ghost

BY FLAVIA Z.
DRAGO, WALKER
BOOKS 2021



Thinking and talking

- Why didn't anyone notice Gustavo? How do we know what he's feeling?
- What does Gustavo draw on to express himself?
- Can you think of a time you felt shy — or when you helped someone who did?

Try this...

- Design a poster inviting others to your own ghostly concert — what would you play?
- Use stencils, coloured paper or pastels to make papel picado decorations.
- Write or draw a 'friendship guide' from Gustavo's point of view — what advice might he give to someone feeling shy?

About this book

Gustavo is a ghost who longs for friends, but being shy and see-through doesn't make things easy. Even when he's near others, he often goes unnoticed. So, he decides to invite everyone to a violin concert in the graveyard... on the Day of the Dead. Mexican-born author-illustrator Flavia Z. Drago fills each page with warmth, colour, and exquisite detail — from papel picado to marigolds, sugar skulls to glowing spirits. Underneath the festive textures is a tender story about courage, self-expression, and the quiet magic of being seen. A joyful celebration of identity.





About this book

When a prince who fears the dark becomes King, he decrees it banned — installing a glowing artificial sun, outlawing dark corners and silencing shadows. At first, his subjects cheer. But soon, they cannot sleep, lose their sense of wonder and realise that day without night leaves them restless and empty. Clever advisors manage the ban—only for the townspeople to rebel and discover the beauty in darkness when fireworks

9 The King Who Banned the Dark

BY EMILY HAWORTH-BOOTH, PAVILION CHILDREN'S BOOKS 2018



blaze in the night sky. A witty and warmly illustrated fable that explores fear, balance and the freedom to embrace both light and shadow.

Thinking and talking

- Why does the King ban the dark, and how do his people feel about it at first?

- What changed for the people when they couldn't sleep or see the stars?
- What do you think the dark gives us, even though it sometimes feels scary?

Try this...

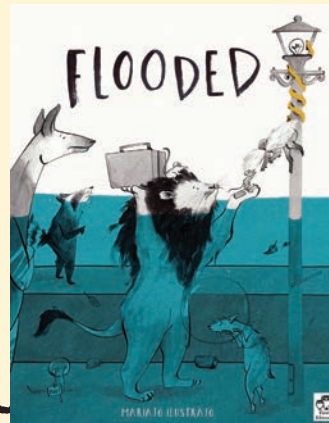
- Make a symmetrical 'light and dark' collage: fold a large paper in half, paint one side bright and warm, the other cool and shadowy. Add textures (foil, tissue, charcoal) to show how both sides feel different but belong together.
- Use torches and paper puppets to explore how shadows change. What happens when you move the light closer or change the angle? Can you make the King's crown grow taller?
- Take on the role of the King's advisor. What would you tell him about why darkness matters? Write your message, or perform it in a speech.

10 Flooded

BY MARIAJO ILUSTRAJO, FRANCES LINCOLN CHILDREN'S BOOKS 2023

About this book

It starts like any other summer's day – but the water is rising. In a busy animal city, no one seems too worried at first. Some splash, some complain, most carry on as normal. Only one small voice begins to notice what's happening. As the flood worsens, it becomes harder to ignore — and harder to speak up. Mariajo Ilustrajo's gently funny debut is full of expressive detail, with soft pencil textures and a cool blue-green wash that slowly takes over the page. This is a thoughtful and playful story about noticing problems, listening to others, and working together.



Thinking and talking

- How do the city animals respond when the flooding begins?
- Who notices the problem first—and why do most others ignore it to begin with?
- What does it take for everyone to finally work together? What do we learn about teamwork and responsibility?



Try this...

- Using torn tissue or paper, layer blue-green shapes over a cityscape drawing. Add tiny animal cut-outs. What happens as the water rises?
- Try placing small objects in a tub of water. Which ones rise? Which ones disappear? What might help the smaller animals in the story?
- Stand in a circle and pass the story round, sentence by sentence. Each person adds the next moment, showing how the flood rises — and how the animals work together in the end.



Mat Tobin is senior lecturer in English and children's literature, strand lead for

primary English, and pastoral lead for BAY3 students at Oxford Brookes University. He has judged the Klaus Flugge Prize and each year creates a special Padlet on the longlist.

klausfluggeprize.co.uk

Judge and JURY

Book awards can inform teaching practice and energise your classroom, say **Nikki Gamble** and **Stephen Dilley**

Have you or your class been involved in judging or shadowing a book award? If not, have you considered the positive impact that it could have on the culture of reading in your school?

Before you launch in, it's worth reflecting on the outcomes you would like to achieve. In this article, we focus specifically on teacher involvement and its benefits to both personal and professional development.

This can lead to surprising discoveries: teachers often comment that their favourite books are ones they wouldn't have *chosen* to read, whether because of genre or subject matter. For instance, the cover and title of Jenny Ireland's *The Boy Next Door* led this year's judges to expect a conventional romance story rather than the sensitive exploration of illness and bereavement that the novel offers.

Longlisted books are carefully chosen to reflect

Martin's *Gina Kaminski Saves the Wolf* changed the relationship a particular pupil had with her classmates.

A unique, brilliant, passionate, creative girl, she sometimes struggled to accept the rigid structure of a mainstream class.

Reading *Gina Kaminski...* prompted Liam to 'allow her to tell the story she wanted', meaning that she could feel

validated and listened to.

Another teacher judge spoke about the joy of one girl in her class after reading Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow and Hatem Aly's *Salat in Secret*, about a young Muslim boy who is afraid to pray in public. This book gave her the confidence to be more open about her religion, and allowed her friends to

“There is a real joy to be found in discussing books with such attentive readers”

Teacher-led awards

The UK Literacy Association (UKLA) Book Awards, judged by teachers, aim to highlight exemplary or outstanding books that have engaging narratives and strong literary qualities. The awards are not unique in having a clear purpose like this, but the structure of the judging process – involving teachers at each step of the process – is a model for the education profession, valuing teacher knowledge and expertise.

For teacher judges, reading the longlists and shortlists is both volitional and – unusually for adult reading – non-volitional, as they are required to read all the books without having chosen them themselves.

issues and experiences of importance to young people today, and reading these books can also offer us an insight into our pupils' lives.

This might be through the depiction of LGBTQ+ identities, as in Theo Parish's *Homebody*, of care leavers, as in Margaret McDonald's *Glasgow Boys*, or of child poverty, as in Tom Percival's *The Wrong Shoes*. These stories are based on writers' own authentic experiences and allow us to be more empathetic to the young people we work with.

The impact of sharing such stories with children cannot be overstated. One of this year's teacher judges movingly described how Craig Barr-Green and Francis



understand this more fully. We hear stories like this every year.

Pupil-led decisions

Although teachers judge this award, they are absolutely informed by their pupils' responses to the books. Teachers are transparent about their roles as judges, and invite honest feedback from pupils. The children share in the excitement, particularly when they discover that their teachers will have the opportunity to meet the authors of their favourite books.

Just as important as the books themselves are the discussions with fellow

teacher judges. All teacher judges belong to a small group of teachers from different schools with whom they meet monthly. Reading twenty books together between September and March allows strong bonds to form within the group, particularly when many of the books address challenging issues, and group members get to know each other as both teachers and readers.

There is a real joy to be found in discussing books with such attentive readers, and by the end of the process it can often feel like you have spent time in each other's classrooms. As one of the Awards' founders, Lynda Graham, says:

"Something happens in these groups that is quite remarkable. In every group I've led, teachers begin to share their own emotional responses to their reading and to make connections with their own lives and own lived

A WINNING CLASSROOM

Even if you don't have the opportunity to be a teacher judge, here are a few ways you can bring the magic of book awards into your classroom...



Shadow a book award

Reading a whole longlist or shortlist will introduce you to great books you might not otherwise have read. In addition to the UKLA Book Awards, there are plenty to choose from, including local book awards and subject-specific awards, such as the Young Quills Award for historical fiction or the Royal Society's Young People's Book Prize for children's science books.



Read outside your age group

One of the most exciting parts of the UKLA Book Awards is when our final panellists read the shortlisted books in all four categories. Reading books aimed at readers from EYFS to secondary can offer a much more holistic understanding of young people's development as readers.



Connect with teachers from other schools

to talk about books
Find out more about how other schools promote reading for pleasure and discover new recommendations. This could be through an OU/UKLA Teacher Reading Group, the UKLA's monthly 'book blethers' online, or through a local network of teachers.



Involve pupils in discussions about awards

The conversations we have when judging book awards allow us to be more evaluative and more open about what we like and dislike about different books. Modelling this with young people allows them to see that they are allowed their own response to each book they read and to consider what they value most of all in a book.

experiences. These affective responses lead them to share books honestly with pupils, to begin to know which books might matter to their pupils. They talk about ways they are sharing in schools – and teachers do 'borrow shamelessly' – taking and building on good ideas from each other. These discussions are at the heart of the UKLA Book Awards."

The impact extends far beyond the Book Awards themselves, and many teacher judges describe the lasting effects on their teaching and reading habits. Some who had not previously read any children's or YA fiction for pleasure now do so regularly; others describe becoming the 'go-to' person in their school or department for recommendations.

UKLA achieves its goal of improving literacy education by creating a supportive

community for those working in literacy, language and communication. The longlists for the 2026 Book Awards can be viewed at tinyurl.com/tp-UKLA-longlist



Nikki Gamble is the director of Just Imagine and provides consultancy and training in schools in the UK and internationally. Stephen Dilley has been a secondary



English teacher for 16 years and is currently head of English at Kendrick School, Reading. He is part of the UKLA Book Awards team and the Just Imagine review panel and was an associate teacher with the English & Media Centre for 2024–25.

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When I Feel Lonely

Use Britta Teckentrup's beautiful picturebook to sensitively explore difficult emotions with your class

JO CUMMINS

In an age where an increasing number of social interactions take place online, and where the number of social media platforms is ever expanding, levels of loneliness amongst the general population are on the increase. The 'loneliness epidemic' is particularly prevalent amongst young people, who may not yet have developed the strategies and resilience to manage their own mental wellbeing and seek support if needed. Why is it that

young people can have hundreds of 'friends' online, but feel lonely and isolated at home?

Luckily, there are lots of books available to help facilitate discussions within classrooms, which can allow teachers to create a safe space for their children to explore tricky emotions and develop useful strategies to help themselves and their peers. Many of you will already be familiar with the beautiful work of author and illustrator, Britta Teckentrup.

In her latest title, *When I Feel Lonely*, she explores a journey from the perspective of a young girl as she walks the path from loneliness and isolation to finding friendship. Teckentrup uses her trademark illustrative style and poetic language to sensitively unpack the feeling of loneliness: that it's completely normal, but can also be uncomfortable and unsettling at times. She also ensures that there are glimmers of the hope of happier times ahead despite the present darkness.





Loneliness map

This activity is designed to explore the children's pre-existing understandings and experiences of the feeling of loneliness. It can sometimes feel quite uncomfortable to explore 'negative' emotions, but picturebooks provide the perfect vehicle to do so.

Invite pupils to look closely at the cover of *When I Feel Lonely*. What do they notice about the setting, the characters, and the colours used? Why do the children think Teckentrup has used a wintery setting and blue tones? What colours or weathers would the children associate with being lonely? What other words can children think of to describe the feeling of being lonely?

As previously mentioned, exploring some emotions can feel challenging for children. To support children to feel able to share their own experiences, ask the adults to share an example first of when they have felt lonely. Encourage the children to share examples too, or to think of a scenario when a person might be feeling lonely.



Start creating a large loneliness map of their suggestions. As you read through the book, ask the children to add further observations and thoughts to the loneliness map, along with any interesting vocabulary. This can then be referred to for any later pieces of work and will show how the children's understandings have developed.

Language focus

Throughout the story, a lot of powerful language is used to convey the intense feelings of loneliness felt by the main character. The pupils are going to hunt for as many examples as they can, before going on to create a class poem on the theme of loneliness.

You might want to collect examples as a whole class, in which case large

sheets of paper or hoops to sort examples into might be useful. If you would prefer the children to work independently, they could simply divide up a page in their books or be given a scaffolding framework.

After some discussion, challenge the children to find examples of rhetorical questions, powerful verbs, personification, and interesting adjectives. As an extension, pupils could be asked to indicate which words or phrases make loneliness feel stronger or smaller.

Pick out a key phrase to focus on and explode it. For example, 'My loneliness is always by my side.' Check that the pupils know what is meant by personification. What do they understand about loneliness from the

Take it further ➡➡➡

SHADOW AND LIGHT

Revisit pages in the book where loneliness is shown through empty spaces and muted colours. How do these compare to the more comforting pages at the end, which feature warmer tones, light and scenes from nature? Discuss how Teckentrup shows the feeling of loneliness without using words. How does the mood of the illustrations change when light and warmth are added?

Using the techniques discussed, the children are going to create their own contrast pictures. Divide an A3 sheet of paper in half. On one side, create an abstract or symbolic image of loneliness, using darker colours, simple shapes and shadowy forms.

To contrast, the other half of the page should represent comfort and connection using

brighter tones, patterns, natural imagery or friendly figures.

If pupils have previously experimented with writing descriptive phrases inspired by the book, they could transcribe these onto their artworks. For example, 'Loneliness feels like an empty bench' on the dark side and 'But light returns when I share a smile' on the bright side.

ANTONYM HUNT

Ask pupils to recall what the key emotional focus of the book is – loneliness. What are some possible antonyms for 'lonely'? Create a list together: together, connected, loved, included, comforted.

After the children are secure with the concept of an antonym, give them a card with a different emotion on (happy, anxious, hopeful, angry) and ask them to find the opposite of their word. Pair up with a friend and share their word pairs – match these to physical actions. For example, hug yourself for 'loved' or clench your fists for 'angry'.

These antonyms could provide a starting point for an alternative story modelled on *When I Feel Lonely*. The children could create their own narratives based on transitioning from one emotion to its opposite, for example, from sad to happy, or angry to calm.

MINDFULNESS WALK

When I Feel Lonely is very much based on the natural world and the hope and comfort it can



Loved this? Try these...

- ❖ *The Boy, The Troll, and The Chalk* by Anne Booth, illustrated by David Litchfield
- ❖ *Everybody Has Feelings* by Jon Burgerman
- ❖ *Alone!* by Barry Fields
- ❖ *The Invisible* by Trudy Hardwig, illustrated by Patrice Barton
- ❖ *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan

about how all the different metaphors come together to create the same kind of feeling – even though we may all experience loneliness slightly differently, it is an emotion that most people will experience at various times.

A guide for lonely times

Hopefully, during earlier discussions, the children will already have shared times when they have felt lonely or when other people may feel lonely. They will be using these as starting points for a self-help guide, which will echo the hopeful supportive tone of the book.

Start by revisiting the story. What does the author say that loneliness feels like? What helps the character feel better? Divide the board into two columns. Label the first, 'What loneliness feels like'. Record the key ideas to refer to later, for example: *shadows, grey, empty spaces, being left out*.

Label the second column, 'What helps'. Add some of the ideas from the book (being with nature, reaching out to others, remembering happy times). Encourage the children to add ideas of their own too, for example: *stroking my cat helps* or *looking at old photos*.

The next step is for the children to work in pairs or small groups to expand and reframe the 'What helps' list into advice for peers. For example, 'Go for a walk outside and name three things you can hear' or 'Talk to a friend or teacher, even if it feels hard'. To extend this task further, challenge pupils to try and emulate the book's style, so rather than 'Talk to a friend', they might write 'Shadows shrink when you talk to a friend'.

phrase shared? Can any of them extend the phrase by adding a simile onto the end? For example, 'My loneliness is always by my side, like a cloud of fog that refuses to lift.'

After creating some new phrases as a group, the children should go on to write their own ones, personifying loneliness and creating a simile to add further description. This could be simplified by asking them just to come up with a simile – or extended, by asking pupils to add a reflective phrase on the end which mirrors the hopeful message conveyed at the end of the book. For example, 'But when I see my friend smile, the fog begins to clear.'

These phrases can then all be combined into a class poem which you can read aloud together. Think

The children should create illustrated pages for their advice, inspired by the book's illustrations. They could use drawings, doodles, or illustrations to illuminate their pages. You might want to create a longer book with further sections such as, 'What loneliness feels like', 'Things that help' or 'Kind words for a friend'. This could be kept in a class reading corner or school library for pupils to access when they need to.



Jo Cummins is an experienced primary school teacher and English leader with a passion for children's books and mental health awareness. As well as blogging about new children's books and creating educational resources, she has been involved in long-listing and judging national books awards. Jo currently works for a specialist educational provision in Hampshire in a teaching and advisory role and volunteers with the Children's Book Project.

bring. A great technique for grounding yourself if you are feeling lonely, angry, or sad is to take a walk outside and do some mindfulness exercises.

Here are a few ideas you might like to try with your class or small groups:

- **Slow walking** – This works best in just socks or bare feet! Take 10 to 15 slow steps outside, noticing the heel-to-toe movement. Focus on how the ground feels beneath your feet. Try walking over a variety of surfaces (grass, crunchy leaves, pebbles, smooth tarmac) to increase sensory feedback.
- **A five-senses scavenger hunt** – Pause at various points on a nature walk and ask the children to name five things they can see, four things they can hear, three things they can feel, two things they can smell, and one thing

they can taste (like fresh air or a snack).

- **Nature mandalas** – Collect together natural items such as sticks, leaves, or stones and arrange them in circular mandalas on the ground. Pay close attention to the colours, shapes and patterns created, before leaving them for someone else to enjoy.

FEELING DRAMATIC

Drama is an effective way to get children thinking more deeply about emotions and to help them start making links between what they are feeling in their bodies and which emotion(s) they are experiencing. It will also help them become better at reading the body language of others.

- **Role play** – You could provide the children with prompts of situations when someone is

feeling lonely, or the groups could devise a scenario of their own. Ask the children to act out the situations then model kind and supportive responses. For example, a new pupil has started school and is alone at breaktime. What could the children say or do that would help?

- **Freeze frames** – If you really want to get the children thinking carefully about their body language and facial expressions, freeze framing is the dramatic technique you need. They will need to create two freeze frames – one which is a still image of 'loneliness', which they will then transform into an image of 'connection.' It might be helpful to give the children mirrors to practise their facial expressions in before they begin, so that they see precisely what their features are doing.

WAGOLL

Hunt for the Golden Scarab, by MG Leonard

Peer inside the mind of the author, and help pupils understand how to produce their own enchanting portal story



Hunt for the Golden Scarab, by MG Leonard, ill. Manuel Šumberac (£7.99, Macmillan Children's Books), is out now

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Download your **FREE**, exclusive teaching pack to help you explore both this extract and the rest of the book with your class.

tinyurl.com/tp-portal

Have you ever seen a door that seems to resonate with power, as if it would open into another world? I spot them all over the place. Odd, small, shabby doors, with peeling paint and a rusty lock, are as appealing to my imagination as grand doors with ornate carvings. Books started my fascination with doors, namely *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. A door is thing of mystery. You never know what or who is going to be on the other side...

I grew up loving *Indiana Jones*, *Back to the Future*, and *Dr Who*. I also enjoyed history at school, and all of this has contributed to me eventually imagining that there are special doors that can open into the time in which they were made. I call them Time Doors. Of course, not anyone can open a Time Door. Only a Time Key can spot one and will be able to open it. In my Time Keys series, only young people with a musical gift are capable of being Time Keys. It's a fact that children usually have superior hearing to adults. This is important, because it is music that opens a Time Door. The Time Key can tune into the frequency of a Time Door and play

the music required to open it. In *Hunt for the Golden Scarab*, my heroes open a Time Door back to Ancient Egypt, because they are searching for the lost heart scarab of Nefertiti. The story takes the reader from the present to 1922, when Howard Carter discovered Tutankhamun's tomb, and then all the way back to 1331 BCE.

In each book of the Time Keys series, our musical heroes will open a portal into the past and have an adventure. Every story will have at least one powerful portal. I have spent a considerable amount of time thinking about portal stories, how and why they work, my own door lore, and the function the portal plays in the narrative.

FIVE TIPS FOR WRITING A GREAT PORTAL STORY

1. PURPOSE

Know why you are using a portal. Establish how it works and what it does. This is the door lore that creates the magic in the story. Whether it's a door in time or to a secret garden, you need to know why it's there and what purpose it will serve in your story.

2. STRUGGLE

Adding mystery or a struggle to a character's ability to open the portal will make it more of a significant event. Delaying the opening of the door will

increase your reader's curiosity about what or who is on the other side. If it's too easy, it's boring. Why might your character fail to open the portal?

3. NEW TERRITORY

What is on the other side of your portal? Your protagonist should notice all physical differences and any strangeness. What do they think or feel about the space on the other side of the door? Consider weather, temperature, landscape, time, flora and fauna and the people or creatures that live in this new place.

4. A CHALLENGE

Whatever is waiting for our hero on the other side of the portal must challenge them, and the experience should change them. In the featured extract, Sim wishes his mum would save him, but after opening the Time Door, he sets out to save her.

5. LANGUAGE

What do you want your reader to know about this new place? Think about how you describe going through the door or portal. Try changing the narrative perspective. Use simile or metaphor to evoke newness.



Extract from

chapter 19,
pages 170-171

These short sentences indicate the effect of the threat on Sim. His breathing and his thoughts are quick and short. He closes his eyes and retreats inside himself because there is nowhere else for him to hide.

The choice of words here shows that music has a transformative effect on Sim, described first as if it were liquid (*brimming*) and then as if it were light (*golden sunlight*).

Using the verbs *flew* and *hit* communicates movement and impact. This body blow brings Sim – and us – back into the physical world.

The description here is provided in drips and drabs to show that Sim doesn't understand what he is looking at. This is the first indicator to the reader and Sim that he is in the same place but a different time.

Sim closed his eyes. This was it.
The Council had found him. He'd never see his mum again.

In his head, he stepped the A played by the tuning fork down to an F, humming the harmonising note so that his skull buzzed with it. F was the first note of the 'Raindrop' Prelude. With his back and hands flat against the metal door, Sim imagined the keyboard of his piano back home and played the opening phrase of Chopin's piano piece, as if it could reach through time and summon his mum. He let the music fill him up until he was brimming with it. Until it radiated out of him like golden sunlight. Until he felt he was no longer physical but pure music and he was falling backwards.

His eyes flew open in shock as he hit the ground.

The metal door had opened behind him.

Except now it was closed, in front of him.

Sim scrambled to his knees, opening the door a crack, peeping into the burial chamber. Trying to see Penhooligan. There was no longer a terracotta sarcophagus outside. Instead, an enormous stone box almost filled the room. Above it was a system of pulleys and ropes. There were tools scattered on the floor. His mum and Jeopardy's footprints had vanished.

'What?'

A noise in the room behind him made him spin round. He saw a flickering candle in a lantern. Kneeling in its glow, on the rough-hewn stone floor, at the feet of a black dog statue on a gold plinth, was a man with his head in his hands.

The 'Raindrop' Prelude is a call-back to the music Sim has played to his mum earlier in the story. It connects him to her, almost like he's calling to her by playing it in his head.

These last four words act as both internal and external description; it's how he feels *and* what is happening. Sim cannot discriminate between the two because he's frightened.

Each of these sentences is a new paragraph because they conflict. The first sentence is what Sim experiences. The second is what his eyes are showing him. Both things can't be true. This is the first indication that something uncanny has happened. Both sentences end with 'him', because Sim is the constant and it's the world around him that has changed.

Showing Howard Carter on his knees, with his head in his hands, indicates that he's not a threat to Sim. Showing this to the reader allows them to guess who this person might be before Sim tells them, which involves them in the story.

Reading for pleasure in crisis: **CAN WE STOP THE ROT?**

Despite all the wonderful work being done by teachers, organisations and charities, the number of children reading out of choice is still in decline...

We already know that reading for enjoyment is just about the most empowering thing a child can do to enhance their chances in life. Benefits include:

- significantly larger vocabulary
- enhanced comprehension skills
- greater empathy and compassion
- stronger imagination and creativity
- better performance in school assessments across all subject areas, including maths
- better cognitive performance and mental wellbeing in adolescence

Research has shown that reading for pleasure is more important for children's cognitive development than their parents' level of education, and a more powerful factor in life achievement and life satisfaction than socio-economic background.

So why are children (and adults) reading less in their free time?

Competing with screens

The Reading Agency's *State of the Nation in Adult Reading 2025* report found that 46 per cent of adults in the UK struggle to focus on reading due to the distractions around them



In fact, 33 per cent of adults shared that they're multitasking while reading – whether commuting, exercising, or doing chores. For younger adults, this figure spikes.

Lack of reading role models

Statistics show that only 53 per cent of adults read

regularly in their free time, which means fewer adult reading role models for children to emulate.

Just 40 per cent of parents say reading aloud to their child is 'fun for me', with Gen Z parents the most likely to consider reading as 'more a subject to learn than a fun thing to do'.

Boys may be particularly affected by the lack of

positive male role models as studies show that from ages five to 17, boys enjoy reading significantly less than girls do.

Cost of living crisis

With many local libraries closing and schools suffering drastic reductions in budgets, children's books are becoming a 'luxury' that many families can no longer afford.

Lack of representation

Due to this financial pressure, many schools hang onto outdated children's books that don't reflect our modern society. If children cannot see themselves in books, they quickly conclude that reading isn't for 'someone like me'.

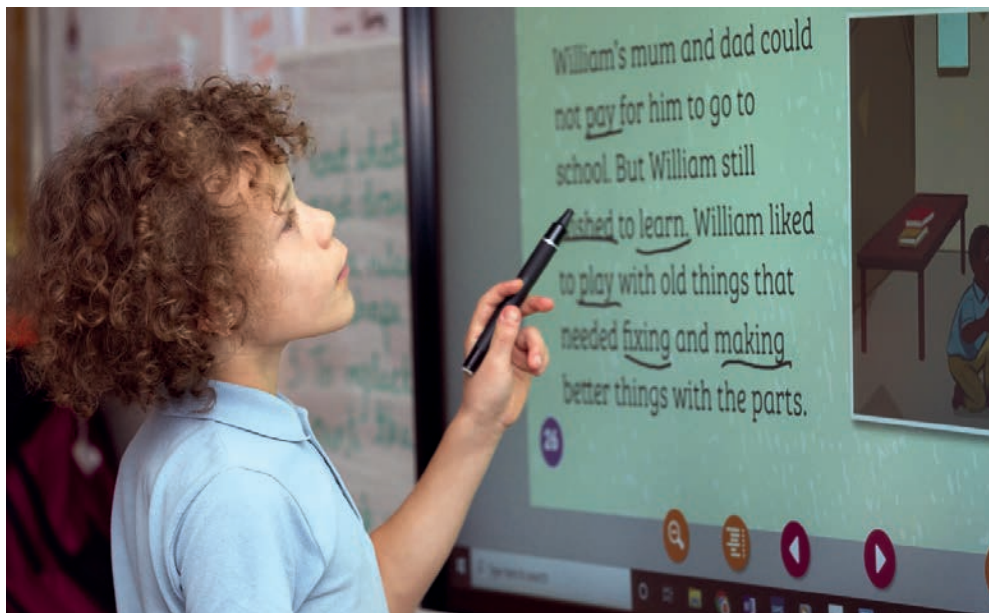
Lack of time

Lack of time is given in surveys as one of the biggest barriers to reading for pleasure.

However, all the surveys suggest children would read more if they were given the time to do so. The Children's Commissioner reported that while conducting The Big Ambition Survey, they found a clear message that 'children want more access to books, more encouragement and more time to read'.

Children also want more agency to be able to choose what they read and not have their choices judged

“36 per cent of parents from families struggling financially say they buy significantly fewer books for their children”



and dismissed by parents or teachers. All reading for pleasure is good reading – whether it's a graphic novel, comic strip, non-fiction picture book, or an audiobook.

10 tips for fostering reading for pleasure

1 Create an environment where a range of books and other reading materials, including audiobooks, are readily available.

2 Invest in new children's books whenever you can afford to – raise money at events such as summer fairs, from the PTA or other sources, like the Children's

Book Project or your local library.

3 Make time for reading. Dedicate time for reading aloud; and set aside quiet times for children to simply relax and lose themselves in a book of their choice.

4 Celebrate books and authors, especially on World Book Day. Invite authors from diverse backgrounds into school to inspire the children and demonstrate that reading (and writing) is for everyone.

5 Be a reading role model and talk about the books you read with the children. Encourage them to talk about the books they're reading too.

6 Host regular sessions with parents on the power of reading. Support them, where required, with information in their home language and emphasise that reading for pleasure in the home language brings most, if not all, the benefits of reading in English.

7 Use a reading and phonics programme such as Reading Planet or Rocket Phonics, that build in a love of story and reading from the get-go and includes a wide range of genres with diverse and inclusive characters.

8 Support less able readers with targeted interventions, bring in reading helpers), and use appealing reading resources, such as the **Astro** strand of Reading Planet – a vibrant collection of high-lo readers, including graphic novels with accessible language.

9 Take classes to the local library. Encourage students to explore all the different books, genres and resources available. Find out about special events and workshops hosted in the library and any other services they can provide.

10 Look out for activities and events taking place next year for the National Year of Reading. The campaign will bring



Reading Planet is a whole-school reading programme for ages three to 11, including our Rocket Phonics programme (ages three to seven) which aims to create a firm foundation for literacy from a young age. We work closely with authors, diversity and inclusion experts, literacy experts, partners, and schools to create books to help every child reach their unique potential, by featuring:

- traditional tales, religious stories and important figures from **around the world**
- characters and settings that **represent all backgrounds**
- thought-provoking and **relevant topics**
- inspirational real-life and fictional stories about people from **varied cultures, places and professions**

Reading Planet launches children into a life-long love of reading. With 800+ books, there is something to support every learner at every stage of their reading journey.

Learn more at hachettelearning.com/reading-planet

REVERSING THE TREND

Hachette's Raising Readers campaign aims to raise awareness of the decline in the number of children reading for fun and encourage everyone to make reading for enjoyment part of children's daily lives.

- Making the most of authors' connection with their readers, letters will be printed at the back of Hachette books by authors writing for adults, sharing the importance of encouraging a child's life-long love of reading.
- This campaign aims to raise awareness that reading for fun is the single biggest predictor of a child's future success – more than family circumstance, parents' education, or income. It impacts academic results, mental health, wealth, communication skills and ambition.

Learn more at raisingreaders.co.uk

together schools, parents, libraries, publishers, and literacy experts so we can all play a role.

Together, we can work to give as many children as possible one of the most precious gifts you can give to a child – a love of reading.

Helen Parker is senior lead product manager for primary literacy at Hachette Learning and spearheaded the creation of Reading Planet and Rocket Phonics.

 hachettelearning.com/trw-mag-reading-planet

Creating a culture OF READING

Jon Biddle explains how to put theory into practice in your classroom

When you walk into a school where reading really matters, you can feel it almost immediately. Books are visible everywhere, children talk excitedly about what they're reading, and staff understand the power of sharing stories.

Establishing this kind of culture takes a lot more work than organising the annual World Book Day assembly. It means embedding habits that put reading at the centre of school life.

In his pioneering book, *Tell Me*, author Aidan Chambers argues that there are four foundations on which a school reading culture needs to be built: independent reading, reading aloud, book talk, and access to high-quality reading material. This is backed up by a large amount of research.

Time and choice

It's easy to say we value reading, but unless we give children actual time in the school day to read, they'll get the message that it isn't really important. Protecting space for **independent reading**, every single day, is essential.

Choice over reading matter is crucial. Children need to feel that the books they pick up are their books, not just ones that have been selected for them. That might mean comics, joke books, non-fiction about dinosaurs or the latest football annual.

We can guide and nudge them towards texts we think they'll enjoy, but the final decision should be theirs,

at least most of the time.

Reading alongside our pupils is also important as, in many cases, school staff will be their main reading role model. There are always things to be done in the classroom, but when children see their teacher sitting with a book, totally absorbed, it sends the clearest possible message about why reading is important.

The beating heart of reading culture

Reading aloud should be happening in every classroom, from Nursery to Year 6, every day. The timing of it is important. Many schools now schedule it for earlier in the day, so that it isn't squeezed out when a lesson overruns or because the cloakroom needs tidying.

A daily read-aloud session can transform the culture in a classroom. It brings children together as a community, exposes them to stories and language they may not yet be able to access independently and shows them what fluent, expressive reading looks like. But more than that, it's joyful and is often one of the highlights of the day.

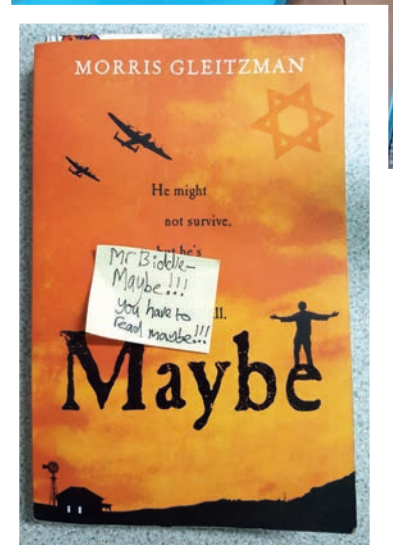
At the end of every year, I ask my class about their favourite memories of school. This year, three of them said it was when we read the last chapter of *A Street Dog Named Pup* by Gill Lewis. The fact that the vast majority of them were in tears when I closed the book was something that will stay with them in a way that we can't measure.

Make reading social

Reading might look like a solitary activity, but in thriving reading communities it's deeply social. Talking about books helps children build their reading identities, gives them recommendations from peers and shows that what they're reading matters.

This is where the Teachers as Readers project, led by Professor Teresa Cremin, is so influential (tinyurl.com/tp-TaRs). The research shows that when teachers develop their own knowledge of children's literature and share their personal reading lives, pupils become more motivated, engaged readers. **Book talk**, rooted in authentic enthusiasm and knowledge, helps to build strong communities of readers where every voice is valued.

Book talk doesn't have to be complicated. It might be a quick "What are you reading at the moment?" or "When did a book last make you laugh?" as children walk in.





“Let children take books home without endless restrictions”



Or a five-minute book blether where they talk favourites with a partner.

Every class in my school has a Pupil Recommendations Shelf organised by our team of reading champions. We also hold regular assemblies where children and staff have the opportunity to share their favourites, and a thirty-second slot in our Friday celebration assembly where a child introduces a book they love. Because parents are invited to this, it's a great way to help raise their awareness of popular books, too.

One morning, I walked into my classroom and saw a copy of *Maybe* by Morris Gleitzman on my desk, along with a sticky note that read ‘*Maybe!!! You have to read Maybe!!!*’. I couldn't really refuse... The next week, I chatted about my thoughts on the book with the pupil who'd suggested it. It was a

conversation between equals, two members of our classroom reading community, readers who'd shared the same journey.

Fuel for the fire

The final pillar is obvious but often overlooked: children can't become readers if they don't have access to reading material that will spark their interest. School and classroom libraries filled with outdated, tatty books won't inspire anyone.

We need shelves stocked with diverse, engaging, high-quality texts; books where every child can find themselves reflected, and also discover lives very different from their own. If you haven't done so already, please read Rudine Sims Bishop's short essay *Mirrors, Windows and Sliding Glass Doors*. It's ground-breaking.

I realise that purchasing new reading material can be enormously challenging. However, even a small investment a couple of times a year can help. Buying new books has to be viewed as an investment and not an expense.

Most importantly, let children take books home without endless restrictions. If we want reading to feel like a normal, enjoyable part of life, books need to travel beyond the classroom.

We let our pupils take home books from the library over the summer holiday as we're very aware that a significant number don't have access to books at home. Yes, inevitably a small number get lost, but that has to be better than children facing six weeks with nothing to read.

Pulling it all together

Independent reading, reading aloud, book talk, and access to great books help create the conditions where reading for pleasure can flourish. None of this is flashy or gimmicky.

WHY CHOICE MATTERS

I'll never forget a girl in my class who, at the start of Year 5, proudly told me she didn't like reading so I shouldn't even waste my time. For weeks, she'd spend independent reading time half-heartedly flicking through whichever book was in reach. One day, she saw a friend enjoying a graphic novel (*Smile* by Raina Telgemeier) and decided to give it a go.

By the summer term, she'd read most of the graphic novels in the classroom. In Year 6, she began dipping into longer chapter books and decided she wanted to be a reading buddy and a pupil librarian. Without that protected time, she might never have made that leap.

None of it is a quick win. But, over time, these methods build habits, identities and communities that last.

When you see a class of children sprawled around the room, lost in books that they've chosen; when you hear them arguing passionately about what the next class read will be or whose turn it is for Poem of the Day; when you're overwhelmed by applications for reading champions at the start of the year – that's when you know a school is on its way to building a culture of reading. And once it's there, it spreads.



Jon Biddle is an experienced primary school teacher and English

lead. Winner of the 2018 Reading for Pleasure Experienced Teacher of the Year award, he coordinates the national Patron of Reading initiative.

Getting to THE POINT

If you want children to write with confidence and fluency, don't leave their sentence structure skills to chance, warns **Amanda Webb**...

"Don't forget your full stops!" was something I said a lot in my early teaching career.

I soon realised that this lack of punctuation could be owing to one of two things:

- The children needed to be taught how to proofread as they were, understandably, unable to attend to punctuation at the point of drafting, due to cognitive overload.
- Pupils lacked understanding of the grammatical conventions of a sentence.

By asking children "What is a sentence?" and analysing their writing, I could determine what I needed to teach to support their understanding and control of language.

Looking at structures

I regularly found myself addressing this challenging area of primary English with specific teaching around sentence structure.

Children who struggle with end-of-sentence punctuation, or who stick to sentence constructions that they are comfortable with, most often require some explicit teaching to transform spoken language into a more controlled, concise written form.

Confident readers, who are consuming varied sentence constructions daily through their reading mileage, often appear to be more secure around their

use of sentences within their writing. However, there may be some underlying wobbliness – and for children who are not voracious readers, where to place that end-of-sentence punctuation can remain a mystery.

We cannot leave this skill to chance. We want our children to have a range of sentence constructions to hand so they can begin to choose the most appropriate with fluency, conveying their meaning precisely to their intended audience.

So what can we do to support the development of sentence skills?

"We cannot leave this skill to chance"

A holistic approach

The importance of explicit sentence structure teaching is emphasised in the draft writing framework, published in July 2025. However, it is important to note that this shouldn't result in the teaching of sentences in isolation.

Instead, they need to be taught within the context of the whole piece to create meaning. Sentence-level instruction forms part of a holistic approach to writing instruction, which leads to effective outcomes.

Pleasingly, the writing framework refers to the importance of the early years. It stresses that quality interactions between children and adults, alongside

provision with language at the heart, supports children to develop a wide range of language structures.

We need to attune children's ears to different language structures, including the sound of a sentence, by providing opportunities for them to hear, see, read, speak and write correctly structured sentences again and again.

Included in the writing framework is guidance around the types of sentence constructions we should be teaching our primary-age children. This highlights the importance of teachers

knowing the curriculum.

Time spent as a school developing subject knowledge around this strand of the curriculum, and shoring up teachers' knowledge of and use of terminology appropriate for each year group, is key to building strong foundations in this area of learning.

A shared understanding of what to teach, and when, then allows for planned opportunities for children to spend time taking sentence structures to fluency without rushing ahead. This then frees up their cognitive load to add flourishes to their writing with the use of carefully chosen vocabulary, whilst thinking about the purpose of their writing and who they are writing for.

Sentence essentials

Don't rush ahead

Know your programme of study, but also what children need to know and understand from their learning in previous year groups.

We wouldn't teach multiplying mixed fractions to a child who doesn't know their times tables yet, so why would we teach relative clauses if a child needs to secure their use of single-clause sentences?

Those single-clause sentences are as important in Y6 as they are in Y1 to communicate meaning.

Model, model, model!

Use metacognitive talk whilst live writing so children can hear and see your choices as a writer. An example of this is shown in the panel opposite.

Check your sentences

Model checking your sentences are correct using a sentence checker, so that children can then emulate this within their own writing. As teachers, we ask children to check their writing for correct

end-of-sentence punctuation – but how often do we teach and model this process?

Introduce visual reminders

Colour pop is a great reminder for children to use end-of-sentence punctuation and capital letters. Here they can choose a different colour pen/pencil to write their capital letter and full stop. This acts as a physical reminder to include their end-of-sentence punctuation followed by a capital letter.

This can be used from Y1 through to Y6, for a time-limited period, as a prompt when writing.

Be consistent

If you are a subject lead, ensure there is a consistent approach to the teaching of sentence structure across the school. We need to ensure this learning is taught sequentially, with time to circle back to previous Year Groups’

learning, in order to ensure strong foundations are laid and built upon.

Provide time to proof

If children are secure in their understanding of sentence structure, but this becomes lost at times through extended pieces of writing, teach them how to proofread for sentence structure accuracy. Provide dedicated time to do this, and ensure there is a real, chosen authentic audience who they will be sharing their writing with at the end of the process. In this way, you will be developing their motivation to want to write something purposeful and authentic with accuracy for their reader.

Building strong writers

As teaching professionals, we need to keep a sharp focus on teaching all children how to write correctly-structured sentences in a systematic way within the context of an authentic piece of writing, to ensure misconceptions do not persist. But we must also give children the tools they need to make authorial choices around which sentence constructions to use and when to engage their authentic readers. Only then can we ensure children will become successful writers and communicators.

Metacognitive talk for Year 2

Display the written examples below, and talk about the differences between *and*, *but* and *or*.

Displayed sentence: Luna watched her teacher and she tried out the steps.

Metacognitive talk: The word *and* links these two ideas together.

Displayed sentence: I know you fell over but you are still a real dancer.

Metacognitive talk: The word *but* shows contrast, where something opposite or different happens.

Displayed sentence: Luna could give up dancing or she could dance again.

Metacognitive talk: The word *or* shows an option or a choice.

Model writing the sentence below and orally testing out ideas to extend it. Write the extended sentence on the board.

Displayed sentence: Luna went to a show.

Metacognitive talk: Luna went to a show... and the dancers were brilliant, or... and it was great, or... but she still felt upset. Yes, I like ‘Luna went to a show but she still felt upset.’ Let’s write that, starting with a capital letter for Luna.

(Extract courtesy of HFL Education **ESSENTIAL WRITING**)



Amanda Webb is primary English teaching and learning

adviser at HFL Education. For further information about HFL Education, including its popular Fixing Full Stops training, visit hfleducation.org/home



Expressive FLUENCY

Rachel Clarke shares some effective ways to breathe life into your pupils' reading

Decoding words automatically and at a good rate is an important reading skill. But when combined with reading expressively, it becomes expressive fluency – a skill that shows children can both decode and understand the texts they read. Expressive fluency is important for growing confident, effective readers.

Why is expressive fluency important?

When children read with expression, they bring texts alive through using pace, tone and rhythm that matches the meaning of what they read. This very act of reading with expression shows that they understand, or comprehend, what they read. Conversely, teaching children to consider how to read with expression asks them to interact deeply with a text; to unpick what it is about and what it means so that they can read it with expressive fluency.

Repeated reading

One popular approach for teaching expressive fluency is repeated reading, where children build familiarity with a text by reading and rereading it several times. This allows them to iron out fluency issues such as mispronunciations and to practise expressive elements such as experimenting with different tones to reflect the meaning of the text.

Rate my reading

You can extend repeated reading by asking children to evaluate the quality of each other's reading aloud. They do this by creating success criteria such as reading clearly and audibly, projecting their voice



and reading rhythmically to catch the listener's ear. Asking children to do this helps teachers evaluate whether pupils know the elements of expressive fluency, as well as being able to judge how well they achieve them.

Delivering dialogue

In books with large or lively sections of dialogue, there are opportunities for children to practise reading character's words. In some cases, this encourages them to think about the reporting clauses and how these direct the reader. In others it helps them explore meanings and feelings to gain deeper understanding of the text.

Reader's theatre

Children could also stage reader's theatre performances where they give a polished rendition of their reading with encouragement to add gesticulations and actions. This again supports and reinforces the meaning of the text.

Spoken language

We know that children have better understanding of what they read when they have had a chance to talk about it. These ideas often come under the heading of book talk and are as varied as they are numerous!

Snowballing

When asked to answer a comprehension question on their own, children often have one chance to form a response. Opening up questions for discussion makes it possible to form layered, nuanced responses that reflect the opinions and conversations of all involved.

Snowballing is a scaffold that helps children form group responses. It works by giving a prompt about a book to pairs of children and encouraging them to discuss it. After a few minutes, each pair is combined with another to form a quad. They then share their discussions to create a combined and refined response. Finally, quads are combined to create larger groups where children further shape, adjust and craft their response.

Asking questions

Encouraging pupils to ask questions about a text in addition to answering them can reveal how deeply they have connected with what they have read. Children often have a knack for asking questions we would never think of! Hot seating is an approach that allows them to devise their own questions. In addition to asking questions, when they take a turn in the hot seat, children can also show just how well they know the events of the story but also the feelings and emotions of the characters involved.

Big Cat Read On is a series written for children at the top of Key Stage 2. Each book comes with extensive teacher's notes designed to cover the range of reading skills expected of older primary children. With

so much emphasis on fluency and spoken language, *Big Cat's Read On* series is destined to encourage children to read on and on. Visit collins.co.uk/BigCatReadOn to find out more.



Rachel Clarke is an experienced primary English education consultant, writer and content creator.

Celebrating 20 years of COLLINS BIG CAT

Raising lifelong readers

First published in 2005, Big Cat has become a multi award-winning, market leading reading programme that champions the importance of reading in schools.

It has:

- 2,000+ fiction and non-fiction books in print, featuring work by more than 1,000 authors and illustrators
- been used in more than 12,000 UK schools and hundreds more around the world
- supported 2 million children every year to become fluent readers

INSIDE THIS SECTION

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Original stories and natural language have helped to make Big Cat the enduringly effective reading programme it is today

39 Onwards and upwards

Keep the reading spark alive through the primary-secondary transition with the right books at the right time



Illustration © Irma Ruggiero (*The Dragon in the Sewer*, Collins Big Cat)

How does a book come to life?

Follow the Big Cat process from concept to creation

Shaping the vision

Every book's journey starts with market research and valuable feedback from schools. This helps to define the focus and scope for each Big Cat book.

Finding the right author

The in-house project lead crafts a detailed brief and reaches out to top authors – they may even bring in an external commissioning editor to discover new talent.



Just three of our hundreds of amazing Big Cat authors (L-R: Michael Rosen, Julia Donaldson, Joseph Coelho)

Pairing them with the perfect illustrator

For illustrated books, we scout for the best illustrators to bring the story to life. Sometimes the authors and illustrators like to meet up and discuss the book to ensure they're both on the same page.



Two of our incredible Big Cat illustrators (L-R: Dante Hookey, Sonny Fletcher)



Author Oliver Sykes and illustrator Ian Morris visited Denbigh Castle together to help Ian visualise Oliver's story as accurately as possible.

Crafting the manuscript

Authors collaborate with development editors and in-house editors over two draft stages. The manuscripts undergo copyedits, fact checks, and diversity and inclusion reviews to ensure meaningful representation.



For more behind the scenes content from our creators, follow @BigCatBooksLikeMe on Instagram!

Finalising the artwork

Illustrators deliver rough and final artwork, while photo research is carefully handled. Every detail, from artwork to photo placement, is reviewed and refined across multiple proof stages.



Illustrator Jennifer Latham Robinson's sketches of Jack, the main character of *Going Viral*.

The final touches

Before heading to press, rigorous editorial and technical checks are performed to ensure nothing is overlooked.

Ready for printing

With every detail perfected, books are sent off to our production team to bring authors' visions to reality.



A book begins to take form at one of our UK-based printers.

Books arrive at schools!

Once printed and checked, the books start making their way into classrooms.



Pupils at St George's Catholic Primary School enjoy reading Big Cat books.

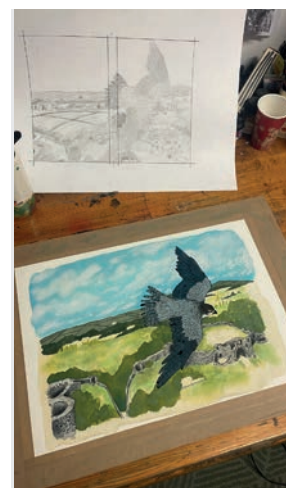
 **Collins** **20 years**
BIG CAT of raising readers

Designing the cover

Different options for covers are presented and discussed with the in-house team. Illustrators use a range of tools, from paint to graphic design, to create each cover.



Illustrator Ian Morris sketched and then painted the cover for *Saving Anwen*.



The power OF BOOKS

Original stories and natural language have helped to make Big Cat the enduringly effective reading programme it is today, says **Lee Newman**...

I was the last person in the office on Christmas Eve, 2004, quietly checking off minor file corrections for an urgent reprint of the first phase of Collins Big Cat, scheduled to publish on 5 January 2005. I remember feeling simultaneously exhausted and exhilarated – all 100 titles had gone to press on time, and we'd already sold the first print run.

The beginning of Big Cat

Big Cat was a high-profile project for HarperCollins' Education division, meticulously researched and

featuring a dazzling array of leading authors, illustrators and photographers, and offering excitement, choice and agency to their waiting readers.

We were a small team of just four, supported by a huge external range of freelance commissioning editors, proofreaders, editors, designers, and picture researchers. In constant contact, we were able to draw on that vast well of experience, such as the creative skills of our design managers, Nikki Kenwood and Niki Merrett; elevating the quality and setting a new industry standard for children's reading books.

pre-reading, with wordless, illustrated titles to fluent readers of 80-page books. Drawing on his own teaching experience, Cliff wanted children to develop their skills while reading for pleasure, believing that children need autonomy as readers; that they have more inherent preferences and knowledge than we often give them credit for; and that we should trust them to read what they want. He believed that if we trusted them to choose books written in natural language, with all its nuances and oddities, we would be giving them the best possible start to their journey as readers – and we have stayed true to the principles he enshrined in the programme.

The legacy

Those principles are acutely relevant today, where research reveals children's growing disengagement with the act of reading. Only 32 per cent of five to 10-year-olds frequently choose to read for enjoyment, down from 55 per cent in

“We aim to give children wide exposure to different forms of literature”

developed by publisher Jill Cornish and commissioning editor Eddie Rippeth, who shared a vision for combining the qualities of children's picturebooks with the rigour of a levelled reading programme. Abandoning the traditional model of a small team of authors and illustrators writing schematic books, they brought an unprecedented level of originality to the project, commissioning a different author and illustrator pairing for almost every book. The end result was 100 titles in a range of formats and genres,

One of the most important contributors to the entire project was the series editor, Cliff Moon. A former teacher, lecturer, author and respected literacy expert, Cliff's annual guide to Individualised Reading (National Centre for Language and Literacy) was regarded as an indispensable listing of the readability levels of thousands of children's books. This and other reading taxonomies informed the development of Big Cat's finely graded reading progression, that takes children from



2012; and despite reading aloud to children being a proven way to boost their enjoyment of reading, the number of parents reading aloud to children is at an all-time low. Fewer than half (41 per cent) of babies to four-year-olds are read to frequently; a steep decline from 64 per cent in 2012.

Learning to read and reading to learn are often cited as limiting factors in enjoyment of books, exacerbated by diminishing access due to library closures and financial pressures on families. But we must accept the reality that for many children, reading at school will be their only exposure to books. Even more important, then, to publish high-quality reading books

that capture children's imaginations, and inspire, inform and entertain. This responsibility and privilege has long driven the commissioning strategy for Big Cat. We've published children's contemporary fiction and non-fiction, classics and fairytales, retellings of Shakespeare, poetry, graphic novels, even joke books, aiming to give children wide exposure to different forms of literature, showcasing the huge range of forms that books can take, and helping children to develop their own literary tastes. Recent years have seen us focus heavily on representation and inclusion – from Lisa Rajan's Tara and Dani Binns miniseries that showcases women in STEM

careers, to the Time-Travelling Trio books from Nadine Cowan that shine a light on figures of Black history that have been omitted from traditional historical texts, and collections of books centred around neurodiversity, disabilities and long-term conditions, written and illustrated by contributors with lived experience, shared in an inimitable and authentic way. We want all children to see themselves in our books, so we take care to reflect the widest possible range of people, places, experiences, family structures and different socio-economic contexts; and we do so respectfully and authentically.

We've applied these commissioning principles equally to our decodable phonics books, which have been a mainstay of our publishing programme over the last five years. In 2021 we were delighted to partner with the Wandle Learning Trust and Little Sutton Primary School, publishing resources and supporting books for their systematic synthetic phonics programme, Little Wandle

Letters and Sounds

Revised. The programme is now used in more than 5,000 schools, and in April this year won a Teacher Tapp Gold Recommendation Award for having more than 90 per cent of teachers recommend the programme. Once children have secured the phonic code and embedded their decoding skills, they can build reading fluency and stamina with exciting chapter books by leading authors such as Abie Longstaff, Joseph Coelho and Chris Bradford. Supporting children on their reading journey, from

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Are you in need of a creative and effective reading programme? Consider these criteria:

- 1 A diverse range of genres and topics to allow children agency and choice over what they read.
- 2 Authentic representation and inclusion that gives all pupils a chance to see themselves in the books.
- 3 Rich, high-quality texts that captivate children's imaginations and transport them to new worlds, broadening their point of view.
- 4 A clear and structured progression that helps pupils to secure early reading skills and build reading fluency at a pace that's right for them.
- 5 Comprehensive teaching and assessment support to save teachers planning and preparation time.

mastering phonics to discovering the joy of independent reading, continues to be the driving force behind everyone who works on Big Cat, from the authors and illustrators to the team behind the scenes.

I feel immensely privileged to have been part of Big Cat's journey for the last 20 years. I look forward to seeing what the next 20 years bring.



Lee Newman is the education and children's publisher at Collins, chair of the Education

Publishers Council at the Publisher's Association, and a trustee of Book Aid Intl.

collins.co.uk/BigCat



Collins BIG CAT Read On

Set children up for a lifelong love of reading
with 20 new chapter books

Bridge the jump from banded readers to longer books
with exciting stories featuring more sophisticated
themes, vocabulary, plots and structures

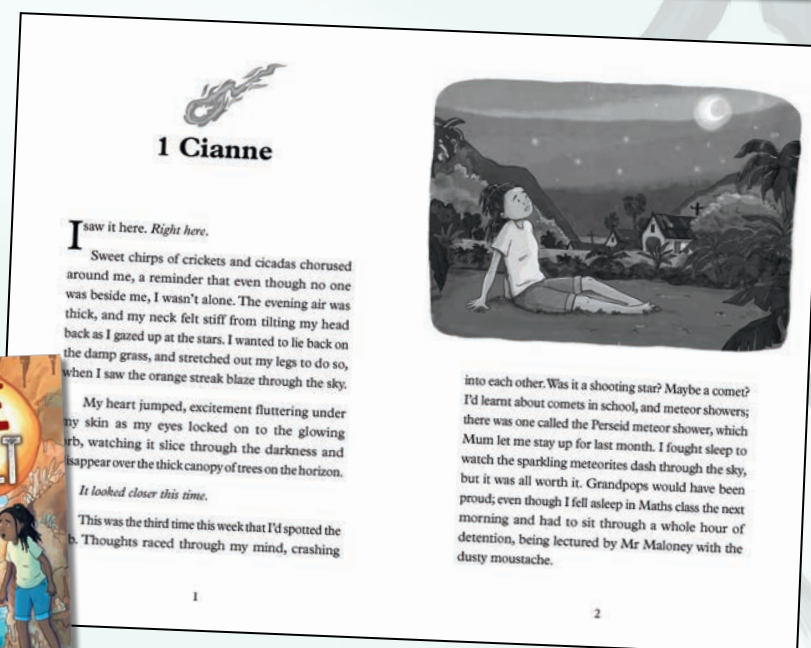
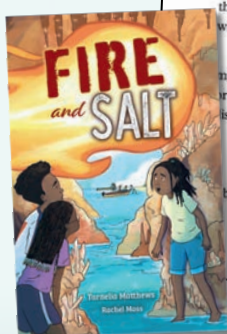


Longer books and higher word
counts to **build reading stamina**

Varied structures, devices
and vocabulary to
boost comprehension

Sophisticated themes
and plots to **encourage
exploring new genres**

Book talk opportunities
to **spark discussion**



Look inside the books and view free
teacher support resources at
collins.co.uk/BigCatReadOn



Onwards and UPWARDS

Keep the reading spark alive through the primary-secondary transition with the right books at the right time, says **Tom Mitchell**...

Given that his dad is an English teacher and children's author, you might imagine my 13-year-old son to be the world's biggest reader, but that's not quite how things have turned out. It wasn't always this way, though; back in primary school, he loved reading. Every so often, my phone throws up a photo memory of him snuggled up with a book. I'd like to say I wonder where that boy went, but I know exactly: he was chased away by SATs, 11+ exams, and secondary school homework. And he's not alone; HarperCollins recently released research showing that almost one in three (29 per cent) of children aged five to 13 now think reading is "more a subject to learn than a fun thing to do". So here's the question: how do we stop reading from becoming a chore?

Spark interest

According to the National Literacy Trust's 2019 Annual Literacy Survey, reading for pleasure levels drop significantly during the transition from primary to secondary school, falling from 72.7 per cent in Year 5 to just 48.8 per cent in Year 8. For any parent or teacher, this won't come as news. The move to secondary school is like reaching a new video game level: you've completed one world, only to find the next is tougher, darker, and full of new challenges. And that's just the parents. OECD data from the 2022 PISA suggests that UK secondary school students spend an average of two hours a day on homework. Given this, it's no wonder reading for pleasure



“Reading for pleasure is a bit like a fire; it doesn't need grand gestures, just regular tending”

falls away – especially if the new school shifts the emphasis from reading for fun to reading for assessment.

Reading for pleasure is like tending a campfire: it doesn't need grand gestures, just regular attention, the occasional spark, and something to keep it burning. Left alone for too long, it fades to embers. Neglected completely, it dies out.

How, then, can we keep the fire burning? Clearly, kids need books that match their interests and their reading level; books that support not just a love of reading, but the habit of it. The danger, however, is the dreaded 'b' word: boredom. I once received a negative Amazon review for one of my children's books, for kids aged nine plus, in which the parent bemoaned the

struggle their 'precocious' six-year-old had in reading it. If you give children books that are too difficult, they'll lose momentum. Similarly, if you stick to books that are far below their abilities, they will quickly outgrow them and stall again.

Tend the flames

This is where transition books come in. They aren't just about keeping the wheels turning – they help young readers build stamina and confidence for the longer rides ahead. They bridge the gap, offering more complex characters and ideas without abandoning the fun. The Big Cat Read On series is pitched at exactly this spot: accessible but never condescending, post-early chapter books, but pre-full-length YA. And in no way boring.

I was lucky enough to be asked to write two books in the first round of Read On. And I wrote what I'd want my son to have read at that age. Both *Gold Rush* and *On the Bench* are stories that are funny, real, and meaningful. Because here's the thing: books in these key years don't need to be overly literary. They just need to keep kids reading.

I realise my 13-year-old is unlikely to ever plead with me to bring a book with him on the supermarket drive with the same passion that he begs to be allowed his phone. But as I encourage him to read little and often, I hope the routine will help him rediscover that sense of ease and balance – where reading becomes just another way to enjoy the ride, rather than a task to prepare him for his GCSEs. It's an ongoing mission, and one I think would have been easier had I understood just how bumpy the transition between Year 6 and Year 7 could be.

We want our children to read not because they have to, but because they want to. As parents, teachers, and writers, it's our job to make sure they leave primary school not just with skills, but with stories. It's not about leaping straight to the classics, but about building the confidence to get there – and keeping the fire gently fed along the way.



Tom Mitchell is mostly a dad, partly a teacher and, at times, a Collins Big Cat writer.

LITERACY

New Big Cat information books



A wide-ranging series of ability-levelled information books, covering a variety of non-fiction genres

AT A GLANCE

- Carefully levelled non-fiction books covering a broad spectrum of primary reading abilities
- Appealingly written and illustrated
- Covers most genres of information text
- Features an unexpectedly wide range of topics
- Part of the popular Big Cat series published by Collins



REVIEWED BY: MIKE DAVIES

Sometimes my job isn't fair. I receive a set fee for writing a review, for which I then allocate a certain amount of time to getting to know the given product before putting fingertips to keyboard. It therefore simply doesn't make economic sense for me to spend ages immersing myself in the subject of my review. Yet, on this occasion, I spent far too long on the product-testing phase, because I really struggled to put these books down.

I found this new series of information books from Collins – part of their highly popular Big Cat scheme – a genuine delight. But, before I start enthusing about the content, let's get the technical essentials out of the way first.

These are carefully levelled readers to meet the needs of most reading abilities across upper KS1 and KS2. They join a programme of over 1,800 non-fiction and fiction books in Big Cat, which are designed to suit readers at all levels from novice to independent.

Each book is compellingly written yet precisely pitched. The design is lively and appealing, and the illustrations and photographs are well chosen. In short, teachers can be confident that the content will be spot-on for each child (assuming their reading ability has been accurately established) and there is smooth progression throughout the series, right up to seriously challenging texts for the most advanced Year 6 pupils.

But what really appealed to me was the range of ideas covered. Collins has clearly worked hard to include topics that will pique the interest and

fire the imagination of today's school pupil. No doubt this will enhance the pleasure of reading, not just for the child, but also for the teacher, teaching assistant or parent. And, let's face it, one of the main objectives of creating a successful reading scheme must be to inspire a love of books.

As you might expect, there is a noticeable, though not obtrusive, nod to diversity issues, such as *Twentieth Century Trailblazers* – although even that included examples of women achievers well beyond the usual suspects. There are also playful appeals to perennial childhood fascinations, from football to slime.

But what really caught my eye were the books that provided an age-appropriate introduction to topics that are more typically reserved for adulthood, through their *A guide to...* titles. Psychology is a subject that is particularly close to my heart, so I was thrilled to see it given a book of its own. Similarly, I was pleasantly surprised to encounter a thoughtfully written guide to money. Before long, I was deeply engrossed whilst simultaneously admiring the careful way in which complex and even abstract concepts had been covered. However, as the saying goes, time is money and, despite the enhanced financial literacy granted by this book, I found that the time I was spending getting lost in these titles was becoming seriously economically unsustainable. So, I think I'd better leave it there and let you discover for yourself just how good they are...

Teach
**Reading
& Writing**

VERDICT

- ✓ Enjoyable, well-pitched books
- ✓ Wonderfully informative
- ✓ Refreshingly unexpected
- ✓ Attractively presented
- ✓ A positive addition to any school library or reading programme

UPGRADE IF...

You want to foster a love of reading by introducing pupils to a wide range of fascinating topics through wonderfully crafted information books.

Find out more at tinyurl.com/tp-BigCatInfo

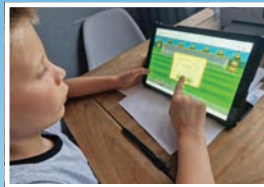


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Elf-care PROFESSIONALS

Pie Corbett models a magical instruction text

HOW TO CARE FOR A PET UNICORN

Do you have a baby unicorn to look after? Are you wondering how on Earth you will manage to take good care of such a precious animal?

Fear not. Read these instructions and you will be able to care for your pet and enjoy seeing it develop into one of the most remarkable creatures on Earth.

What you need: Living quarters, a soft blanket, shade, a water bowl and edible flowers, some grass and leaves plus plenty of kindness.

What to do

First, find a comfortable space for your unicorn so that it cannot escape and get into danger.

Next, provide a soft blanket for your unicorn to sleep on and make sure there is a shaded area, preferably with leaves as unicorns live in forests.

After that, talk to your unicorn and stroke it gently, because they like nothing more than human contact.

Also, provide regular water, because unicorns become thirsty. They also need fresh leaves, grass and edible flowers as a basic diet. This will result in a healthy unicorn.

Furthermore, exercise your pet daily by taking it outside to trot around. However, be very careful that there are no dogs or cats about that might result in frightening your baby unicorn.

Moreover, make the time to play with your pet otherwise it might pine away.

Finally, sing to your pet and if you are lucky, it may dance for you!

Unicorns make wonderful pets but eventually will outgrow any house. Consequently, you will have to release your pet into the wild. This will be a sad day, but if you have treated it well then it will return. Unicorns are faithful to those who treat them kindly.



“Ensure you provide regular cups of honeysuckle tea and mushroom slush, because elves become thirsty when playing”

HOW TO LOOK AFTER A CHRISTMAS ELF

Have you just been given an elf for Christmas? Do you know how to take good care of such a rare creature? Do not worry. Read these instructions and soon you too will be able to enjoy your pet and have the pleasure of watching it develop ‘elf-thily’.

Of course, all elves want to travel to the North Pole and work with Father Christmas. To do this, they will need good training and a nutritious upbringing. Be wary though, because elves by nature can be mischievous, so they need careful handling.

What you need: An enclosed space, plenty of toys, green clothes, ear muffers and a pointy hat, honeysuckle tea and mushroom slush, fresh vegetables, dandelion bread and acorn soup plus exercise, singing and craft lessons.

What to do

First, build an enclosed space where your elf will be safe so that it cannot escape and carry out mischief.

Next, supply plenty of toys so that your elf does not become bored. In winter, provide green clothes, ear muffers and a pointy hat to keep it cosy.

After that, remember to play daily with your elf, as they are sociable creatures, but *never* touch an elf because if you do, their magic will fade.

Also, ensure you provide regular cups of honeysuckle tea and mushroom slush, because elves become thirsty when playing. They thrive on a vegetarian diet so supply fresh vegetables, dandelion bread and acorn soup as their staple diet.

Furthermore, remember to exercise your elf daily as they have a lot of energy. However, they may run away and hide, so be very careful to keep a close eye on where they go! Consequently, you will avoid losing your elf and having to call in local elf-trackers.

Moreover, make the time to sing with your elf a range of jolly Christmas songs. Ensure your elf attends craft lessons, where it will be taught how to make toys and wrap presents. They like to whistle as they work. As a result, you will have a well-trained and happy elf!

Important reminder: Play the radio, because elves like music. If you are lucky, your elf may dance and sing for you! This is very special as they may become so excited that they uncurl their translucent wings and fly.

Elves will eventually outgrow any house. Consequently, you will have to release your elf so that it can travel north. Once it has begun working for Santa, all your training will be put to good use. Do not feel too sad, because elves are faithful to those who treat them with compassion and often return for holidays!

©Pie Corbett – Elf Whisperer



TEACHING NOTES

Have fun this festive season with some instructional work based around how to look after a Christmas elf. I have provided two model texts here: the first is about looking after a baby unicorn, and the second about caring for an elf. I have woven in some causal language to explain aspects of the instructions. You may wish to use just the first model with the children and only bring in the second one for pupils who require extra support.

Tuning-in game

This can be played orally or lead into writing a list. Note how in the model text, each idea begins with a ‘bossy verb’ to write an imperative. Discuss and brainstorm or list ideas for ways an elf could create mischief or how a Grinch might spoil Christmas. A word of warning: this activity might lead some children to go one step too far!

Five ways for an elf to create mischief

1. *Sneak around the house every night and hide so that children have to look for their elf every morning.*
2. *Sing ‘Old Macdonald had an elf’ in a very loud voice, making lots of silly noises.*
3. *Hide the car keys and Gran’s slippers, and put the tv remote control under the sofa.*
4. *Eat the cat’s dinner and bury Mum’s best shoes.*
5. *Put superglue on a teacher’s chair.*

Five ways for a Grinch to spoil Christmas

1. *Sneak into houses and flats, dressed up as Santa Claus, and steal all the children’s presents.*
2. *Raid the fridge so that there is no food.*
3. *Pull all the tinsel and decorations down and dress the dog up as a reindeer.*
4. *Turn the power off so that there are no pretty lights.*
5. *Hide behind Christmas trees and jump out shouting, “YAH! BOO!” so loudly that everyone hides under the kitchen table!*

Prepare ideas

Discuss and brainstorm a list of ideas about how to care for a pet elf. Do not skimp on this part of the preparation. The children will need lots of ideas about how they would care for their elf. Let them talk in pairs, share possibilities and make sketches of potential elf shelters.

Shortburst practice instruction

Read and discuss my unicorn text. Improvise some instructional sentences to practise using temporal language to organise the chronological order of 'what to do'. Note how the words *also*, *furthermore* and *moreover* allow the writer to add on further instructions. **Temporal language:** *First, next, later on, after that, then, eventually, finally, in the end.*

Language for adding on ideas: *Also, in addition, as well as, additionally, furthermore, moreover.*

Practise a few sentences as a class before independent writing of the children's own sentences. Note the pattern of the adverbial, followed by the comma and then the imperative verb.

TABLE 1: USING TEMPORAL LANGUAGE

Adverb of time and addition	Example using imperative verb
<i>First,</i>	<i>First, find the ideal shelter for your elf.</i>
<i>After that,</i>	<i>After that, calm your elf by talking to it gently.</i>
<i>Furthermore,</i>	<i>Furthermore, provide plenty of toys.</i>

Shortburst practice explanation

Notice how the causal language provides an explanation for the instructions.

Causal language: *because, as, so, so that, as a result, since, consequently, this causes, the reason that, this means that, this results in, therefore, when.* Practise adding explanations to the basic elf instructions. Give time to this work as it is harder. Work on one sentence at a time, with you modelling how to do it, then working as a class before they attempt their own sentence.

TABLE 2: ADDING CAUSAL LANGUAGE

Adverb of time	Example using imperative verb & causal language
<i>First,</i>	<i>First, find the ideal shelter for your elf <u>so that</u> it cannot escape and get into danger.</i>
<i>After that,</i>	<i>After that, calm your elf by talking to it gently, <u>because</u> elves like nothing more than human contact.</i>
<i>Furthermore,</i>	<i>Furthermore, provide plenty of toys, <u>because</u> elves are very energetic and easily get bored. This might <u>result in</u> mischief and mayhem!</i>

Reading as a writer

Read, discuss and analyse both model texts. Box up the underlying pattern and make a note with the children of any relevant features. Use the underlying pattern and relevant features as a basis for shared writing, leading into independent writing.

TABLE 3: PLANNING YOUR WRITING

Title	Clearly state what the instructions are about.
Introduction	Hook the reader's interest with rhetorical questions. Explain why these instructions are needed, and talk to the reader directly.
What you need	List the items needed, in order, using a colon followed by commas to separate items in the list.
What you do	Think carefully, step by step, about what your elf will need. Then, list in order what to do. Draw the steps needed to help the reader know what to do. Keep sentences clear so that the instructions can be followed easily. Use temporal adverbs to organise the order. Add on extra instructions using adverbs such as <i>also</i> , <i>furthermore</i> , <i>additionally</i> and <i>moreover</i> . Use explanatory language to explain why your list of instructions matter.
Reminder	Provide any final reminder or word of warning.
End comment	Add a final note or comment to round off the instructions.



Pie Corbett is an education consultant, poet and author known for Talk for Writing. His most recent book is

Catalysts: Poems for Writing (talkforwritingshop.com).

ENGLISH ➔

Reading Planet Online



A comprehensive, generously resourced, online, primary-level reading scheme

AT A GLANCE

- A broad-based fiction and non-fiction reading scheme with over 800 titles.
- Aimed at children of all reading abilities aged three to 11.
- Supported by a wealth of online materials, including eBooks.
- Created by a diverse range of authors and illustrators, guided by educational experts.

REVIEWED BY: MIKE DAVIES



Expertly teaching children to read remains a central focus of primary schools, and rightly so. What's more, it has evolved into a precision mission designed to carry pupils from the enjoyment of simple picture books, through the acquisition of phonics skills, right up to the establishment of young people who are fluent, confident readers.

Obviously, there are a fair few reading schemes to choose from. The question is, which one is most suitable for you? Which one best meets the needs of your school? This is where you would do well to look at Reading Planet, an online subscription service from Hachette Learning.

As you would expect these days from a major publisher, Hachette has created a comprehensive reading scheme that offers smooth progression from pre-school through primary. The books are carefully levelled (based on the Lexile system, in case you're interested) and include fiction, non-fiction and playscript titles. Although they are primarily presented online, they can also be ordered as printed versions.

The books themselves have been nicely crafted by their team of authors and illustrators. You can also tell that they have a wealth of educational, diversity and inclusion expertise behind them as they cover a very broad range of cultural and demographic interests. Most importantly, though, they feel like books a child would want to read.

For example, just from the Cosmos range (for pupils aged seven and above), I noticed a gentle

narrative about friendship issues, which ample experience tells me is a perennial problem in schools. They have spooky stories, biographies, historical non-fictions and books that address neurodiversity – the list is almost endless. It's probably more of a reflection of who I am and what I do but I found it very hard to put down *Word Play* – a lively journey through the development of language and writing.

One of the biggest plus-points, though, must be the way these titles can be accessed as eBooks through Boost, their digital learning platform. Not only does it give pupils the chance to 'take home' these wonderful books to read with their families, but it also means these precious resources don't get lost, damaged or eaten by the dog.

Furthermore, there are plenty of nifty features like self-marking, end-of-book quizzes based on NC reading content domains which automatically report back to the teacher. There are also tools for highlighting, annotating and so on while sharing the book with the class via a smart board. Furthermore, teachers will, no doubt, be glad to discover a wealth of support materials such as lesson ideas and background notes.

In fact, if I'm not careful, this whole thing could turn into a long list of features, but nobody wants to read that. Instead, why not investigate for yourself and see if this scheme ticks all your boxes. Far be it from me to give away any spoilers but I think there's a good chance you'll discover a happy ending.

“There are plenty of nifty features”

Teach
**Reading
& Writing**

VERDICT

- ✓ Attractively presented books
- ✓ Plenty of interest for everyone
- ✓ Impressively inclusive
- ✓ Clever use of technology
- ✓ Well-resourced for teachers

UPGRADE IF...

... you want to equip your school with a comprehensive, extensively resourced reading scheme designed to foster a lifelong love of books.

Find out more at hachettelearning.com/trw-mag-reading-planet

LITERACY

Big Cat Read On

Collins
BIG CAT
Read On

A brilliantly inclusive and engaging series designed to bridge the gap between banded readers and longer chapter books

AT A GLANCE

- 20 'free readers' for the transition to longer, more complex books
- Dynamic covers and clear genre labelling to help teachers and caregivers recommend reads
- Sophisticated vocabulary, plots, and structures to inspire reading and writing
- Inclusive stories with diverse characters and themes
- Variety of genres, from science fiction to historical fiction



REVIEWED BY: EMMA THOMPSON

Finding the right books to help children move from banded readers to longer, more complex texts can be tricky. You need something that challenges them without overwhelming them, while still keeping the excitement alive. That's exactly what the Big Cat Read On series achieves.

This series of 20 'free readers' is designed to bridge the gap, offering a selection of books that feel 'grown up' while still being accessible and engaging for developing readers. It's the perfect next step for children who are ready to take on more challenging texts.

One of the things I noticed immediately is how thoughtfully these books are presented. On the back of each title, you'll find the word count and a clear genre label, making it simple for teachers, parents, and caregivers to match children with books that suit their interests. The genres are wide-ranging: sci-fi, spooky mysteries, contemporary stories, historical fiction, mythology, and adventure are all available, ensuring there is something for every reader.

The books sit comfortably in the 10,000 – 15,000-word range, making it easy to help children progress incrementally.

The covers themselves are fantastic, modern, bold, and eye-catching, while the blurbs do a brilliant job of teasing what's inside without giving too much away. These little touches immediately spark curiosity and get children excited to dive in.

I found myself genuinely drawn in, especially by the science fiction titles, being a fan myself. *Leon and Asha Vs the Aliens* was a standout for me; I devoured it in one sitting. With its fast-paced plot about two friends stopping an alien invasion at their school, I could immediately picture which children would be desperate to get their hands on it.

But what really sets Big Cat Read On apart is

the quality of the writing. The vocabulary is rich, the sentence structures varied, and the plots are layered in ways that feel sophisticated without being inaccessible. These books don't talk down to young readers, and that's key. They encourage children to stretch their comprehension and critical thinking, all while enjoying stories.

The inclusivity and diversity of the series is another huge strength. Children will see themselves in these stories. *In the Castle Club*, by Helen Dineen, tackles friendship struggles in a sensitive and thoughtful way, while *The Secret Diary of Joynina K. Jones* offers a raw yet funny portrayal of living with a health condition. These books don't shy away from complex issues but approach them with warmth and honesty.

Historical titles like *Gold Rush*, set in the Wild West, and *Big News*, *Small World*, set during the Vietnam War, weave educational elements seamlessly into engaging narratives.

Another great touch is the excellent online resources. These can enhance the reading experience and help children think more deeply about the stories. They're ideal for guided reading, whole-class sessions, or independent follow-up activities, offering another way for teachers to get the most out of these high-quality texts.

Finally, the illustrations deserve a mention. While these feel like 'real' chapter books, the artwork scattered throughout enhances the stories and offers visual support for readers still transitioning from picture-heavy texts.

Big Cat Read On is flexible enough to work across different year groups, meeting children where they are on their reading journey rather than focusing on age. With its combination of thoughtful design, exciting stories, and educational value, it's an exceptional series for classrooms.

Teach
**Reading
& Writing**

VERDICT

- ✓ Perfect for bridging the jump to chapter books
- ✓ Rich vocabulary and sophisticated themes
- ✓ Wide genre range to appeal to all readers
- ✓ Inclusive, engaging, and beautifully illustrated
- ✓ A must-have for school libraries and classrooms

UPGRADE IF...

...you want to inspire confident, independent readers with high-quality books that will spark a lifelong love of reading.

ENGLISH



Clicker

Feature-rich, customisable writing support software

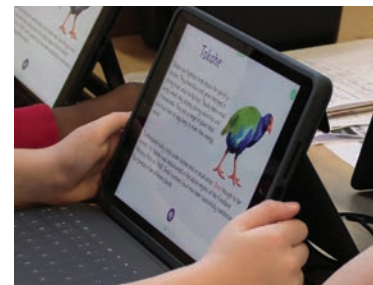
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unlocking writing word by word

AT A GLANCE

- Award-winning educational software to support writing across the ability spectrum
- A highly intuitive tool packed with a variety of features
- Realistic speech feedback
- Intelligent word predictor and a customisable spell checker
- Voice Notes enables pupils to record their own audio notes
- Includes a library of over 4,500 curriculum-related pictures
- The complete writing solution for the primary classroom

REVIEWED BY: JOHN DABELL



Imagine that there was a piece of literacy support software that helped children write more multi-syllabic words, reduce their errors, and increase their output of legible sentences. Imagine something that would help children rely less on their teacher and become more resilient and independent writers.

Well, there is.

Clicker is a feature-rich writing tool designed to transform your approach to teaching. It supports every stage of literacy and is a highly versatile tool for vocabulary exploration, decoding practice, expressive reading, supporting writing and comprehension.

At its heart, Clicker is a child-friendly, intuitive word processor – carefully designed to support developing writers – and a time-saving, flexible resource for teachers.

Clicker comes with intelligent word processing features teachers value: speech feedback, word prediction, Voice Notes, picture support, and mind-mapping tools. In addition, you can supply learners with topic-specific Sentence Sets, Connect Sets, and Word Banks – either drawing on Clicker's ready-made collection or your own creations.

This brilliant software guides children through the entire writing process, allowing them to work alongside their peers while enhancing their foundational literacy skills. Using the software enables children to write more, reduce their grammar and spelling mistakes and produce a much higher standard of writing.

Clicker's deft design, combined with flexible functionality, gives you the confidence to support every learner effectively. It supports your continuous provision by offering children a diverse range of activities that they can access independently.

The analytics tool in Clicker offers a clear

window into every learner's progress, making it easier to gather meaningful summative and formative assessment data. It highlights how learners are engaging with the support provided and helps you judge when they are ready to move on to new activities and challenges.

One of the best-loved functions of Clicker is text-to-speech. This provides realistic child voices that read back pupils' writing, giving them valuable opportunities to check accuracy and develop self-correction skills. These are not always easy things to get right but recent upgrades using the very latest neural voice technology now make the voices more realistic and smoother. Children can select their favourite voice easily using a drop-down menu or opt to set a default voice.

With Voice Notes, pupils can record audio prompts before writing, giving them a way to organise thoughts, rehearse language, and build confidence.

Clicker leads in inclusivity by offering a spectrum of writing grids with scaffolding that adapts to different needs. 'LearningGrids' are an excellent launchpad where you will find ready-made resources that will save you loads of time. Plus, because all activities are editable, you can adapt them instantly for your learners.

Clicker is more than writing software, it is a feature-rich platform with opportunities galore for personalised learning, which transforms teaching and learning. It is highly engaging, enables all learners to succeed, provides differentiated support, makes inclusion realistic, and accurately assesses pupil progress.

As a literacy intervention support tool, it is second to none because of its user-friendly design. It is simple to navigate, with a wealth of features at

your fingertips and boasts really versatile functionality.

Clicker provides support for learners of all different abilities which is why this is inclusive software for writing at its very best.

Teach
**Reading
& Writing**

VERDICT

- ✓ Offers a wealth of features that will revolutionise your teaching practice
- ✓ Positively impacts pupils' writing engagement, confidence, attainment and enjoyment
- ✓ Perfect for emergent readers and early writers
- ✓ Provides access for children with motor difficulties
- ✓ Provides rich assessment data
- ✓ Builds self-regulation and resilience
- ✓ Increases children's motivation to write

EXPLORE IF...

...you are looking to help improve children's writing across the class and to particularly support children with diverse learning needs and challenges.

Book a discovery call to find out more: info@cricksoft.com | 01604 671691 | cricksoft.com/clicker

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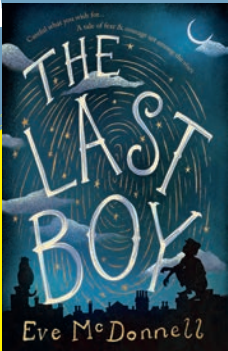


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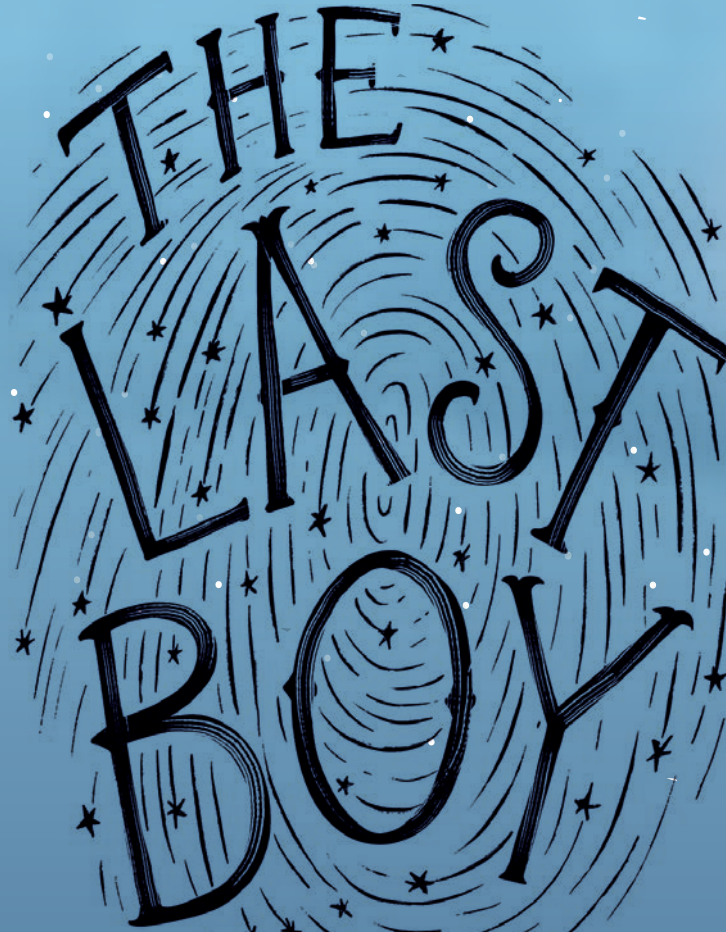
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Published by Everything With Words, September 2024



Explore the skies

Take a journey back in time and learn all about the last ever chimney sweep's astronomical adventures with Eve McDonnell's powerful novel

KATE HEAP

The *Last Boy* is a compelling middle-grade novel that will capture readers' hearts and minds. It tells the heartbreaking story of a young chimney sweep in 19th century Ireland. A petite boy, Brewster was sold to Master Sweep Wyer when he was just six years old. Now, at age 12, he makes a wish on a sky full of falling stars – to be the last climbing boy.

This book is overflowing with historical and scientific themes.

There is so much to discover: the history of child labour and work of chimney sweeps across Ireland and Great Britain, technological advancements in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, the impact of astronomy and people's relationship with the stars, and the power of mathematics to make predictions – and change one's life. Author Eve McDonnell's research is incredibly thorough, providing abundant detail for her readers.

When Brewster joins his sweep

family, we start to see just how difficult this life was for such young children. As readers, we keenly feel each welt, blister, empty stomach and sooty cough. There is no escaping the horrors of these young lives.

A gift for maths, probability and the science of the stars pulls Brewster into a life beyond his climbing family. His ability to work out calculations and predict the arrival of a magnificent comet draws the attention of a wealthy lady. Lady Rosse has the most amazing telescope



and a passion for photography. Her family's technological interests and ground-breaking inventions call to Brewster and, as if by magic, he finds himself starting a new life in her care.

But this new life isn't going to be easy. Lady Rosse expects great things from him in return for her help in making his wish come true. Brewster would do just about anything to protect his climbing family and change the lives of young sweeps forever...

Activities

The last climbing boy

'He wished over and over, fast as words could leave his lips, that he would be the last boy. *The last climbing boy.*'

Not only did Brewster wish *he* would no longer have to climb narrow, soot-filled chimneys, he wished it for all climbing boys everywhere.

The real George Brewster was born in London in 1863. Unable to provide for him, his family sold him to Master Sweep Wyer for just a few shillings. George's death certificate shows he died after getting stuck in a chimney flue. Wyer was charged with manslaughter and sentenced to six months' hard labour. News of George's death caught the attention of the 7th Earl of Shaftsbury. Saddened by the tragedy, the Earl was prompted to push a bill through parliament to stop the use of climbing boys – the Chimney Sweepers Act of 1875.

Find out more about the lives of chimney sweeps in the 1800s. How were they treated? How did they clean

chimneys? What laws did the Chimney Sweepers Acts of 1834, 1840 and 1864 put in place? Did Master Sweeps obey these laws?

Imagine you live in 1875. Write a newspaper report about the tragedy of George Brewster's death or about the Chimney Sweepers Act of 1875. Include key facts and quotes from people at the scene.

Photographing the past

Birr Castle in Ireland is the home of Lady Rosse and her family. A passion for technology and invention runs through every room of this great building. An amateur astronomer and pioneering photographer herself, Lady Rosse has a wish – she wants to photograph the past. Over the years, she has brought the world's greatest minds to her home, built the world's largest telescope and filled her library with scientific books – the very books Brewster sneaks in to read in secret to expand his own mind.

Create a fact file about telescopes. How does the speed of light allow us to see into the past? Find out about Proxima Centauri (the nearest star to Earth except for the Sun) and how long it takes its light to reach our eyes. The Leviathan Telescope was a real telescope built at Birr Castle in the 1840s. What did the Third Earl of Rosse discover using this telescope? Why was it such an important invention of its time?

Written in the stars

In 1833, the greatest meteor shower in history, the Leonids, filled the sky with hundreds of thousands of dust particles shed from the tail of the Tempel-Tuttle comet, burning up as they entered Earth's atmosphere. Every 33 years, the orbit of this

magnificent comet causes it to flash across the sky to the delight, and sometimes horror, of those who witness it. Unaware of what they were seeing in 1833, people panicked. Superstition and lack of knowledge caused them to believe they were being cursed, blaming crop failures, illness and misfortune on the comet.

Using mathematics and science, Brewster is able to predict the 1866 return of the comet. He longs to see it, with thousands of meteors creating a sky more white than black. His understanding of science means he isn't afraid and can appreciate the wonder of it all.

Find out about the Leonid meteor shower and Tempel-Tuttle comet. Why is it called Leonid? What was



Fingerprint illustration © Holly Ovenden

Take it further → → →

WHAT DO YOU WISH?

Brewster makes a wish on thousands of 'falling stars'. Everyone's wishes are unique, just like their fingerprints. If you could make a wish on a falling star, what would you wish for?

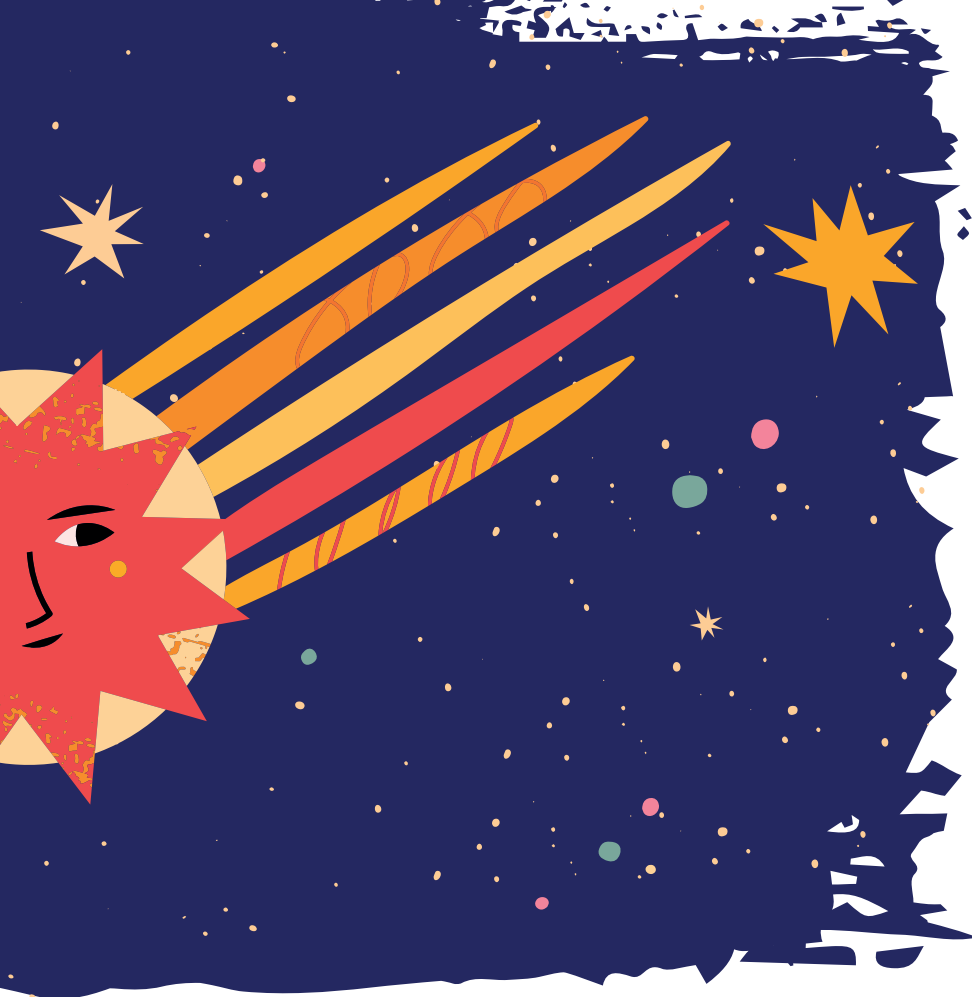
Author Eve McDonnell suggests making a wish print. Write a series of sentences beginning with 'I wish...'. The sky's the limit! Start writing in the middle of the page and spiral your sentences into the shape of a fingerprint. Everyone's wish print will be personal and full of hope.

SWEEP'S LUCK

Chim chiminey, chim chiminey, chim chim cher-ee... If you're familiar with the film *Mary Poppins*, you'll know chimney sweeps are considered good luck, especially if they blow you a kiss.

Throughout the story, Brewster blows kisses to his friend Alice in kindness and to bring her good fortune. But why are sweeps considered so lucky? Brewster's early life was full of anything but luck, although did this start to change when Lady Rosse took him in

Find out more about this sweep superstition. There are ancient beliefs that fire and the hearth are connected to good fortune. Legend tells us that in the year 1066 (approximately), King William of Britain's life was saved when a chimney sweep pulled him out of the path of a runaway carriage. The king invited the sweep to his daughter's wedding, beginning the superstition that sweeps are good luck at weddings. A second legend tells us King George III was riding in a carriage when his horses bolted. A passing chimney sweep calmed the horses and



the scientific impact of the 1833 meteor shower? Why were people so afraid of the comet? When will the Tempel-Tuttle cross our sky again?

Use oil pastels to create a night-sky scene. Blending blues, purples and blacks will create an inky sky, then small splatters of white paint stretched across the page with a white colouring pencil will add a stunning meteor shower. Use the book cover for inspiration as you fill the paper with a 'storm of stars'.

Brilliant minds

Many of the characters in *The Last Boy* were inspired by real people who were deeply committed to science. Lady Rosse and her

husband, William Parsons the 3rd Earl of Rosse, built the real Leviathan Telescope at Birr Castle. Charles Parsons – their son and Brewster's nemesis – went on to become the inventor of the compound steam turbine. Dr Grubb, who took Brewster under his wing, helped design the huge Leviathan telescope mirror. Sir Robert Ball, the boys' tutor, was a real astronomer, who went on to have great influence in the world of maths and science. Even Mary Ward, who fell from Lady Rosse's steam carriage, placing her in history as the first road traffic fatality in Ireland, was a well-known naturalist, astronomer, microscopist and author.

What do you think attracted these

stopped the coach. The king decreed that all sweeps were lucky, and the superstition spread throughout Europe.

Rewrite the final chapter of *The Last Boy* so Brewster finds a life of good fortune. As well as being known as 'Brewster the last climbing boy', help him find success as 'Brewster the astronomer' and a caring home with Dr and Mrs Grubb. What will his calculations help him to predict? What great inventions will he create? What will his life be like when it's full of hope and happiness rather than soot and darkness?

THE REAL BREWSTER

Discover more about the real George Brewster, who died from suffocation after climbing a boiler chimney at the Fulbourn Lunatic Asylum, Cambridgeshire, in 1875. Historian Joanna Hudson has applied to have a blue plaque mounted in Fulbourn in February 2025 to mark 150 years since this tragic death. Her research has revealed so much about the life of young sweeps.

You can watch a fascinating video where Joanna shares her use of historical sources such as census documents, photographs, diagrams of chimneys, newspaper articles

Loved this? Try these...

- ❖ *Mystery of the Night Watchers* by A.M. Howell
- ❖ *The River Spirit* by Lucy Strange
- ❖ *Rivet Boy* by Barbara Henderson
- ❖ *Darwin's Dragons* by Lindsay Galvin
- ❖ *The Chestnut Roaster* by Eve McDonnell

people to Birr Castle? What is their legacy? What impact did they have on Brewster throughout the story?

Choose one of these historical figures and create a character profile. Include details from the text, but also research who they were in real life. What was their passion? How did they gain knowledge? What was it about their class, education, wealth or opportunities that allowed them to become experts in their fields? How did they relate to Brewster? Did they help or hinder him in his own scientific quest? Add a sketch of the individual or some symbols to represent them.



Kate Heap is a primary English consultant and children's book reviewer. She is also the author of the Developing Reading

Comprehension Skills series.

 scopeforimagination.co.uk

and records to discover more about George's legacy (tinyurl.com/tp-GeorgeBrewster). You might notice George's death certificate says he was 14 years old (rather than 11) when he died. It's likely this document was falsified to make him appear older because the Chimney Sweepers Act of 1834 stated that no child under the age of 14 could work as a chimney sweep. Master Sweep Wyer would have been worried about criminal charges for sending young children up chimneys.

George Brewster's death and the resulting legislation marked a significant transition of British industrial society.

Hidden MEANINGS

Don't underestimate the role of inference in the SATs reading comprehension paper, warns **Andrew Jennings**

Of the 50 marks available in the Year 6 reading comprehension paper, 30–35 per cent involve inference. To get those all-important marks, it's important that children understand the different question formats – and have strategies for tackling them.

Simple questions

The most straightforward 'how' and 'why' questions direct pupils to specific parts of the text and guide them to make inferences and explain the reasoning behind their answers. The children might be asked 'How do you know?' or 'Why did this happen...?'. Remind pupils that these questions relate to the actions or emotions of the characters in the text.

Sentence inference

This format provides an opportunity for pupils to zone in on a specific sentence or word in the text to draw a conclusion. It's important for pupils to read the questions and make a logical inference based on the information provided. The children should focus on the actions and emotions, and try to draw on their own experiences to imagine how characters in the text might feel, act or think.

This suggests...

These multiple-choice questions often refer to the imagery and language that authors use to create an atmosphere, such as simile, metaphor and personification describing the actions or emotions of a character. Check that pupils

understand that 'this suggests' simply means 'this shows that' or 'this means'.

Evidence: Two inferences

This type of question requires pupils to look for evidence that supports an inference. For example, 'How can you tell the child was upset? Give two ways.' Pupils will need to reflect on their own understanding of what an upset child looks like and then look for clues that suggest this in the text (e.g. 'they were crying' or 'they couldn't catch their breath').

Evidence: Three inferences

Teach pupils to read the question and the instructions provided carefully. If the question references the 'whole text' then pupils must know that the inferences or the evidence could be found anywhere across the text. Alternatively, if they are directed to a specific part of the text, they will need to focus in on that area.

Evidence: impression and evidence

Expose pupils to these questions early on – they are actually fairly simple and should not be feared.

Teach pupils to provide, in their own words, a simple impression or opinion. Quite often, the impression box will be a one-word description, such as *happy*, *anxious*, *excited*, *old*, etc.

In the evidence box, pupils just need to provide evidence from the text to support their impression. For example, if their impression was 'it's old', the evidence in the text might be, 'the walls were crumbling.' That's it.

Summarise questions

These multiple-choice questions focus not only on the events that happened in the text, but also summarise character and narrator attitudes, feelings, emotions and thoughts.

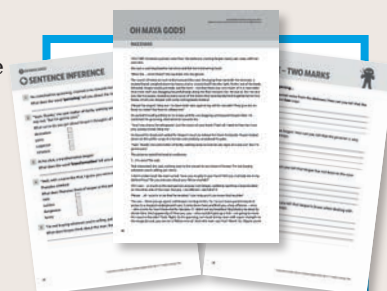
To answer correctly, children will need to reflect carefully on the general emotions, thoughts, actions

or tone of the characters or narrators. In lessons, prompt pupils to explain and discuss why they chose a particular option, to avoid random selection.

Prediction questions

Questions of this type challenge children to think beyond the text and choose the statement that best matches with what could happen next.

Prediction questions encourage pupils to reflect on details stated in the text, but they also rely on our understanding of the world and our previous experiences to help us make logical or sensible predictions.



Download free practice questions from *Comprehension Ninja: Inference and Beyond for Upper KS2* at tinyurl.com/tp-inference



Andrew Jennings, author of *Vocabulary Ninja series*, creates innovative

teaching resources used by thousands of schools in the UK and abroad.

vocabularyninja.co.uk

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From stage TO PAGE

With an active approach, teaching Shakespeare can have an astonishing impact on literacy outcomes, advises **Georgia White**

This autumn, thousands of children will watch their first live performance of Shakespeare as the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) takes its new 80-minute First Encounters production of *King Lear* on tour into schools, theatres and communities.

His language can feel daunting, but it's important to remember that Shakespeare's plays were written to be performed. It's in performance, when those words are accompanied by action, interaction and context, that their meaning is unlocked and revealed.

Lively language

Our work with teachers and young people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds, across the country and around the world, has shown that when Shakespeare's plays are approached as living, breathing texts, every child is able to access them. A live theatre experience can be the first step in that process, igniting an interest in stories and language. Once lit, that spark can then be reinforced through our active, rehearsal-based approaches to learning.

We've trained thousands of teachers to bring to the classroom the sorts of approaches our actors and directors use in the rehearsal room. During active, rehearsal-based approaches to Shakespeare in the classroom, desks are pushed to one side, and the plays are explored through movement, spoken word and shared interpretation.

In exploring the key themes and dilemmas that are present in the text, rehearsal room approaches focus on



establishing the world in which the story is taking place, telling the story, discovering the characters and exploring the language.

It's active, fun and works with learners of all ages and abilities. By embodying the language – speaking it, moving with it and feeling its rhythms – students engage emotionally, physically and intellectually, deepening the learning and making recall easier.

The facts don't lie

The impact on children's writing and language skills is backed by hard evidence. Our 2024 Time to Act study (tinyurl.com/tp-time-to-act) used a randomised controlled trial in 45 state primary schools and demonstrated just how transformative this approach can be.

In the trial, half of the Year 5 classes were taught using RSC rehearsal-based methods; half followed their usual curriculum. After just 20 hours of teaching, all the children were asked to complete the same two writing tasks: one creative and one persuasive.

The results were striking. Children taught using RSC methods outperformed their peers in 41 of 42 of the established measures



researchers used to evaluate the writing, sometimes by as much as 25 per cent. They developed richer vocabularies, more sophisticated sentence structures, sharper comprehension and, crucially, greater confidence when using that language. Importantly, these benefits were seen across the board, including among pupils who had limited language development, little exposure to books or additional learning needs. In the test classrooms, ability wasn't the deciding factor, it was the *approach* that was the key.

Playful learning

Active, rehearsal-based approaches do more than enliven lessons; they connect with children's natural instinct for storytelling and play. The combination of a compelling plot and active collaborative exploration turns potential barriers into invitations, encouraging young people to explore something new, experiment with language, debate ideas and work together.

Teachers regularly report huge gains in writing attainment. After working with the RSC and using our teaching approaches, some schools have moved from well below the national average to

Download your
FREE King Lear
activities for KS2 at

[tinyurl.com/
tp-king-lear](https://tinyurl.com/tp-king-lear)

over 90 per cent of children meeting standards in reading and writing.

The benefits don't just apply to academic achievement. Time to Act recorded statistically significant improvements in attitudes to school and learning, greater confidence with language and in problem-solving, and an increase belief among pupils in their own ability as learners. Teachers describe a 'buzz' when a Shakespeare lesson begins – the willingness to get involved and explore new vocabulary as well as a positive shift in classroom relationships.

With creative learning increasingly under threat, taking theatre directly into communities and schools, and enhancing that experience with active approaches in the classroom, feels more urgent than ever. It's about far more than just seeing a piece of theatre. When we remove fear and unleash creativity, we can offer all children access to a confidence with words and language that will equip them for life and work. Find out about First Encounters: King Lear at rsc.org.uk/first-encounters-king-lear



Georgia White
is deputy
director of
the RSC's
Creative
Learning
team.

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whole school reading engagement

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Resource roundup

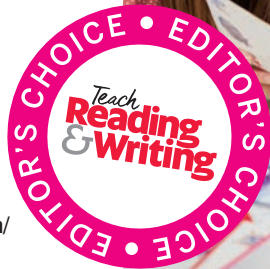
Five ideas for exceptional literacy teaching

1 *Reading Planet*

Reading Planet is a whole-school reading programme for ages three–11 (including our Rocket Phonics programme for ages three–seven). We work closely with authors, diversity and inclusion experts, literacy experts, and schools to create books and teaching materials that children will truly enjoy.

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- Affordable resources to suit your school's needs and budget

Learn more at hachettelearning.com/reading-planet



2



Can your pupils read between the lines?

Learning to read and write isn't just about books. Today's children are also reading headlines, posts and messages – and they need the skills to make sense of them. First News' new TeachKit: *Media & Information Literacy* makes it simple to weave media and information literacy into primary classrooms, with clear progressive frameworks, fully resourced lessons and strong teacher support. Updated fortnightly with the latest news, including tricky topics, TeachKit helps pupils practise reading critically and writing thoughtfully. Visit www.firstnews.co.uk/mil to find out more and see how it could work in your school.

3



The Magic of Roald Dahl's stories

Bring the magic of the Roald Dahl Museum's Sandford Award-winning schools programme to your class. Whether you opt to visit the Museum in Great Missenden, Buckinghamshire — or visit virtually from your classroom — your students will gain skills and confidence in literacy whilst learning about the creative processes of the world's number one storyteller.

Suitable for Years 2 to 8, these sessions are invaluable in developing children's positive attitudes to reading and writing, as well as supporting you in teaching your pupils to draft, edit and evaluate.

"It's easy to say 'use your imagination' but this has given me the tools to do that"

School Teacher

Find out more at roalddahlmuseum.org/schools-and-groups

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4

5



Make your mark

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Write this **WAY**

Jump aboard Shackleton's ship or sail the Amazon river, and use a laser focus to make children's writing leap off the page, say **Laura Dobson** and **Jess Blake**

Take a moment to consider a learning journey that resulted in an excellent standard of writing from your class. What made it so successful? Was it down to the audience and purpose you gave the children, the stimulus for writing, or something else entirely? There are many ways to focus your lessons, but for real success, we've found there are three essential considerations (see the panel, right, for details):

1. What pupils need to learn and the next step for their writing
2. The focus for the writing task
3. Stimulus, purpose and audience

So, what does this look like in practice? Here's what has worked for us...

Exploring endings – Y4

When using a wonderful but lengthy book like *The Explorer* by Katherine Rundell, it can be overwhelming to

consider how best to use it for writing without studying it all year.

First, know the book well! It sounds obvious but I have often planned with someone who hasn't read the story they're teaching. By knowing the book, you know which chapters can be left out, and which lend themselves to great character work or writing.

Next, make sure you fully immerse the children in the text. We read *The Explorer* when we were studying

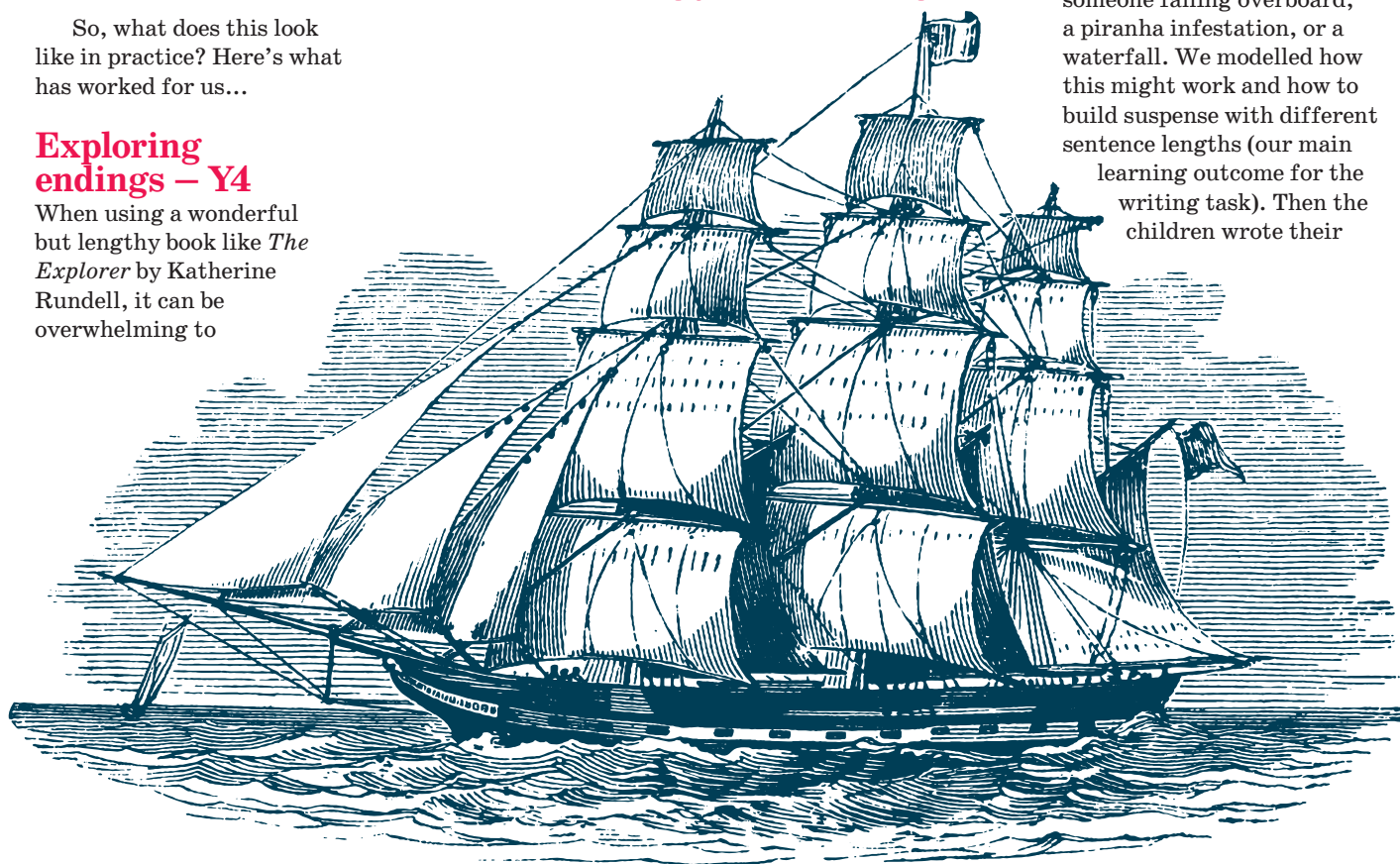
the Amazon River in geography, so the children had some contextual information. We used drama and 'role on the wall' to develop our knowledge of the characters (role on the wall is when you draw the outline of a character; on the inside you put their feelings and around the outside you put how they act/present themselves). We added some of these ideas (and photos from our drama) to our working wall to remind ourselves of the characters

when we were writing diary entries.

We also explored the text further using authorfy.com. The children loved hearing about the time Katherine Rundell ate a tarantula!

Finally, make sure you have a specific focus. Too much choice can be a bad thing, and asking children to come up with an entire story, or even story ending, can be cognitive overload. Instead, we focused on an ending for a single chapter. We used a part in the story where the four children are on a raft and there is a fork in the river (serious suspense!). As a class, we brainstormed what problem the children might encounter here. They had fabulous ideas: someone falling overboard, a piranha infestation, or a waterfall. We modelled how this might work and how to build suspense with different sentence lengths (our main learning outcome for the writing task). Then the children wrote their

“Make sure you have a specific focus. Too much choice can be a bad thing for writing”



chapter ending. Providing a simple structure of one problem for which pupils need to find one resolution allowed them to create a suspense-filled scene.

Success with Shackleton – Y6

Children love disaster and drama, so what better way to hook them in than with a staggering real-life story of survival – Ernest Shackleton and his failed expedition to Antarctica? Powerful, real footage, shocking facts and photos and a brilliantly accessible parallel text (*Ice Trap* by Meredith Hooper) really bring this learning journey to life. This three-week unit consists of three short pieces: a blog post, an informal letter and a journalistic report, but the opportunities to write for a range of purposes and audiences using this hook are vast. In our letter-writing unit, the children needed to use an informal tone to reassure a loved one.

For pupils to achieve true authorial tone, they need to feel as connected to the piece of writing and audience as possible, which is why in our class, all children were recruited as crew members on board Shackleton's ship, *Endurance*. From stowaways and chefs to biologists and artists, pupils were offered the opportunity to 'become' their character, and it was this, relatively

small, decision that captured their attention and fuelled their excitement. If we're being honest, it's rare to be able to say that a learning journey engages all learners – boys, girls, reluctant writers, children with SEN – but this removed barriers easily and effectively. Writing a recount to a loved one in an informal style and tone is accessible; it removes the need to use (though doesn't prevent the use of) overly challenging,

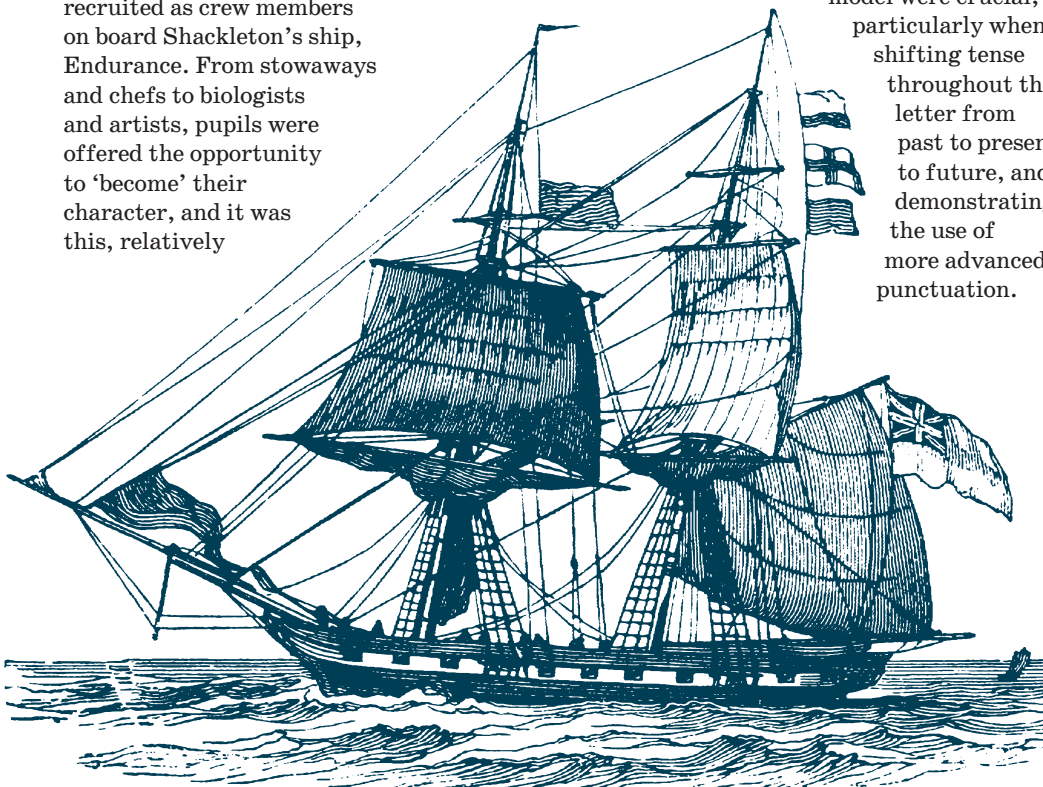
In doing so, 'working towards' and 'expected standard' writers could focus on using the correct tone, while 'greater depth' writers had the opportunity to highlight and research their specific role in relation to the incident (e.g. a meteorologist using the time to collect and collate data about the weather and environment). Once the children had planned their letter, we moved swiftly on to a spot-the-difference

“Pupils were offered the opportunity to ‘become’ their character, and this decision fuelled their excitement”

technical vocabulary and allows children to write in a conversational manner.

For their letter, we tasked pupils to recount the events on board *Endurance* from the point of departure to where the ship became stuck in pack ice – a catastrophic moment in the story – which allowed the children to attach their letter to a specific event.

lesson exploring informal and formal language, before beginning to write. Throughout the writing process, we used a variety of scaffolds to support lower attaining writers, such as prompts, structure grids and word banks created using The Noun Project (thenounproject.com). For all, regular pitstops to model were crucial, particularly when shifting tense throughout the letter from past to present to future, and demonstrating the use of more advanced punctuation.



3 steps to clear writing

1 What?
The curriculum will guide you with what pupils should learn at each stage, but it may be that a previous year's learning is not quite embedded, so don't just plough on regardless.

2 How?
Less is often more – have a clear focus for a writing task and don't be too ambitious. A whole story is often too unwieldy and will result in rambling rather than quality writing. By asking children to focus on, for example, a story ending, with a focus on sentence lengths, you are setting them up for success.

3 Why?
If children feel there is real purpose to their writing or an audience will see it, they become invested. The stimulus matters, too; find a text which excites them (and you) or a situation they will be engaged in and want to write about.



Laura Dobson is a deputy headteacher at a large primary school, and a former T&L consultant specialising in English and assessment.



Jess Blake is English lead and Y6 teacher at a large primary school, and is part of the moderation team for English in her local authority.

Transformative CPD

Discover how the Japanese model of Lesson Study can open up a whole new facet of writing, while demolishing harmful hierarchies

ROB DRANE AND AIMEE DURNING



INTRODUCING LESSON STUDY

Our school has research at its heart. Our founding associate headteacher, Luke Rolls, recognised the potential of Lesson Study (tinyurl.com/tp-tdtLessonStudy) – a powerful form of professional learning developed in Japan – to unite research with teacher development. While Lesson Study has transformed education in its country of origin, its potential in UK schools is largely untapped.

Working alongside Pete Dudley, a Lesson Study expert from the University of Cambridge who now leads Camtree, Cambridge's Teacher Research Exchange, Luke spent years establishing the foundations of our approach. Lesson Study is collaborative professional development, involving a cycle of identifying a research focus, jointly planning a lesson, teaching with colleagues observing, and conducting a non-judgemental group discussion to uncover how pupils are learning.

The approach emphasises incremental improvement, with all participants considered equal in the learning process, regardless of experience or seniority.

TRANSFORM PRACTICE

Our unique position as a University Training School means we can pilot approaches that could benefit all schools. By developing a scalable model of CPD through Lesson Study, we aim to show how schools can create sustainable communities of enquiry.



with external experts including Charlotte Hacking, formerly of the CLPE, English consultant Nicola Izibili, David Reedy from UKLA, and Ross Young and Felicity Ferguson from the Writing for Pleasure Centre. They each join us for three days spread throughout the year, focusing on the collaborative research lesson approach.

While we're fortunate to work with experts, the model is designed to be adaptable. Schools could create similar partnerships with teachers from neighbouring schools. We've deliberately included teachers at all career stages as lesson leads, too, ensuring we benefit from diverse perspectives.



GETTING STARTED

We've also developed an innovative 80/20 model that shifts the focus onto teachers having genuine autonomy in driving their own professional development, supported by guidance from education experts. The majority (80 per cent) consists of internal collaborative research, where our teachers and learning coaches (TAs) work together in small research groups, with Pete Dudley providing expert guidance throughout the process. The remaining 20 per cent involves partnerships

80/20

By breaking down hierarchies and emphasising collaboration between teachers and learning coaches, this approach could transform how schools across the country tackle professional development.

CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES

We've been trying to implement a fundamentally different approach to teaching writing, and Lesson Study has proven to be the perfect framework for this. We've adopted the Writing for Pleasure pedagogy (tinyurl.com/tp-W4P), which requires a significant shift away from traditional, structured approaches, to one that gives children greater autonomy over their writing choices. Teachers now observe children's responses to new pedagogy in real time, allowing us to collectively analyse what works and why.

This enables us to make adjustments to our writing sessions based on direct classroom observations rather than theory alone. For example, we noticed some pupils were hesitant to make independent writing choices.

Our post-lesson discussions helped us develop gradual release strategies that built children's confidence and autonomy, whilst ensuring they developed their authentic voice and identity as writers. This iterative, collaborative approach has helped teachers feel more confident in embracing pedagogical change, as they're supported by colleagues who are observing and reflecting on the same challenges. Non-judgemental observations also mean that teachers are more at ease, and willing to take greater pedagogical risks.

GENUINE COLLABORATION

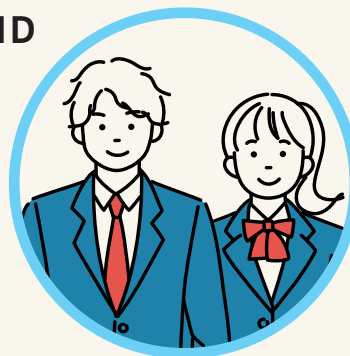
Our experience shows how this approach could help schools across England transform their entire professional development culture.

"We now make adjustments to our writing sessions based on direct classroom observation"



ONWARD AND OUTWARD

At the end of each Lesson Study cycle, teachers come together to disseminate their learning. This becomes a powerful platform where educators can share their discoveries, challenges, and insights. Teachers have reported significant shifts in their practice as a result, and our learning coaches provide particularly valuable insights about our most vulnerable learners. For example, they've identified how traditional 45-minute writing lessons can overwhelm children who engage best for only 5-8 minutes (which links with the Writing for Pleasure findings). Through their observations and participation in post-lesson discussions, coaches have helped develop adaptations such as flexible writing goals, prioritising quality over quantity, and allowing pupils to write about topics of personal interest (like Arsenal FC or Sonic the Hedgehog). They've also embraced Ross Young's suggestion that adults



S, YEAR 5

"I love choosing what to write about. Sometimes I write stories for Reception children, other times I create information books about topics I'm interested in. Writing feels more purposeful now."



M, YEAR 4

"Writing is exciting because we think about who we're writing for. Last week I created a guide for my little brother about how to care for his first bike!"



A, YEAR 6

"Before, I just wrote what teachers told us to write. Now I pick my topics and my audience. It makes me want to make my writing really good."



Rob Drane
(associate headteacher) and **Aimee Durning**
(director of inclusion) lead the writing Lesson Study initiative at the University of Cambridge Primary School.



BEYOND WRITING

We use Lesson Study across subjects including maths, science and humanities. Each subject offers unique opportunities for teachers to explore specific pedagogical challenges and pupil learning approaches.

position themselves as writers within the classroom community, modeling their own writing processes alongside children; a significant shift from their traditional role of micro-managing teacher-led writing tasks.

Adventure TIME

Leap into a veritable volcano of verse and let pupils fearlessly fly away on their own imaginations, leaving their worries about poetry behind

KATE WILLIAMS

Poetry-writing is a tricky thing to teach – if ‘teach’ is indeed the word. Perhaps *nurture* is more apt, but even nurturing can be hard, especially with children who freeze up or freak out at the mention of verse. But there’s one approach that works for me every time: games! Rhymes and other appealing challenges can serve as a fantastic building block, drawing your class in, unleashing ideas and setting pens dashing. Once everyone’s on board, you can sail into deeper poetic waters – if the game hasn’t got you there already. Meanwhile, it will be invaluable in itself, boosting linguistic agility and confidence. Here are six of my favourite games to pick from...

1 Rhyming couplets

Starting with a one-syllable word like *hat*, elicit rhymes from your class (*bat, cat, chat, fat...*), jotting them down on the board. Now tag on a phrase – *I saw a cat*, say – and prompt for a rhyming phrase – *It was wearing a hat*. Some children struggle with word order in rhymes, so draw attention to the importance of putting the two rhyming words at the line ends, one under the other. After concocting and enjoying a few more phrasal rhymes together, keep them on their toes by swapping in a different word from the list... then two-syllable rhymes, like *lazy/crazy* or *tumble/*

grumble. Some children will already be thinking up their own rhyming couplets, and a colourful mix of concepts will be emerging. Finally, take one of their rhymes and prompt for developments. As ideas spin, go easy on rhyme rule – they’re poetry-crafting now.

2 Alliteration

Name a fictional place (Treasure Island, Fairyland, an undiscovered planet...?). Draw its imagined outline on the board and mark in a landmark, and here’s the key: make it a two-word, alliterative name, but with the second word missing: *Forest of F...*, *Lake of L...*, or *Desert of D...* In my experience, some hands will be up in an instant, the challenge understood, while others hesitate and a few children miss the alliteration cue altogether, so be sure to clarify this. It’s the only rule of the game. Suggest a few words yourself to open up the possibilities – *Forest of Flip-flops, Lake of Love, Desert of Danger and Dread*, perhaps. Now watch, as eyes widen and arms wave for attention around the room. Let your class amaze, amuse, scare and charm you with their crazy double-word names, first out loud, then on

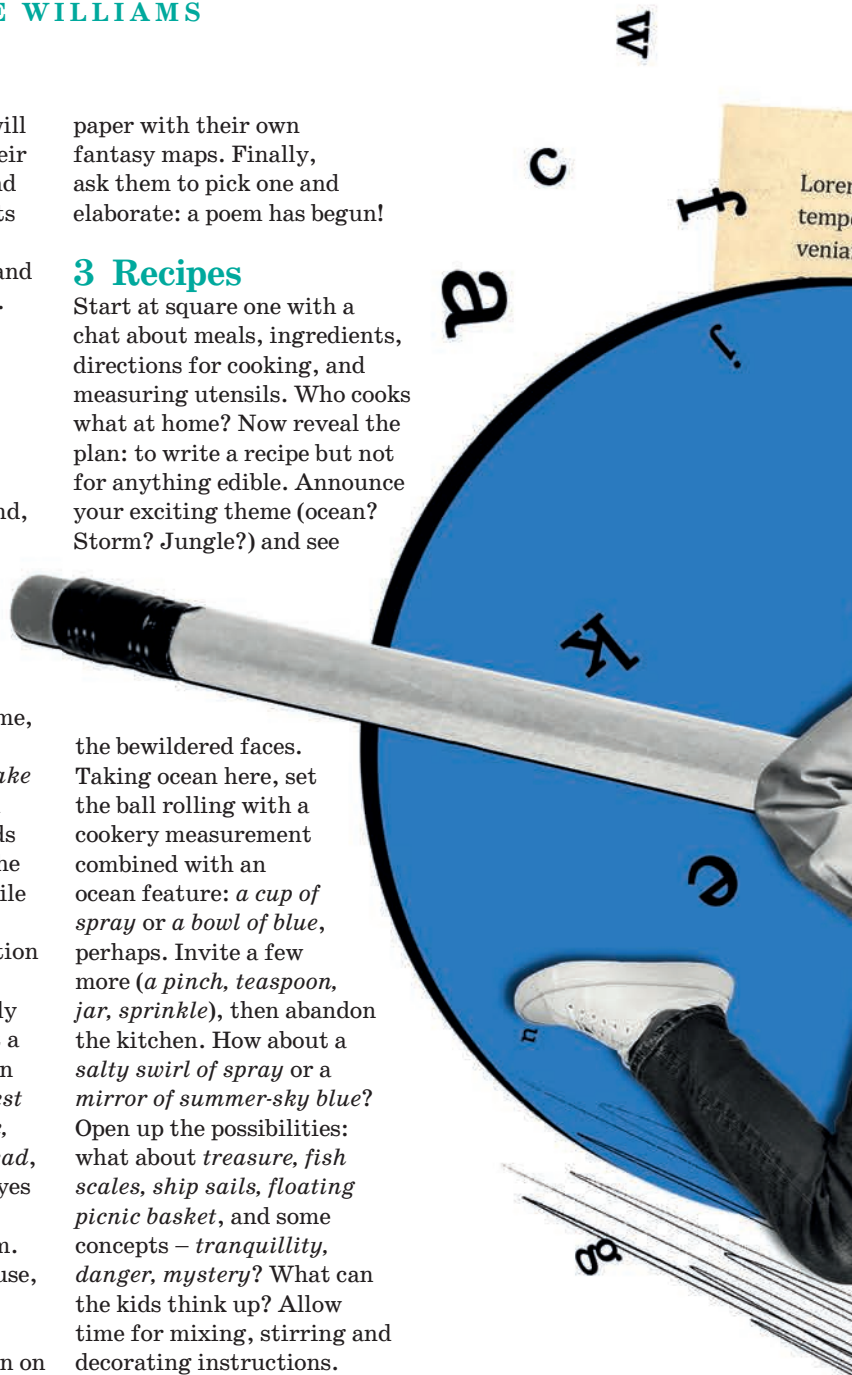
paper with their own fantasy maps. Finally, ask them to pick one and elaborate: a poem has begun!

3 Recipes

Start at square one with a chat about meals, ingredients, directions for cooking, and measuring utensils. Who cooks what at home? Now reveal the plan: to write a recipe but not for anything edible. Announce your exciting theme (ocean? Storm? Jungle?) and see

the bewildered faces. Taking ocean here, set the ball rolling with a cookery measurement combined with an ocean feature: *a cup of spray* or *a bowl of blue*, perhaps. Invite a few more (*a pinch, teaspoon, jar, sprinkle*), then abandon the kitchen. How about a *salty swirl of spray* or a *mirror of summer-sky blue*? Open up the possibilities: what about *treasure, fish scales, ship sails, floating picnic basket*, and some concepts – *tranquillity, danger, mystery*? What can the kids think up? Allow time for mixing, stirring and decorating instructions.

“Rhymes and other appealing challenges can serve as a fantastic building block, drawing your class in and unleashing ideas”



4 Haiku

Haiku are all about syllables, which can be explained as beats or sounds. I always start by helping children count the syllables in their names. Introduce the 'haiku' term and explain its basic format – i.e. three lines with varied syllable counts of 7, 5, 7. Complicated? Start slowly

with a whole-class haiku on a given theme. They'll love counting the syllables and correcting each other, while the need to get words to fit will stretch their linguistic and imaginative powers. Next, offer a partly-written haiku to complete in pairs and share a few outcomes. They're now ready to craft and count independently. If

identify the thing described. There's no required format for a riddle poem, so they're easy-peasy! Personally, I find the cinquain form handy as a loose frame to bounce off from. A cinquain has five lines, each describing a given object in a different way – through nouns, verbs, a simile, a metaphor, and an alternative word to round off (see Plazoom for a cinquain resource: tinyurl.com/tp-CinquainPlzm). Your riddles might include other details (e.g. what the mystery thing likes doing or where it can be found). And here's the best bit – revealing the answer, which might be upside down, backwards, in tiny writing, or any other obscure way the children can devise. As for themes, you can't go wrong with an all-round animal one, or a creature category like *jungle*, *farm* or *winged creatures*.

6 Action words

Action words beg to be enacted, fidgety legs beg to get up and moving, and action-word poems address both needs at once – also, it's oodles of fun. You'll need some floor space and a whiteboard to jot down the children's on-the-move

results don't quite fit the format, no worries: in this session, it's just a game!

5 Riddles

Your junior poets will get a kick out of mystifying each other with their crafty riddle clues, and listeners will equally enjoy trying to

language contributions. Taking *dragons* as an example theme, lead your group in a given movement, say *creeping*. Enact it expressively as possible together, slyly tiptoeing, claws out, teeth gnashing. Now invite other action-words to say and do – *leaping*, *flying* and *fire-breathing*, and nuanced variations: *pouncing*, *gliding*, *blazing* – keeping up the momentum. Never mind that everyone's getting breathless – that's part of the fun. Call

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for adverbs – *ferociously*, *mysteriously*, *crazily*, and similes – pouncing like a... what? Add in sounds, colours, scene-setting concepts, until their responses drown out your prompts. An opening line from you, such as '*The ... dragon went ... like a ... through ...*' and they'll be off.

With all these games, the best advice is to try forgetting that 'poetry' word yourself and go with the flow. You'll find plenty to celebrate, whichever activity you pick, and your class will be geared up to venture further in. Have fun!



Kate Williams is a children's poet and workshop leader for schools.

Kate's latest book, *Squeak! Squawk! Roar! Amazing Animal Poems* (£8.99, Otter-Barry Books) is out now.

How to teach RECOUNTS

Help pupils craft engaging writing using recollections of past adventures and imaginary tales of historical events, with **James Clements**

Recounts are a key part of literacy in Key Stage 2, offering children the chance to reflect on familiar experiences while honing their skills as writers.

Whether they're retelling the excitement of a school trip, describing the highlights of a workshop, or sharing an experience from their life outside of school, recounts help pupils focus on *how* they write, rather than just what they write about.

Not only do they allow children to relive and celebrate personal moments, but recounts can be a vehicle for imagination and creativity, too. Pupils can also be encouraged to write about imaginary events, employing the features of the genre to imagine themselves as witnesses to anything from the toil of a Victorian chimney sweep to life on a distant planet.

By mastering the key features of recounts – like chronological structure, vivid descriptions, and reflective conclusions – children can learn to craft engaging texts that draw readers in and leave a lasting impression.

We went to...

Children can explore a variety of topics when writing recounts. The most common type is a personal experience, such as a recent school trip or workshop, or an enjoyable day out or special celebration. These are especially valuable as they allow children to reflect on an experience as well as honing their writing

skills. As children are writing about something real – something they have actually done – it gives them something tangible on which to base their writing. This can help them to write confidently, as they can focus on expressing their thoughts and emotions clearly, without worrying about getting something wrong.

However, the features of a recount can also be employed for creative writing. That might be an imaginative recount (e.g. a day in the life of a Roman soldier or a Victorian child, or an explorer's recount of investigating a polar desert); or an historical recount (e.g. events leading up to the Great Fire of London from an eyewitness, or details of the Gunpowder Plot told by one of the conspirators).

Writing about their own lives also gives pupils a voice. It allows them to share what's important to them, to tell others about their life outside of the classroom, and explore how they've felt in particular moments. This can also help to show them that their experiences matter and their perspective as a young writer is valued, which can be important in nurturing children's positive attitude to writing.

Most importantly, recounting personal experiences can be fun! Reliving exciting or happy memories can be deeply engaging, helping pupils develop a writing-for-

pleasure culture in the classroom, while also improving their skills. However, as always, teachers need to be sensitive about the different experiences that children might have had. Being asked to write a recount of their half-term holidays will be motivating and exciting for some, but others might be reluctant to write about their experiences for a whole variety of reasons. Being sensitive to this and perhaps giving children the choice to write about something from school, or something imagined as well, can be helpful for some, as well as ensuring they have ownership over their writing.

Remember these

To write an effective recount, children will usually include the following key features:

1. Past tense:

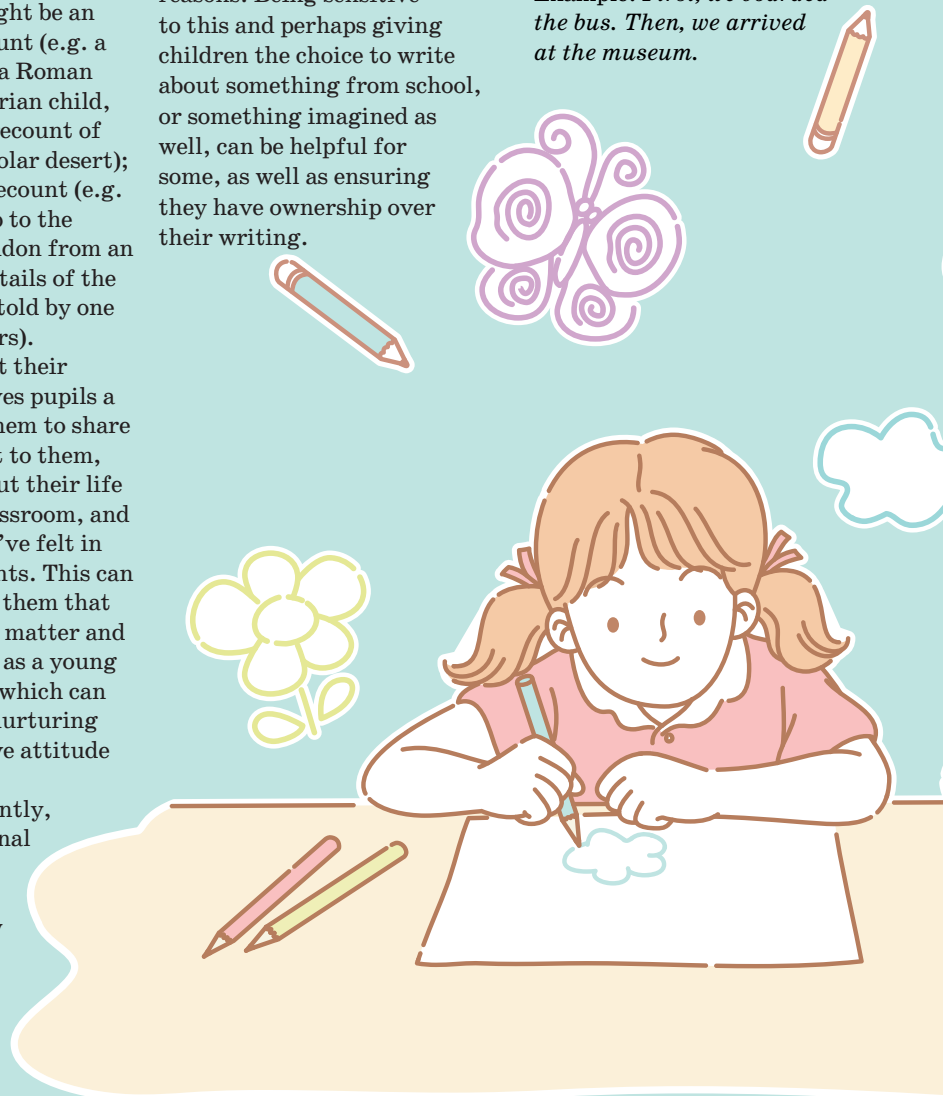
Recounts describe events that have already happened.

Example: *We visited the museum and saw an amazing display of fossils.*

2. Chronological order:

Events are presented in the order they occurred.

Example: *First, we boarded the bus. Then, we arrived at the museum.*



3. First person

The recount is told in the first person.

Examples: *We saw...; I couldn't believe...*

4. Adverbials of time:

Words like *first, next, after that, finally* help guide the reader through the sequence.

Example: *After lunch, we walked to the park.*

5. Details and description:

Including sensory details (what was seen, heard, or even smelled!) helps to make the recounts more vivid for the reader.

Example: *The museum's garden was filled with the scent of lavender, and we could hear the faint hum of bees.*

6. Personal voice (optional):

For diary-style or personal recounts, the writer's thoughts and feelings are often included.

Example: *I couldn't believe how big the dinosaur skeletons were – it was amazing!*

7. Concluding statement:

A sentence or two that wraps up the recount, reflecting on the experience.

Example: *It was one of the best days I've ever had, and I'll never forget it.*

Bit by bit

There are many ways of teaching children to write recounts. One effective approach is to break the process into small, manageable steps. For example, children might:

1. Explore examples

Begin by reading different types of recounts as a class. Highlight key features such as time connectives, past tense verbs, and use of descriptive language.

2. Identify key features

Work on the whiteboard together, or ask pupils to

use highlighters on their individual worksheets to identify recount features in model texts.

3. Decide on a topic

This could mean everyone writing about the same shared experience – a pantomime the class have watched at the local theatre, for example. It could be an imaginative scenario, such as exploring a strange planet or life from inside a Victorian workhouse. Or it could involve asking children to choose an experience to write about from their life outside of school (a football tournament, a sibling's birthday, or a trip to visit family). As noted above, teachers will need to be sensitive and use their knowledge of the class to decide how best to organise this.

4. Plan the recount

Planning templates, timelines or graphic organisers might help pupils structure their ideas (see linked resources on the right for worksheets).

5. Draft the recount

Focus on writing the recount step-by-step, starting with an engaging introduction, moving through the main events, and ending with a reflective conclusion.

6. Edit and improve

Encourage children to review their recounts, both proofreading for elements such as grammar, punctuation, and use of key features, and checking if there any wider

opportunities to improve the piece and further engage the reader, perhaps by adding greater detail or including more vivid descriptions to bring the events to life.

7. Share and reflect

Provide opportunities for pupils to share their recounts with peers, celebrate their work, and reflect on how they could improve in the future.

Encourage your class to experiment with recounts today, and see how they bring their writing to life!



James Clements is an education writer and researcher. His latest project is

FluentZoo, a programme for developing children's reading fluency.

 fluentzoo.com

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Magical spaces

We need our school libraries more than ever, says
SLA chief executive **Victoria Dilly**

The last six months have been a period of change and challenge for me. Not just navigating the steep learning curve of a new role and getting to know my organisation, but also facing head-on the difficult climate in education. With a government Curriculum Review in progress, economic pressure and rising costs, schools supporting increasing numbers of children with SEND and mental-health issues, as well as the ever-increasing attainment gap... at times I have questioned whether I can really make a difference.

Despite this, my first six months in post as CEO of the School Library Association have strengthened my belief that school libraries and librarians offer an antidote to many of the challenges schools face.

What other place in school holds that magical key to unlocking reading, provides a safe space for those who need it most, supports all types of learners to access the curriculum, inspires the intellect of the most able, provides scaffolding for those who struggle, and has just the right resource to support learning across every subject?

The announcement that the government would fund a library in every primary school by the end of 2029 (tinyurl.com/tp-Library26) was amazing news for the sector (there are approximately 2,000 schools that don't currently have one). The task at hand for the SLA is to ensure that these libraries – and indeed all school libraries – as well as those who work in them, are given the support they need to be sustained.

Libraries need ongoing investment of staff, time, money and infrastructure. Books get old,

collections need management, and skills need developing if a library is to be truly effective. The benefits are manifold when this happens.

Research demonstrates increased reading and learning engagement, better education outcomes across the curriculum, improved wellbeing and social relationships... the list goes on, and shows just what can happen when a school library and its librarian are active parts of the school community.

Since starting in this role, I've been fortunate to meet many inspiring people working towards the same goals – not least my newly recruited team – and it is exciting to be working together on opportunities to strengthen our impact.



The SLA is offering Teach Reading & Writing subscribers a 10 per cent discount on annual membership. Find out more about joining at sla.org.uk/join and use code **TEACHRW** for your discount.

As we seek to widen the SLA's reach, including growing our support for primary schools, I will be working with senior leaders and partners in the sector, as well as utilising my own experience of running primary libraries – sometimes on a tiny budget, with just a few hours a week – to ensure the SLA meets all schools where they are. Not just those with new libraries, but all those with libraries already in place, too.

We are at a critical point in education, with the reading crisis having a negative impact on children's development, and the National Year of Reading campaign in 2026 will offer an opportunity to put reading at the heart of every community. Where better for

this to be situated in schools than in the school library, creating sustainable support so that *every* year can be a year of reading?

Through our work, the SLA can help our members positively impact the lives of every child and young person in schools across the country – and that is why I know that I can make a difference.



Victoria Dilly has worked in education for 20 years, initially as a school librarian and then leading national education programmes for organisations such as National Literacy Trust.

“School libraries and librarians offer an antidote to many of the challenges schools face”

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