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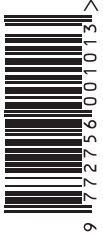


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# Welcome...

Speaking to teachers recently, a recurring theme has been that poems, aside from their own inherent worth, are invaluable and accessible teaching tools – but that good poetry lessons are difficult to source. That being so, I think lots of you will love the lively and thoughtful activities that Jo Cummins has put together for Zoro Weil’s nature-inspired poetry collection, *I Hear the Trees* (p.49).

Then, on page 12, the Poetry By Heart team recommend 10 books of poems that are perfect to read and share aloud. Suitable for Early Years through to UKS2, these titles – and teaching tips – will help your pupils to develop strong, intuitive and expressive poetry voices.

This summer sees the return of Sophie Anderson’s *House with Chicken Legs*, and we were delighted that the author herself could pop in to give us a writing masterclass based around her new book (p.20).

Someone else who’s back is Pie Corbett – who has a thrilling new KS2 WAGOLL for you, along with full notes on how to use it with your class (p.42).

With oracy still a hot topic, we have some super-practical advice from Voice 21. The charity has worked with schools around the country to help them embed a culture of oracy, and on page 9, Rebekah Simon-Caffyn showcases some of their biggest success stories.

Also on my list of ‘must-reads’ this issue are Jon Biddle’s super book topic based around Jason Reynolds’ *Look Both Ways* (p.23) and James Clements’ very thorough masterclass on how to teach determiners (p.35). James’ feature is accompanied by a pack of worksheets, which you can download for free from [teachwire.net](http://teachwire.net)

Finally, it’s always a pleasure to hear from the people behind the books we recommend. On page 7, Sunday Times Bestselling Jamie Walton discusses the themes of cooperation and kindness that underly his new picturebook. And we close this issue with words from Yassmin Abdel-Magied, who contemplates the value of addressing difficult topics within the hope-filled setting of fantasy fiction (p.66).

Wishing you a summer term filled with all the right kinds of stories,

*Lydia Grove*  
(editor)



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

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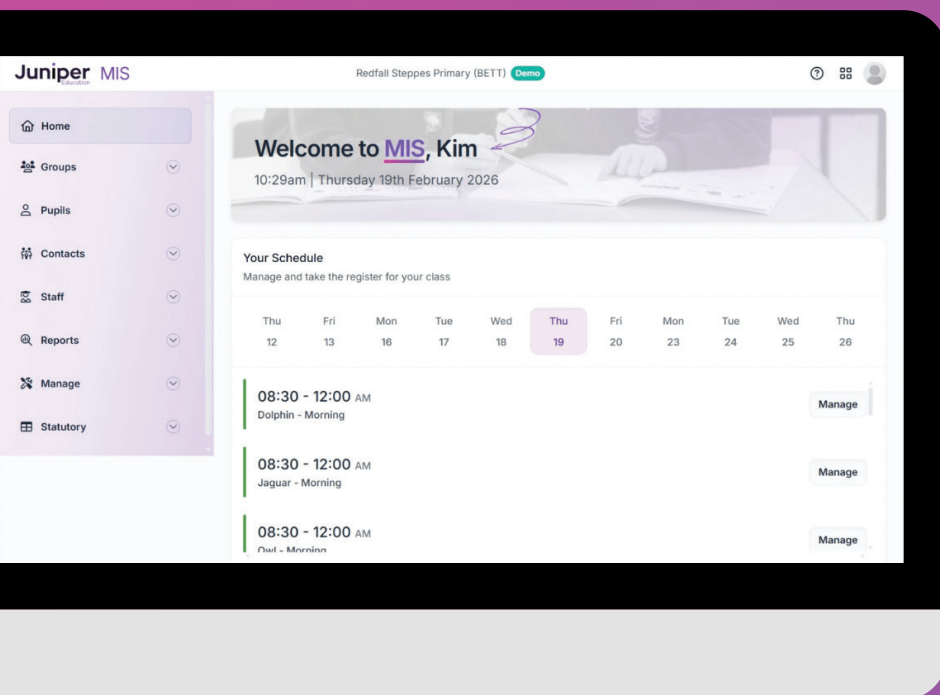


*“Stomp, stomp,  
on the floor,  
can you hear  
the mighty  
roar?”*

Cover illustration taken from *Big Red Dragon* by Jane Newberry, illustrated by Carolina Rabei (Otter-Barry Books, £9.99)



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### PUBLISHERS:

Joe Carter, Sam Reubin,  
Richard Stebbing

### EDITOR:

Lydia Grove

### ART EDITORS:

Richard Allen & Sarah Barajas

### ACCOUNTS:

artichokemedialtd@integral2.com

### SUBSCRIPTIONS:

subscriptions@artichokeHQ.com

### ADVERTISING:

samantha.law@artichokehq.com  
01206 505499

hayley.rackham@artichokehq.com

01206 505928

demi.maynard@artichokehq.com

01206 505 962

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Headteacher  
Brooklands Primary School





# ‘Plants are brilliant teachers’

**Jamie Walton**, Sunday Times Bestselling author and horticulturalist, discusses humility, teamwork and the rhythm of the seasons

**TR&W** Is writing something you have to force yourself to sit and do, or is it a relaxing pursuit after a day in the garden?

**JW** It depends. The ideas tend to come very naturally, usually when I’m in the garden, noticing things and making connections. But turning those ideas into something coherent on the page does take some level of discipline I suppose. I wouldn’t say I force it, but for someone with ADHD and dyslexia, I do have to create the space for it. That said, there are moments where it feels quite similar to gardening. You get into a rhythm, and it becomes immersive and calming.

**How do different aspects of your life influence your writing?**

I’d say everything feeds into it, although the garden is the obvious one: it’s where most of my inspiration comes from. But my own childhood, which was devoid of any horticultural or environmental teachings, and the challenges I see around access to nature and food also play a big part. I’m always thinking about how to make growing feel more accessible and less intimidating. That shapes the tone of what I do a lot. I don’t want gardening or growing our own food to feel rigid or overly instructional.

**Is there a book or piece of writing about gardening, growing or biodiversity that particularly resonates with you?**

One that really stays with me is *The One-Straw Revolution* by Masanobu Fukuoka. It’s not a children’s book, but the philosophy behind it has influenced how I see growing and, in turn, how I write about it. The idea that we don’t always need to intervene, that nature often does a better job when we step back, is something I try to carry through into my work. It encourages a kind of humility, and I think that’s important for both adults and children to understand.

**Your new book features a community of plants living in a vegetable garden. What lessons can children learn from plants?**

Plants are brilliant teachers if we take the time to notice them. *Plants need friends too!* is about cooperation, biodiversity, kindness, and understanding that even the smallest living things have an important role to play. Some plants bring nutrients up from deep in the soil, others attract pollinators, some offer shade or protection. It’s a quiet

kind of teamwork, but one that relates to us too. I wanted children to see that difference isn’t a weakness, that we all have our own value and strengths, and there are also lessons in patience, in cycles, and in resilience. A seed doesn’t rush, it just grows when the conditions are right, and I think that’s a comforting thing for children to understand.

**Do you have any tips for keeping children interested in biodiversity even through the colder months of the year?**

I think the key is to shift the focus rather than trying to replicate summer, as winter has its own stories if you look closely enough. We can explore seed heads, notice bird activity, look for signs of insects tucked away in stems or leaf litter. Even something as simple as leaving parts of the garden a bit ‘messy’ for wildlife can turn into a talking point. Indoors, you can grow things like micro greens or herbs on a windowsill, which keeps that connection going. And it helps children see that nature never really stops, it just changes pace.

Jamie Walton is an ecological horticulturalist and Sunday Times Bestselling author, growing food and flowers in North Yorkshire.

 [nettlesandpetals](#)



*Plants Need Friends Too!* illustrated by Rose Gerrard, is out this month (Ivy Kids, £9.99).



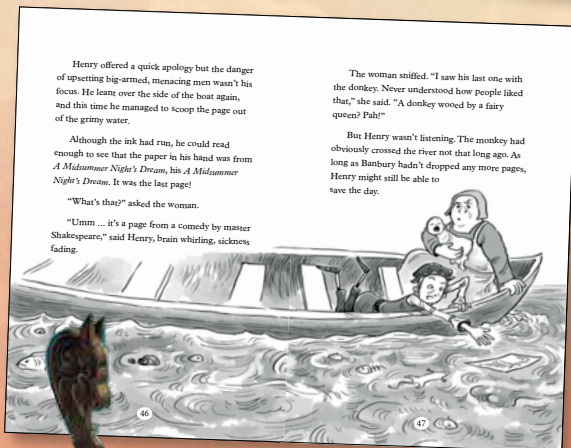
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# Family MATTERS

When parents understand the power of oracy, conversations at home and school can transform children's learning, says **Rebekah Simon-Caffyn**

**O**racy means articulating ideas, developing understanding, and engaging with others, through speaking, listening and communication. A high-quality oracy education enables students to learn both *to talk* and *through talk*, providing a breadth of opportunities for children to develop essential communication skills.

At Voice 21, we take a whole-school approach, supporting schools to deliver a high-quality oracy education by building speaking, listening and communication into teaching pedagogy, the curriculum and the wider school community.

The Oracy Benchmarks ([tinyurl.com/oracy-benchmarks](http://tinyurl.com/oracy-benchmarks)) created by Voice 21 outline what constitutes a high-quality oracy education. They support teachers and leaders to work towards creating a shared vision and understanding of what oracy education should look like. School Oracy Benchmark 2 emphasises the importance of weaving oracy into the fabric and culture of a school, both in and out of the classroom:

'The school maximises opportunities for oracy for all students; students use their voices in meaningful contexts in and beyond the classroom. Across the school community, oracy is nurtured by everyday interactions and is visible, showcased and celebrated throughout school life.'

One of the ways in which

schools can work to weave oracy into every aspect of school life is through engaging the whole school community with oracy, and particularly by engaging parents and carers. By ensuring that these key stakeholders are actively involved with and aware of oracy, a whole-school culture of oracy can be developed.

## Making the case for oracy

In order to successfully engage parents and carers with oracy, schools must first make clear to parents why a high-quality oracy education is important for their children, and how they could develop their children's oracy skills

*“Oracy is not an inherent ability, but rather a learned skill that all children can and should be supported to develop”*



at home. Explanations should take a two-pronged approach: sharing the purpose and evidence base for oracy and then demonstrating the impact that it has on children.

For Turnfurlong Junior School in Aylesbury, gathering information about parent perceptions of oracy was an important first step. The school sent surveys out to parents to understand their awareness of oracy.

This enabled the school to tailor the information that parents were given to meet their understanding.

Earlham Primary School in East London facilitated an oracy coffee morning to introduce parents to oracy, its importance in children's development and the school's approach to teaching it.

The event included a showcase from student oracy ambassadors, which illustrated the impact and benefits of oracy, including for academic attainment, social development and building confidence.

Bedgrove Junior School in Buckinghamshire took a similar approach, inviting parents to attend an open morning that showcased how oracy is approached within teaching and learning at the school. Showcase classes demonstrated how oracy enables pupils to have autonomy and leadership within their learning, with staff playing a facilitatory role rather than a didactic one. The open morning demonstrated to parents how independent and confident their children were with their oracy skills

and helped make the case for why oracy is essential for children's development and future opportunities.

## Building parents' expertise

Providing practical strategies and resources that give parents everything they need to bring oracy into their homes ensures that schools are creating a culture of oracy that is not confined to the classroom. It's important that schools emphasise the inclusive nature of oracy to parents and carers by celebrating discussions in home languages, and ensuring that parents understand that oracy is not about speaking 'standard' English or using a formal register.

Bedgrove Junior School provides parents with strategies that they can use at home to promote an oracy-rich approach to talk. The school sends home oracy games that parents can play

with their children, as well as question prompts they can use to find out more about a child's day and learning.

For Turnfurlong Junior School, connecting with parents on a regular basis about oracy is a key means of promoting an oracy culture both at school and at home. Turnfurlong includes a weekly Talking Point in its newsletters, which parents can use to initiate conversations with their children.

Meanwhile, Earlham Primary School builds parents' expertise by putting oracy tasks up as homework on Google classroom, enabling children to practise their oracy skills at home with parents. Having access to oracy resources helps parents understand how best to support the development of their children's oracy skills at home – and also helps keep parents updated on the oracy targets that their children are focused on in school.

## Authentic engagement

To make oracy relevant to parents and to the school community, it's important that schools create authentic contexts and opportunities for parents to engage with it. This could look like linking oracy activities to important community events, or creating at-home oracy activities that link to curriculum aims.

Parents at Earlham Primary are invited to themed assemblies where pupils tell stories, perform poetry, have exploratory discussions and deliver speeches. These events provide children with invaluable opportunities to speak to authentic and varied audiences.

At Bedgrove Junior, children present pieces of their work during parent presentations. In art, pupils show their sketchbooks to their parents, then receive feedback and respond to questions from them. This approach gives the children ownership of their learning and also creates an authentic context for parents to see and engage with their children's oracy skills.

By making the case for oracy to parents, giving them practical tools and strategies and ensuring that oracy at home links to what children are doing in school, schools can work towards building a culture of oracy throughout the whole school community.



*Rebekah Simon-Caffyn is the research and policy lead at Voice 21.*

*Her research and advocacy work focuses on ensuring a high-quality oracy education for every child.*

[voice21.org](http://voice21.org)

## YOUR ORACY ROADMAP

### Make the case

Explain to parents and carers that oracy is not an inherent ability, but rather a learned skill that all children can and should be supported to develop. Secure buy-in from parents by demonstrating the impact oracy can have. Seeing their children become more confident and engaged with their learning can ensure that parents value oracy as they would literacy and numeracy.

### Build expertise

Provide parents with practical, engaging and easy-to-use resources as well as tips and instructions for how to support the development of their children's oracy skills. This could include weekly Talking Points, discussion questions to support homework, or oracy games and tasks.

### Create authentic opportunities

Make sure parents and families understand that oracy is inclusive; it doesn't mean speaking in full sentences, using 'standard English' or debating. Oracy can be developed in home languages, in regional dialects and through different types of communication. Schools should celebrate oracy in different languages and give parents tools and resources to develop their children's oracy skills in their home languages.

### Enable oracy at home

By using events in the local community, schools can create authentic contexts for talk at home. This could include presentations to parents, providing talking points that parents can use at home, or home-based oracy tasks linked to the curriculum.





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# 10

## BOOKS TO BUILD CONFIDENT *poetry voices*

These books, all included in Poetry By Heart's new Timeline Anthology, are perfect to read and share aloud...

# 1

### FOUNDATION STAGE

#### Big Red Dragon: Play Rhymes Through the Year

BY JANE NEWBERRY, ILLUSTRATED BY  
CAROLINA RABEI, OTTER-BARRY BOOKS 2024



#### Big Red Dragon

Big Red Dragon flying  
higher, higher, higher.

Big Red Dragon shouting,  
"Fire, fire, fire!!"

His paws clap, clap,  
his wings flap, flap

and he jumps up and down  
like a big rubber tyre!

Boing!

Boing!

**LET'S PLAY!**  
Lift child as high as you can  
for *higher, higher*.  
Older toddlers can raise an arm  
and point upwards.  
Cup hands round mouth for *fire, fire fire!*  
Indicate wings with big arm flaps.  
JUMP up and down!!

This beautiful hardback encourages children to flap their wings like a dragon, stomp like a dinosaur and hop like a bunny. Journeying through the year, young readers will encounter rhymes celebrating Easter, Diwali and more, with brilliant suggestions for how to act out the sounds and rhythms. This book brings children in on the action and gets them to think about how their body can express meaning. The gentle, pared-back illustrations balance out the playful energy conveyed by the tips on moving with the words.

#### Try this...

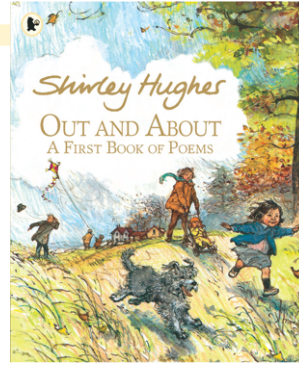
■ Pupils will enjoy twitching their noses in the poem *Easter Bunny* and adding in gestures for this energetic poem.

# 2

FOUNDATION STAGE

## Out and About: A First Book of Poems

BY SHIRLEY HUGHES, WALKER BOOKS 2016



### About this book

In four sections and 18 poems, this book follows the changing seasons, with two pages of pen, ink and watercolour illustrations

for each poem. Everything comes from a young child's perspective, from the struggle to pull on wellies to the magic of an autumn bonfire that transforms



### Try this...

■ For the poem *Fire*, ask pupils to imagine their hand is the fire dragon and act out all its movements as they speak the poem.



into a fiery dragon. Longer poems tell seasonal stories with a strong sense of rhythm and rhyme, while short poems with tiny two-word lines illuminate the natural world.



#### LET'S PLAY!

Here's a good chance to get out the jingle bells or old car keys to accompany this easy rhythm. If you like singing, it fits to the tune of *Twinkle Twinkle, Little Star*

Or...BIG arm movements -  
Waving in verse 1.  
Mimic sharing sweets verse 2.  
verse 3 - Sun: both arms up in sun-shape.  
Lamps: cup hands  
Finish both hands waving above head!

## POETRY BY HEART

### SPEAK ALOUD WITH POETRY BY HEART

Since its launch in 2013, Poetry By Heart, the national poetry speaking competition, has been hugely popular amongst young people aged eight to 18.

But poetry, especially when read, memorised and shared aloud, is a springboard to explore language, develop literacy and boost confidence in children of *all* ages. So now the organisers are inviting Reception and Key Stage 1 pupils to participate too, and have launched a Timeline Anthology of poems perfect for under-sevens.

It's available freely to all at [poetrybyheart.org.uk/timeline/4plus](http://poetrybyheart.org.uk/timeline/4plus)



# 3

FOUNDATION STAGE

## A First Book of Dinosaurs

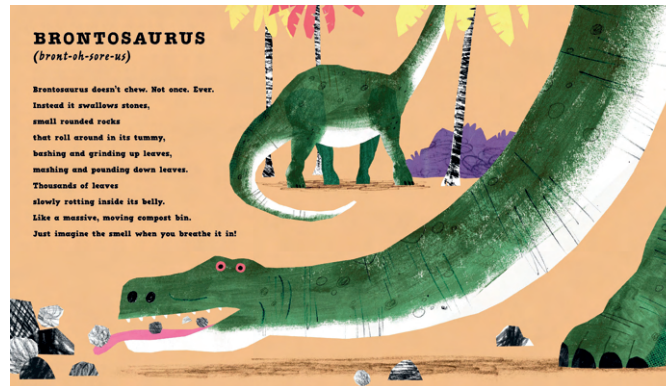
BY SIMON MOLE, ILLUSTRATED BY MATT HUNT, WALKER BOOKS 2023

Simon Mole transforms dinosaur facts into poems – checked by palaeontologists at The Natural History Museum. Readers will meet old favourites like T-Rex and Triceratops, but also less familiar dinos such

as Therizinosaurus, who waddled upright and had swords for fingers! This is a great book for children who make a beeline for the fact file. Visit [simonmole.com](http://simonmole.com) for video performances of all the poems.

### Try this...

■ Turn the poem *More than enough* into a performance for a pair, with one pupil speaking line one and another line two; split the repeated phrase 'more than enough' the same way and then speak the final line together.



## HOW TO SPEAK A POEM ALOUD

**1 CONNECTION**  
Take a little while to connect with the poem yourself. Read it aloud a few times. Find a recording if you can and let the sound of the poem wash over you. How does it make you feel? Does it remind you of anything you've read, seen, heard or experienced? Let yourself respond to the poem as a human being.

**2 PREPARATION**  
Think carefully about how you want the poem to sound – pace, pausing, if different voices are needed, etc. Say it aloud multiple times and use a coloured pencil to map where you want to slow down/speed up, pause for dramatic effect and where you want to linger on the language.

**3 ANTICIPATION**  
Get your listeners excited by telling them you'll be sharing a poem later. You could tell them the title to get them thinking about what the subject might be. Before you start, ask what they think the poem might be about. You're giving them a gift – make the most of it!

**4 MOMENT AND SPACE**  
Consider your listeners' energy and how that might affect your reading. Will they be chilled out and receptive, or excited and chatty? As you speak the poem, notice their energy and see if you can respond to it. Think too about where you want to be in the room for maximum effect.

**5 NUTS AND BOLTS**  
When you speak it aloud, begin by saying the poem's title and the poet's name. Then count to three to signal that you are entering the space of the poem. Go slower than you think you need to and make sure you let the last line of the poem really land. Then stay silent for a count of six to let the poem settle.

# 4

KEY STAGE 1

## The Puffin Book of Fantastic First Poems

EDITED BY JUNE CREBBIN,  
PUFFIN 2000



This anthology arranges 130+ poems into seven themes, including animals, family, mealtimes and nonsense. It's easy to find something to match children's interests: Looking for dancing kangaroos? Just boogaloo to page 8! With vivid illustrations and poems that are fun to share aloud, it's a perfect bridge from nursery rhymes and picture books to the wider world of poetry.

### Try this...

■ *Witch, Witch* by Rose Fyleman is great for a pair performance – have one child asking the questions and the other answering (as the witch).

KEY STAGE 1

# 5

## Joy

BY YASMEEN ISMAIL,  
ILLUSTRATED BY  
JENNI DESMOND,  
CANDLEWICK  
PRESS 2020



### About this book

*Joy* tells the story of an excitable kitten who gets into a pickle chasing her favourite ball of wool and becomes lost. It's a simple story made special by the way words and illustrations interact – and great fun to speak aloud. The pages sing

with densely packed rhyme and zinging alliteration.

### Try this...

■ As the words become part of the kitten's movements, ask your pupils how they want to speak words that are upside down and going loop-the-loop across the page.



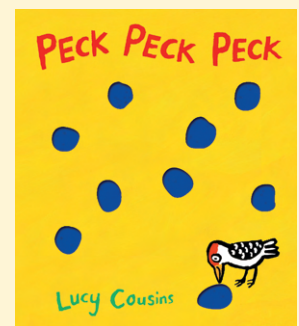
KEY STAGE 1

# 6

## Peck, Peck, Peck

BY LUCY COUSINS, WALKER  
BOOKS 2016

Tactile, exuberant and bursting with bold rhymes, clever repetitions and concrete spacing of words, this board book might be just what a young reader needs to get excited about language. The book traces a young woodpecker's attempts to learn to peck wood, guided by his father. Soon he is pecking holes in hats, mats, tennis rackets, jackets and more. A heartwarming tale and great fun for a child to join in with and experiment with rhyme-making.

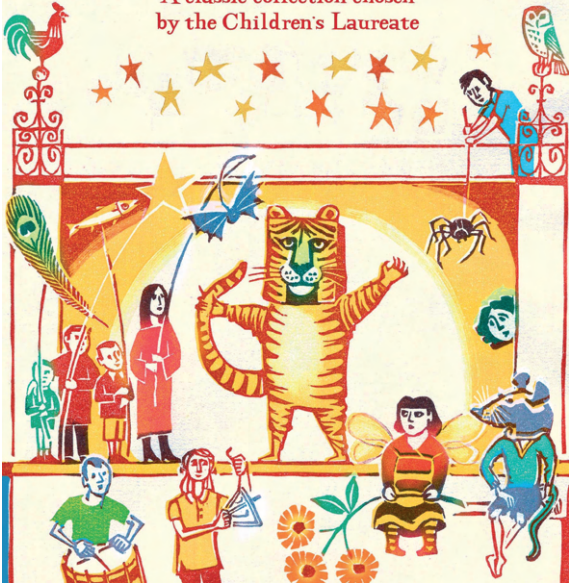


### Try this...

■ Sound out the repeated 'pecks' in different ways, speeding up as the woodpecker's pecking becomes more enthusiastic!

# JULIA DONALDSON POEMS to PERFORM

A classic collection chosen  
by the Children's Laureate



KEY STAGE 1

## 7 Poems to Perform: A Classic Collection Chosen by the Children's Laureate

SELECTED BY JULIA DONALDSON,  
ILLUSTRATED BY CLARE MELINSKY,  
MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS 2014

If you're looking for a first step into speaking poems aloud with young children, you can't go wrong with this wide selection chosen by Julia Donaldson specifically for being shared aloud. The final section suggests how each poem could be performed in class, with opportunities for choral speaking that are sensitively matched

to the poems. The helpful 'cataloguing' of approaches means you can quickly appraise the level of challenge for different pupils.

### Try this...

■ Have your whole class speaking the first and last two lines of *Cats* by Eleanor Farjeon, with the remaining lines divided between individuals or pairs.

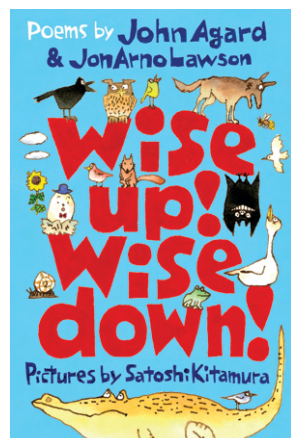
## 8

KEY STAGE 2

### Wise up! Wise down!

BY JOHN AGARD AND JONARNO LAWSON, ILLUSTRATED BY SATOSHI KITAMURA, WALKER BOOKS 2024

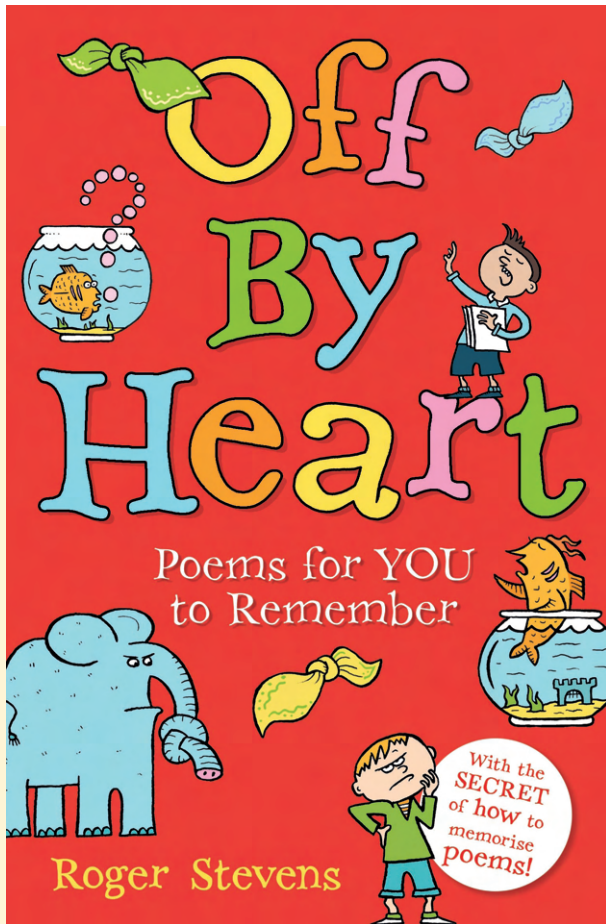
Two poets from different sides of the world are in conversation with each other in this book. They use poems to ask questions, from what a mind is to whether crows fly in straight lines. The poems all work in pairs, and this dialogic format is great for encouraging children to think about different ways to respond to their world.



### Try this...

■ Have four pupils speak the first four verses of John Agard's poem *Questions* while everyone else performs the actions. The four speak the fifth verse together, before everyone joins for the final line.





KEY STAGE 2

9

## Off By Heart: Poems for YOU to Remember

SELECTED BY ROGER STEVENS, A&C BLACK CHILDRENS & EDUCATIONAL 2013

These poems are playfully organised by length so that the book opens with a one-word poem and progresses to poems for young readers looking for a challenge. Filled with tempting sounds, from buzzing flies to cheerful rhymes, the poems are enormous fun for children to sound out. From classics to new

favourites, there's a poem for every child, and top tips to help learn poetry by heart, with pointers on timing, expression and memorisation techniques.

### Try this...

■ Ask your pupils to make every word count in Christina Rossetti's short poem *Flint*, helping them notice all the different stones.

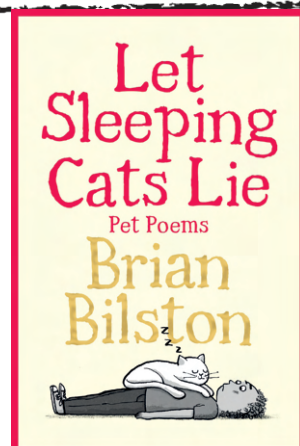
10

KEY STAGE 2

## Let Sleeping Cats Lie: Pet Poems

BY BRIAN BILSTON, MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS 2024

With poems on four-legged friends and meandering snakes, lugubrious goldfish and loft pigeons, this collection will entertain adults as much as children. Brian Bilston's explorations of the animal kingdom are formally playful (think haikus, lists and concrete poems) and always funny. Children will love the rambunctious sounds emanating from this book, from yapping dogs to hissing snakes, while the sheer variety of poetic shapes will inspire budding writers to let loose and express themselves with gusto.



### Try this...

■ Haiku Composed by My Dog while Looking Out of the Window at a Passing Cat is made up of just one repeated word. How might pupils bring out different emphases?

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Written collaboratively by Poetry By Heart's Suzannah V. Evans (communications), Mariah Whelan (poetry and digital content editor), Julie Blake (director and co-founder) and Charlotte Bourne (learning and engagement). Suzannah and Mariah are also poets and poetry educators, and Charlotte and Julie taught in state schools and teacher education for many years.

[poetrybyheart.org.uk](https://poetrybyheart.org.uk)

# Welcome to STORYWORLD!

Dr Samantha Jayne Hulston examines how play can be used to support reading enjoyment

**H**elping young children to personally connect and engage with stories is key to supporting reading enjoyment. Connections can be nurtured through enchanting whole-class read-alouds, energetic book talk, and independent exploration of texts in the book corner. But what if there were other ways to support children's interest in, connections with and enjoyment of stories? What if play-based activities could help?

## Play and reading enjoyment

Established Reading for Pleasure pedagogies ([ourfp.org](http://ourfp.org)) and more recent research ([tinyurl.com/rfp-practice](http://tinyurl.com/rfp-practice)) have shown the importance of giving children time and space to connect with and talk about stories in ways that are meaningful for them. Thoughtfully introduced opportunities for play within the classroom can provide these components, too.

Play is often characterised as open-ended, child-orientated and, most importantly, fun. So, when children are able to play with stories, they have the time, space and autonomy to informally explore fictional worlds. The fun that's associated with playing with stories can act as a route to reading enjoyment.

## Introducing Storyworld Play

Storyworld Play is one possible way children can be supported to play with, connect with and enjoy stories. This specific, play-based approach to supporting reading enjoyment was developed as part of a research project. The project looked at different ways young children could engage with stories – especially individuals who might not choose to talk about stories during read-alouds and book talks or who might not visit the book corner.

## The nuts and bolts

Storyworld Play is not the same as free play. Instead, it is an activity that is initiated and curated by adults but extended by children. For instance, Storyworld Play always takes place after an adult-led read-aloud of a fictional text that is well-known and much loved by the children in the class. There is a clear link between the play and the text. The choice of a familiar and liked text is key, as children will be able to bring their knowledge of the story to their play.

After a read-aloud has finished, small groups of children are introduced to an adult-designed story-related play scene, placed in a tuff spot or on a blanket. It's not quite the same as small world play: Storyworld Play scenes include a range of different objects, using small-scale and real-sized objects – realistic



*“The choice of a familiar and liked text is key, as children will be able to bring their knowledge of the story to their play”*



and abstract items as well as craft materials. For instance, a scene linked to *My Pet Star* by Corinne Averiss, a story about a fallen star rescued by a child, might include wooden peg figurines, a star plushie, dress-up items and tin foil.

A big plus for busy teachers is that there is no need to arrange objects sequentially or artfully. The emphasis is not on creating an Insta-perfect replica of the book, but on offering a range of enticing and intriguing objects linked to the story to prompt children's individual responses. Once introduced to the scene, children are invited to 'play the story', reinforcing the connection between the play and the story, but with children able to choose *how* they play with the story.

### The role of adults

Play is often seen as the domain of children, suggesting that adults are not involved, invited or wanted in play. However, adults can have a valuable

role in supporting children's play, so long as children are still free to choose the direction of their play. This is no less true for Storyworld Play. The adult has already played a crucial part in choosing the text for a read-aloud and selecting objects for the play scene, but their part continues into the heart of the play activity.

After inviting the children to 'play the story', the adult remains on hand during Storyworld Play to act as an affirmer, guide or participant.

Affirming children's play can involve mirroring their facial expressions or offering encouraging smiles. These non-verbal forms of encouragement can be vital. They help to let children know it is okay to have a go at re-enacting part of a story or dramatising a bit of character dialogue, especially if children are not used to exploring stories through play.

Guidance might take the form of gently asking children questions about objects, such as "Why do you think there is a small toy cat?" or "How could we use this toy cat to play the story?". It can also involve more subtle suggestions. An adult could tap an object up and down, modelling how a character can be animated into life; or they could quietly move one object closer to another to indicate a possible narrative connection, such

as placing a toy hat near to a figurine.

Finally, being a participant in children's play might involve choosing to take on a character to act out a story segment, or following the directions of a child to re-enact a segment.

Through these various roles the adult can not only help to ensure children's play remains connected to the story but, by being close to the play, can also gain some valuable insights into the children's story-related interests and preferences.

### Starting young

One concern about play-based approaches is whether children will actually engage with the story. From observing a number of young children, the answer seems to be that they most definitely will. We should not be surprised, though, if they do not re-enact the entire story. Instead, during Storyworld Play children tend to home in on, repeat and move between story segments that are of interest to them. Children tend to re-enact key actions, take on intriguing characters, change bits of the story and move objects to create important scenes.

These playful responses show how giving children time and space during a play-based activity can allow them to connect with stories on their own terms, exploring parts of stories in ways that are meaningful for them.



*Samantha Hulston is a former teacher, specialising in Early Primary, and a*

*postdoctoral research fellow at The Open University where she looks at how children use 'Storyworld Play' to engage with and enjoy stories.*

**in** samantha-jayne-hulston-109011b9

## THE STORYWORLD PLAYBOOK

### Be consistent

Take time to set up a routine, linking Storyworld Play with particular days, times, locations and objects. For instance, when children begin to associate a particular blanket with Storyworld Play they realise that this activity is an opportunity to explore and connect with the story just shared or, as one child put it, "To make the story come alive".

### Tune in

Sometimes, pupils' story-related play can be vocal, noisy and vibrant as children delight in taking on characters and re-enacting story segments. However, it is important to also tune in to non-verbal play, where children's gaze, quiet movements or silent animation of objects can indicate which parts of stories children are connecting with.

### Include children's text choices

When children are given opportunities to make text choices, they are more likely to be engaged in book-related activities. So, when planning ahead for Storyworld Play, you could run some book votes to ensure the choice of stories appeals to all children.

### Take Storyworld Play into writing

During Storyworld Play, children may make changes to stories, such as imagining what happens when the bear and rabbit from Jon Klassen's *I Want My Hat Back* meet. You could take some photos of these played out changes and use them as prompts for playful writing activities.

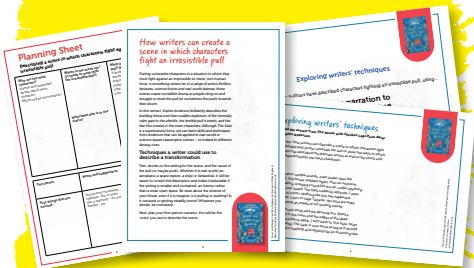
# WAGOLL

*The House with Chicken Legs Runs Away* by Sophie Anderson

Peer inside the mind of the author and show pupils how to depict a character fighting an irresistible pull

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**W**hen *The House with Chicken Legs* published, I had no idea of the wonderful journey it would take me on, nor the number of readers I would meet along the way who would tell me how much the book meant to them.

Marinka and the house mean a great deal to me, too. Marinka is a stubborn, fiery, vulnerable young girl who is trying to break free of a destiny she does not want. And the house is a Yaga house, a place where dead souls come to celebrate their lives before being guided to the stars in a beautiful, comforting ceremony. Together, they are a family.

I have found these characters difficult to leave behind, yet I did not return to them lightly. When I finally decided to revisit their world, I felt a great deal of responsibility to make this story mean something equally important to all the readers who took the first book into their hearts, whilst also widening Yaga lore and adding to the themes being explored.

I thought deeply about where I left Marinka and the house, and what might be next for them. And once again, I was inspired by Russian folklore, and the sorrows and joys of the circle of life.

*The House with Chicken Legs Runs Away* begins a few months after *The House with Chicken Legs* ends, and although it is a sequel, it can be enjoyed



Photo © seenicksphotography

**The House with Chicken Legs Runs Away** (£8.99, Usborne Publishing Ltd) is out now

as a standalone.

The opening finds Marinka and the house trying to live a normal life with the living. But things are not going well. Marinka is struggling to settle in her new life and the house is behaving strangely. Then, after something goes explosively wrong at a guiding, the house runs away. A quest follows in which Marinka and her friends, old and new, travel to extraordinary places in search of a way to help their beloved house.

Like its predecessor, *The House with Chicken Legs Runs Away* explores some of the big ideas and questions that are part of being human, through a fantastic adventure. Are you ready to run with the house again?

## 5 WAYS TO DEPICT FIGHTING AN IRRESISTIBLE PULL

### THE INTERNAL BATTLE

Let readers see the push and pull inside the character's mind, making it clear that resisting is a constant struggle.

### A MOMENT OF DOUBT

Show a moment where the character almost gives in – this 'crack' in resistance will create tension and make the struggle more believable.

### CLARIFY THE STAKES

Make it clear what the character stands to lose or gain should they give in to the irresistible pull. The greater the consequences, the more powerful their resistance will feel.

### THE FIVE SENSES

Use sensory details (sound, touch, sight, smell, taste) to make the pull feel vivid

and overwhelming, to help the reader experience the moment alongside the character.

### CHARACTERISATION

A character's response to the pull is an opportunity to demonstrate their personality and values. Do they fight or flee? Do they resist immediately, or is there a moment of hesitation?



# Extract from

Pages 50–51

A long, descriptive sentence followed by a short, abrupt one creates an immediate dramatic contrast that increases tension.

P 50

Another rumble sounds, even louder than the first. The house wobbles again, then an ominous creaking, scraping sound fills the air, unlike anything I've ever heard. The Gate suddenly expands. I stare at it in horror. Nothing like this has happened before. I turn to Yaga Tatyana. Her eyes are wide, reflecting an image of me looking scared.

The music stops and the dancing too. Silence swells in the room and the edges of the dead become blurry again. I turn back to The Gate, heart thumping. The Gate is now twice as big as it should be and is swelling and rippling like an incoming tide.

There is another rumble, followed by a deafening bang, and with a rush of cold, damp air The Gate explodes outwards, then begins pulling everything towards it.

Comparing The Gate to the ocean in this simile makes the reader connect the pull to something natural, powerful and unstoppable. This reinforces the idea that the pull is inevitable and impossible to resist.

The auditory imagery builds throughout this extract to a climax of a 'deafening bang', reflecting how the pull of The Gate has become impossible to ignore or resist.

P 51

The dead get pulled into The Gate first. They are lifted off their feet and swept into the expanding darkness on icy winds.

"No!" I shout, reaching for the woman who had been dancing energetically only moments ago. "They haven't been guided properly!" I yell, but the woman slips through my fingers, speeds away and disappears.

Cold air whirls around my body, tugging me towards The Gate too. I duck behind Baba's chair and look around urgently for Yaga Tatyana, Benjamin and Jack.

Benjamin is on the far side of the room, his eyes wide with fright as he clutches the windowsill with one hand and Baba's balalaika with the other.

The repeated themes of coldness in relation to The Gate create a threatening atmosphere, reminding us of the sinister nature of this pull.

The shift from the impersonal ('the dead') to an individual ('the woman who had been dancing') personalises the loss and intensifies the emotions of the stakes.

Exclamative dialogue highlights Marinka's panic and reinforces the stakes. She understands the consequences of the pull but is powerless to stop them.

Using a verb like 'clutches' (rather than 'holds' or 'grabs') conveys fear and desperation, adding to the already tense atmosphere of the scene.

50-51



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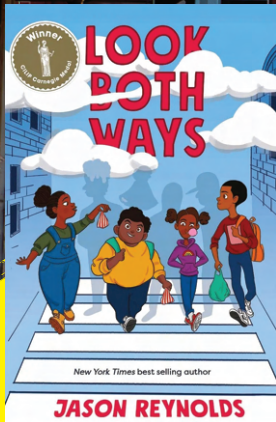
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Published by  
Knights Of Media, 2019

Winner of the CILIP Carnegie Medal 2021, *Look Both Ways* was written by Jason Reynolds and illustrated by Selom Sunu.

[jasonwritesbooks.com](http://jasonwritesbooks.com)

[selomsunu.co.uk](http://selomsunu.co.uk)

# Look Both Ways

Jason Reynolds' award-winning collection of interconnected stories will inspire pupils to think deeply and write with complexity and nuance

JON BIDDLE

**L**ook *Both Ways* is a collection of ten loosely interconnected stories following pupils from Latimer Middle School on their journey home. The stories explore a range of themes, which include bullying, parental illness and homophobia. However, they are all written with a very deft touch, ensuring there are some genuinely funny moments between the more poignant and serious ones.

The title, *Look Both Ways*,

captures the book's central idea: situations are often more complex and nuanced than they first appear and need to be considered from multiple perspectives. One of the book's most engaging features is the clever and subtle ways the stories interconnect. For example, one character notices some flowers are missing from a rosebush she walks past. In a later chapter, we discover that the flowers were picked by a boy who wanted to apologise to a friend. Each of these small details rewards careful reading

and shows how important it is to look more deeply at every situation.

Two recurring motifs run throughout the book. First, each story mentions a slightly different version of a homework assignment set by the school, and second, there is a mysterious reference to 'a school bus falling from the sky'. The meaning of this phrase is only revealed in the final chapter and turns out to be far lighter than readers might expect, demonstrating Reynolds' remarkable talent as a writer.





## Activities based around *Look Both Ways* The bus falling from the sky

After reading the first few stories, ask the children whether they have noticed any ideas or motifs that appear repeatedly. They should be able to suggest certain characters and settings that resurface, as well as the mentions of the school bus in each story. Ask them to think about what this could mean. Is it literally referring to a school bus, or is it something more symbolic? Are there clues in any of the stories? Why might the author have chosen to connect the stories through this image? Working in pairs, ask them to make predictions about what might happen in the final story to explain the appearance of the mysterious bus.

### Character study

*Look Both Ways* is full of intriguing characters. My personal favourites

are Britton ‘Bit’ Burns, the leader of the Low Cuts gang, and Bryson Wills, who bravely supports one of his friends during a conversation about toxic masculinity. Ask the pupils to select a favourite character and reflect on questions such as:

- How do our feelings about the character change over the course of the story and why?
- Would you like to be friends with this character? Why, or why not?
- Which moment best captures the character’s true personality?
- What choices does the character make at key points in the story, and what do these choices tell us about them?

Model writing an extended paragraph about one of the characters (for example, one of the adults such as Ms. CeeCee). Think aloud as you plan and work through your ideas. Demonstrate how to find evidence from the text to back up your thoughts and opinions, and how to use expanded noun phrases and figurative language where appropriate. Provide pupils with a scaffold to support their individual writing:

- Introduce the character – who they are, and their role in the story
- Appearance – zoom in on one or two key details
- Actions and behaviour
- Thoughts and feelings – how they see things, including their friendships
- How others view and react to them
- Final thoughts – summarise the character and leave the reader with a clear impression



### Hero vs superhero

In the story *Ookabooka Land*, Cynthia talks about her mum being her hero and her grandad being her superhero, although not in a literal sense. Discuss with pupils what makes a hero, asking them to consider qualities such as kindness, courage and empathy. Ask them to think about who their real-life heroes are, and to write them a short letter explaining why they admire them so much, giving specific examples of actions or moments that have made a lasting impression on them.

## Take it further → → →

### IDENTITY AND BELONGING

Get the pupils to think about the different relationships and communities in the book. All the characters belong to Latimer Middle School, with most of them being in the same class. Ask pupils to focus on one character in particular, such as Bit from *The Low Cuts Strike Again*. He is part of many groups: his family, his class, his school, the Low Cuts, the free-lunchers and the in-school cancer support group. Encourage the pupils to explore which communities he might enjoy being part of and which he might resent or feel uncomfortable in. They could create a character community web, showing all the groups a character belongs to and how

these impact on their actions, choices, and emotions.

Prompt the children to reflect on their own lives. Which groups or communities do they belong to, and how do these influence the way they act and the decisions they make? Can they think of times when being part of a group made them feel confident, happy, or even frustrated?

### MAPPING THE JOURNEY

Provide pupils with a map of their local area. Ask them to find the school and encourage them to plot their route home. See if they can recognise any landmarks, parks, shops or streets. The activity can be extended by

asking them to calculate distances, estimate walking times (the average 11-year-old walks at a speed of 3mph) or write a set of directions for the route so that someone else would be able to follow it.

### COMIC BOOKS

Although Jason Reynolds is not primarily a comic book creator, he has written several graphic novels and the superhero novel, *Miles Morales: Spider-Man*. Ask pupils to decide which story they would like to turn into a comic strip. Explain that they do not need to retell the whole narrative but could just focus on some favourite scenes. Model how to portray what the characters are feeling through using speech and thought bubbles, rather than by writing long sentences. Word choice is enormously important with comic



## Loved this? Try these...

- ❖ *The Track series* by Jason Reynolds
- ❖ *Parachute Kids* by Betty C Tang
- ❖ *I Survived the California Wildfires* by Lauren Tarshis and Cassie Anderson
- ❖ *50 Adventures in the 50 States* by Kate Siber and Lydia Hill
- ❖ *Love That Dog* by Sharon Creech

– the local park, a shop or somewhere totally unexpected – and what it is that makes the walk interesting, funny, scary or exciting. Ask pupils to plan how the characters' feelings and thoughts will change as events unfold and how they will react to different situations. Less confident writers could adapt a story from the book and think about the changes they will make.

As a class, discuss a central motif that could appear in all of the stories. It could be something simple, like it being a wet and windy day, or a more imaginative idea, similar to the bus falling from the sky.



**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.

### Drama

Show the pupils the page on the Kennedy Centre website that advertises a theatre production of *Look Both Ways* ([tinyurl.com/trw-kennedy](http://tinyurl.com/trw-kennedy)). Ask them to select a few favourite scenes from the book and to work in groups to practise performing them. Encourage pupils to think about the body language of the characters and how they interact with each other. Get them to experiment with tone, pace and volume when speaking their lines. They could potentially explore a scene from the point of view of one of the other characters involved, thinking

about how it might change when seen through different eyes.

### The journey home

Ask the children to think about their favourite story from the book. What was it that they enjoyed most, and why did it capture their attention? Explain that they will be writing their own story about something that happens on the way home from school. It could have quite a serious theme, involving issues such as bullying or theft, or be something far more light-hearted. Encourage them to think about the setting of the story

strips, as space is so limited, so encourage the pupils to show the characters' behaviour and feelings through their illustrations. There are lots of online guides to help pupils draw comic strips, with Jarrett Lerner's website ([jarrettlerner.com](http://jarrettlerner.com)) being particularly helpful.

### ENGLISH AND AMERICAN ENGLISH

Display the American cover of *Look Both Ways*, which is subtitled 'A Tale Told in Ten Blocks'. Explain that a block is an American term for a plot of land surrounded by streets and that it came about because many American cities are built as grids, with streets running at right angles. Discuss some of the differences between English and American English (pavement and sidewalk, biscuit and cookie, break and recess, and so on), and

see which other examples the pupils can come up with, either from the book or from their existing knowledge. There are also words found in *Look Both Ways* that are unique to American English, such as lollygagging, which means to waste time or dawdle. See how many examples they can find as they read the book.

### EXPLORING THE USA

Latimer Middle School exists in an unspecified American city. Show the children a map of the USA and ask them to pick out some of the cities they have heard of, discussing what they already know about them. Explain that they are going to work in small groups to research one of the cities in more detail. With the World Cup looming in June this year, it might make

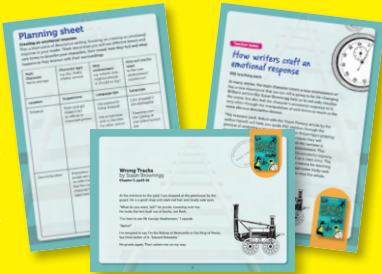
sense to focus on cities that are hosting matches. The work can be quite open-ended and creative, but could include creating their own map showing part of the city, finding out about famous people and sports teams from the area, discovering the main ways that people travel around, exploring famous man-made and natural features and learning more about the weather and climate. It would be a fantastic opportunity to allow pupils to explore atlases, subway maps, travel guides and non-fiction texts, providing a valuable chance to read for a genuine purpose in class. Pupils could record their findings as an information booklet, a double-page spread, or a digital slideshow, making sure to include maps, illustrations and text to show what they have learned.

# WAGOLL

## *Wrong Tracks* by Susan Brownrigg

Peer inside the mind of the author, and help pupils understand how to use various verb forms for creative effect

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I love using real people, real places and real events in my stories, especially those that focus on northern working-class lives. In *Wrong Tracks*, a real boy takes centre stage. Edward Entwistle was born in Wigan, Lancashire, like me, but over 150 years earlier, when life was very different. Yet I felt a strong connection to this ordinary boy, who by chance was caught up in all the drama surrounding early steam travel. In his old age, Edward, now living in America, became a newspaper sensation when he told his story of how, as a lad, he was asked to drive George and Robert Stephenson's famous Rocket locomotive!



*Wrong Tracks* (£7.99, Uclan Publishing) is out now.

It proved tricky to authenticate his claims, but I soon realised the gaps in his story gave me the perfect opportunity to fill them in. It also allowed me to have fun with Edward's habit of telling tales and fondness for exaggeration.

In *Wrong Tracks*, Edward, age 14, is invited by Mr George to leave his small village and move to Newcastle Upon Tyne for a very important job – one for which he is the perfect fit. There he is entrusted to care for Premium Engine, a new locomotive that is going to compete in the Rainhill Trials. The prize is £500 and a contract for the winning inventor's engine to run on the

Liverpool & Manchester Railway – the world's first inter-urban passenger railway.

Edward and his new loco-mad friend Prudence soon realise someone is trying to scupper the Stephensons' chances. It is up to the friends to spot sabotage and chase down spies in a thrilling race against the clock.

I like to follow in my characters' footsteps when writing my books. Highlights were seeing Rocket and riding on the replica at Locomotion in Shildon, two steam train footplate experiences, and visiting the former Forth Street Works in Newcastle. There, I imagined how it was for Edward arriving for the first time at the Stephensons' Manufactory...

## 5 TIPS FOR USING VERB FORMS FOR EFFECT

### PASSIVE VOICE

Passive voice (when the usual object of a clause becomes the subject) can be useful too, as used well it can add atmosphere and tension to a scene. Passive sentences can also show when a character has lost power in a scene or can be used to hold back information in a mystery.

### ACTIVE VOICE

Stories benefit hugely from protagonists being active and pushing the plot on. Using active sentences (*subject, verb, object*) will give your story more pace as

your character is doing stuff – and doing things has consequences.

### PRESENT TENSE

Present tense has the story unfold for the reader at the same time as for the character. Combined with action verbs it can propel your story forward and keep a sense of tension. Some readers don't like present tense narratives, as they find them less convincing.

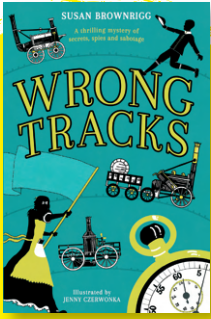
### VIVID VERBS

There are lots and lots of verbs to choose

from when writing, and the right one (as with strong nouns) will make your writing more vivid and precise. Using a thesaurus can help you find an alternative word that fits better.

### PAST TENSE

Past tense can give a sense of distance from events. How does the passage of time affect the pace of your story? Combined with first person, past tense can mute some of the drama, as we know the protagonist has survived to tell the tale. Past tense is often the default for novels.



# Extract from

Chapter 3,  
pages 15-16

I originally wrote *Wrong Tracks* in the third person and past tense. But I wanted the reader to be in his head (and heart) - and for the action to unfold in real time. Changing tense and POV helps the reader explore this new world with Edward. The use of a passive verb - I am stopped - emphasises the main character's lack of power in contrast to the guard's.

This simile has a double purpose. Bricks are not just strong and tough (like the guard), but they also reflect the environment Edward is in. I wanted to contrast his former life - small village - with the industrial here.

Here I am trying to paint a picture for the reader through Edward's eyes. Using a longer list of things builds the sense that this new world is overwhelming - and thrilling. It is a balancing act knowing how much description to use. Too much and a reader may skip over something you wanted them to notice.

This section finishes with Edward's internal dialogue. The use of the verb 'rub' shows Edward's determination. I wanted the reader to be on Edward's side and to will for him to succeed. But will his confidence last? Ending on a question is a trick writers can use to encourage the reader to read on!

At the entrance to the yard, I am stopped at the gatehouse by the guard. He is a gruff chap with dark red hair and beady pale eyes.

"What do you want, lad?" he grunts, towering over me. He looks like he's built out of bricks, not flesh.

"I'm here to see Mr George Stephenson," I squeak.

"Name?"

I'm tempted to say I'm the Bishop of Newcastle or the King of Persia, but think better of it. "Edward Entwistle."

He grunts again. Then ushers me on my way.

I pass through an archway and gape in amazement at the smiths' shop, where men with arms like hams hold red hot tongs over blazing fires.

I can feel the heat; smell it. My heart races with anticipation. I have never been anywhere like this before! It is thrilling.

Continuing on, I reach a long brick building with large archways open to the elements and a tall chimney which seems to be the centre of the works. Machinery parts and wheels are lined up against the wall. I cover my ears at the loud clanging and hammering that echo through the vast space.

Passing a large crank, I enter the manufactory itself. The room is crowded with locomotive parts. I am in awe. Everywhere is a hive of activity. Robust men in shirt sleeves are absorbed in their tasks. There is a potent tang of oil, steam and sweat in the air. Every space is crammed with gears and pulleys and other machinery.

Will I be expected to learn how to operate them all? Imagine that! I rub my hands together. *What will I do first?*

Edward is small for his age (14). His size becomes important in a later scene, so I wanted to remind the reader of that here, with the verb 'towering'. It also shows that Edward is out of his comfort zone. Careful placing of key information can stop a later dramatic scene from being overloaded with information.

This line adds a bit of humour, Edward and I use it to break the tension in this scene. The fact this line is thought not spoken, lets me reaffirm that Edward is realising his white lies and bragging can get him into bother - and in this new situation he is on his best behaviour.

This description is full of excitement and the new. The simile - arms like hams - uses a comparison with something ordinary from Edward's world. The wrong simile (if anachronistic) can jolt the reader from the story. Remember to check the etymology of any words that you suspect may be too new for your chosen time period.

This captures Edward's reaction to a new environment. 'Clanging' and 'hammering' give a sense of the noise, and help us feel what Edward is sensing. Visiting similar locations can be helpful when trying to write about places and times that no longer exist. I have to take care not to use all my research, though, as too many details/facts can bore the reader!

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We hope to equip primary school pupils with the correct skills to communicate confidently with BSL users. Introducing BSL at primary school level lays the foundations for language learning and encourages children to adopt inclusive attitudes towards the deaf community. With 50,000 deaf children in the UK and over 151,000 BSL users, bridging the communication gap is vital in creating a more inclusive society. We strongly believe that learning BSL boosts confidence and helps foster a more empathetic learning environment. Feedback from schools who have already implemented BSL into the classroom report that there are cognitive improvements such as improved memory and better concentration skills. By creating a programme of study which is interactive, accessible, and engaging, The School of Signs supports both staff and children in developing meaningful communication skills in BSL which they can carry through till later life.



### WHAT'S NEXT?

The School of Signs has now launched and is available nationwide for primary schools. With partnerships like 2Simple's Purple Mash, schools can seamlessly integrate the programme into everyday teaching. By developing this programme, we want to create pathways for continued BSL learning beyond primary education, and by introducing BSL at a young age, we hope to normalise its use in day-to-day life, ensuring deaf awareness becomes a usual part of school culture. The schools who have signed up to the programme will now play a part in shaping more inclusive classrooms, and subsequently, more inclusive communities. We hope that The School of Signs can make BSL a valued part of a child's education, and help develop key skills for life.



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# Back to the BEGINNING

Strong phonics foundations are essential for successful reading – and English leads play a crucial role in securing them, argue

**Tricia Moss, Sallie Stanton and Jon Hutchinson**

**S**ome primary teachers talk of phonics as a ‘method’ for teaching reading, and may contest that there are alternative methods that can be as effective – or more so. This is a fundamental misconception: phonics is not a method, but a combination of foundational declarative and procedural knowledge that needs to be taught. An example of the foundations it provides for reading is shown in Table 1.

From looking at the table, you can see why we need to teach this knowledge early: it’s essential curriculum content that enables pupils to learn to read any text. Thus, as an English lead, selecting a phonics scheme for your school should be a priority.

## Teaching early reading

In EYFS and Year 1, the majority of reading lessons will be spent learning the phonic code. Using a phonics programme that has been developed by experts will ensure that the code is

introduced in a rigorous and systematic sequence.

You will want to ensure that implementation of your phonics programme provides plentiful opportunities for new knowledge to be practised and revisited until pupils can apply it automatically.

During daily story time, teachers can build the language-comprehension elements of vocabulary and background knowledge by reading a wide range of fiction and non-fiction with pupils. As pupils’ code knowledge becomes more proficient, they will be able to read a wider range of texts themselves, and the language-comprehension elements can be developed through those texts.

## Routines for phonics lessons

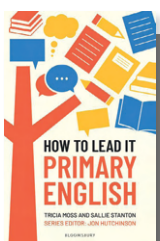
We know young children find it especially hard to zone out distractions and stay focused when they are learning. To help mitigate this, it is helpful to support teachers in planning a

routine for phonics lessons and to keep it consistent. This helps pupils to focus on code knowledge and reading instead of using valuable working memory to understand new routines or activity instructions. When

choosing your phonics scheme, it is worth considering how each scheme supports you with this.

## Extra time

Some pupils will need a little more practice to internalise



Adapted from *How to Lead It: Primary English*, by Tricia Moss & Sallie Stanton, edited by Jon Hutchinson (Bloomsbury Education, £18.99)

Type of knowledge	Example
Declarative	In the word ‘play’, the spelling ‘ay’ represents the /eɪ/ sound.
Procedural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pupils segment the word ‘play’ into individual sounds: /p/ /l/ /eɪ/.</li> <li>Pupils blend the sounds to say the word.</li> </ul>

Table 1. Declarative and procedural knowledge

the code than their peers, which is perfectly normal. A well-structured phonics scheme should help you to tackle this using the three phases outlined at the top right of this page.

Having this structure gives pupils who need more practice time to consolidate their understanding, because they are revisiting previously taught learning at regular intervals. As English lead, it's important for you to ensure that colleagues understand this, and the importance of persisting with phonics teaching for pupils who need more practice time.

*“We know young children find it especially hard to zone out distractions and stay focused when they are learning.”*

You will also need to be vigilant to ensure pupils are not asked to guess words or to learn lists of high-frequency words by sight. This will only lead to problems later and slow down pupils' ability to decode words.

### Repetition

If pupils still need more practice, repeating the part of the lesson with which they struggled can have a hugely positive impact. For example, if a pupil struggled to build words with the new code knowledge taught that day, the teacher can reteach word-building later in the day.

This kind of investment up front is called 'keep-up intervention'. If timetabled and done rigorously, it can significantly reduce the need for catch-up intervention to support pupils who have fallen behind.

This not only reduces the work and stress loads on teachers and educational support staff; it also helps

pupils feel successful and confident as learners.

It is therefore worth considering how timetables are structured in relation to this. They should enable teachers to repeat part or all of phonics lessons for pupils who struggled to keep up or who were absent from school.

The investment is well worth it: you will see your staff and pupils reap the benefits later.

Ensuring pupils have time to practise their code knowledge will also strengthen their mental representations.

In practice, an intervention may look something like this:

- A Year 1 teacher has been introducing alternative spellings for the sound /ei/. By the end of the lesson, they notice that two pupils are still saying the individual letters 'a' and 'e' in 'make' as /æ/ and /e/. The teacher makes a note of the pupils and the specific sound-spelling correspondence on a daily tracker, ready for a same-day intervention.
- The teacher schedules time for the intervention at the end of the day, organising for a teaching assistant to supervise the other pupils getting their coats and bags.

- During the intervention, the teacher models the /ei/ - 'ay' correspondence again and gives the pupils time to practise reading and writing words from that morning's lesson.
- The teacher makes a note to call on those pupils regularly in the following phonics lessons that week, to ensure they get regular practice.

### Phonics for all

To maximise reading opportunities for all pupils, encourage colleagues to draw on the following ideas:

#### PLANNED CALLOUTS

In advance, identify who you will call on. You may decide to call on confident pupils first, to model the process for others, and then on less confident pupils. This will allow them the opportunity to have followed along and read the section several times in their heads first.

#### RANDOM CALLOUTS

Create a culture in which all pupils know they may be called on to read at any point in a phonics lesson. This can be done by calling on pupils seemingly at random to read and reread sections of text. By making your choice of pupil unpredictable, you are increasing the likelihood of all pupils reading along at all times.

#### THE READING FINGER

As you progress through EYFS, pupils will be ready to read from their own copies of the text. At this stage, introduce the concept of a 'reading finger'. Model putting your finger under the word from which you are

### A TYPICAL PHONICS LESSON

The teacher introduces new code knowledge following the order set in the school's chosen phonics programme.

Next, pupils review previously taught code knowledge by reading a decodable text. (Some programmes specify revisiting code knowledge taught in the previous unit, so that pupils recall learning using the principle of spaced practice. Other schemes rely on teachers' professional judgement about which code to review and when.)

The teacher then uses sentence dictation to apply code knowledge taught in earlier units. (As with reviewing code knowledge, some schemes specify using code knowledge taught from two units earlier, whilst other schemes rely on teachers' professional judgement.)

going to begin reading and ask the pupils to do the same. Teach pupils to track the text with their reading finger. This will help you to monitor whether they are reading along in their heads as you or their peers read aloud.

#### FINGER CLICKS

To gauge whether pupils are reading along in their heads, ask individuals to take over the reading quickly – they should be able to do so straight away. You could also introduce a routine in which clicking your fingers indicates everyone should join in. This works well if you click your fingers at the final words in a sentence.



*Tricia Moss is trust curriculum lead and English specialist for a multi-academy trust. Sallie Stanton is the chief education officer for a multi-academy trust. Jon Hutchinson is director of curriculum and teacher development at the Reach Foundation.*

# Resource roundup

Five ideas for exceptional literacy teaching

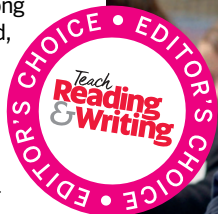
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familiarity and a shared vocabulary. "We can see real improvements in confidence and how children handle tricky emotions," says a Year 5 teacher. Year-on-year engagement fosters



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MELVA is a whole-school wellbeing programme using storytelling, games and digital resources to help primary pupils develop emotional literacy, resilience, self-management and confidence while supporting teachers to deliver PSHE effectively.

empathy and problem-solving and brings wellbeing into everyday learning, equipping children with skills they can carry throughout life.

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## KEY POINTS

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# This and THAT

Tiny but powerful, determiners can add both precision and strength to children's writing, says **James Clements**

**D**eterminers are the small words that come before a noun and help to make its meaning clearer. They can tell us which thing we're talking about, whose thing it is and how many or how much of it there is.

A determiner comes before a noun or noun phrase. For example:

- *the* spider
- *a* book
- *this* pencil
- *my* coat
- *some* water
- *three* frogs

These words help to limit or point to the noun. They give the reader more information straight away. Compare 'some spiders are venomous' to 'that spider is venomous'. The noun stays the same, but the meaning changes.

## Sequencing

In the English national curriculum, determiners are introduced in Key Stage 1. Children meet the term and learn how words like *the*, *a*, *this*, *my* and *some* work in sentences. Across Key Stage 2, this knowledge will deepen through reading and writing. Over time, children will recognise a wider range of

determiners and use them more deliberately in their own work.

At all ages, grammar teaching works best when it supports composition. We don't just want children to learn the labels, we want them to understand how different grammar choices shape meaning and allow them to share their ideas with their reader.

## Core knowledge

There are some common groups of determiners that are especially useful in primary teaching:

- Articles: a, an, the
- Demonstratives: this, that, these, those
- Possessives: my, your, his, her, our, their
- Quantifiers: some, many, few, each, every, enough
- Numbers: one, two, first

In practice, children wouldn't be introduced to these as long lists all at once. Instead, they'd benefit from meeting them through sentences and texts, then talking about the effect on the reader or the ideas that they share.

## Small but mighty

Determiners may be small, but they can make a huge difference to meaning. They

can make writing more precise or more vivid.

For example:

- *The* house was haunted.
- *My* house was haunted.

Referring to a specific house changes the meaning considerably. Likewise in these

two paragraphs:

- Kat walked quickly along the corridor. *One* door was locked.
- Kat walked quickly along the corridor. *Every* door was locked.

Again, a small change shifts the meaning: it's easy to imagine how these different sentences could be used to create very different effects in a story: What lies behind the one locked door? How will Kat escape if all the doors are locked?

## Playing with meaning

This ability to change meaning is where good grammar teaching can focus on creativity. For example, we might share the phrase:

\_\_\_\_\_ spider is venomous

Together, the class can try swapping different determiners into the phrase and discussing what difference they make to the meaning.

Not every version the children suggest will make sense, but that can lead to useful discussion (and learning). Pupils will begin to see that determiners are choices that help writers guide the reader. This grammar-for-writing approach helps children to understand that grammar isn't just something to name, it's something to use for effect.

## Teaching determiners

In KS1, we can start with talk, reading and simple noun phrases. Children can match objects to phrases such as *this pencil*, *my bag* or *three blocks*. Shared reading is also useful. Pause on a



sentence and ask why the writer chose *the* rather than *a*, or *that* rather than *this*.

In KS2, we can build on this by comparing sentence choices in model texts and asking pupils how the meaning changes when the determiner changes. Short editing tasks can work well here, too.

Across both key stages, discuss determiners in context, considering them through oral rehearsal, sentence work and shared writing. Link them to real writing outcomes so children can see a purpose for the grammar. The worksheets that accompany this article ([tinyurl.com/trw-determiners](https://tinyurl.com/trw-determiners)) will give children plenty of opportunities to practise using determiners.

Used well, determiners can do more than meet grammar objectives. They can help children write with more precision, control and imagination. And that's got to be a good thing!



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

project is *FluentZoo*, a resource for supporting children's reading fluency.

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# STICK with it!

Laura Dobson offers fun and practical ways to get your KS2s using cohesive devices correctly

“He has great ideas, but they just don’t link together. It’s a bit all over the place.” I’m sure you’ve uttered words similar to this when marking.

Cohesive writing is structured in a logical way that allows the reader to follow the narrative or information clearly. It joins words, sentences and paragraphs together using a range of devices that keep the reader on track and clear about where the writing is going and how each part links to the others. It is the road map to understanding; excellent writers use cohesive devices subtly, informed by the purpose of the writing, to steer their audience through the text.

## What’s wrong?

Take a look at the following paragraph. It’s the first five sentences from *A Bear Called Paddington* by Michael Bond, but with a few cohesive devices removed. Can you spot what they are?

*Mr and Mrs Brown met Paddington on railway platform. Paddington has such unusual name for bear, name of the station.*

*The Browns meet their daughter Judy, home for the holidays. It was a warm summer day and were crowded with people.*

From the resource pack that accompanies this feature ([tinyurl.com/trw-cohesion](http://tinyurl.com/trw-cohesion)), take a look at **Worksheet 1**. In it, you’ll find the original extract alongside the adapted text shown here.

“Too much description can impact cohesion just as much as too little”

Challenge pupils to have a go at spotting what is missing. Then, share the original text to see if they notice anything else that doesn’t make sense.

## Pick the right one

We can use all sorts of cohesive devices in our writing, and they differ depending on the purpose of the text. However, some key ones are:

- Determiners and pronouns
- Conjunctions and adverbials of time, place and number
- Ellipsis of expected words
- Tense
- Structure (bullet points, numbers, time adverbials)
- Repetition
- Use of synonyms

**Worksheets 2 and 3** offer a cloze procedure where certain determiners and pronouns are missing from the example text and listed at the bottom of the page. Help children to understand the importance of these smaller words by reading the text aloud (with the small words omitted) and asking the class

if it makes sense and is easy to follow. Can pupils put the correct words in?

At my school, we regularly use colourful semantics ([tinyurl.com/trw-semantics](http://tinyurl.com/trw-semantics)) with the whole class to develop children’s understanding of sentence structures. **Worksheet 4** utilises colourful semantics to teach

children the importance of adverbials for time, place and number when creating cohesion. You can use the accompanying slides to guide the lesson.

Comparing the same text in multiple ways allows children to discuss cohesion and what does and doesn’t contribute to it. **Worksheet 5** presents the same text in different ways and demonstrates how too much description can impact cohesion just as much as too little. This is an incredibly important teaching point at a time when children are asked to include ever more success criteria in their assessed writing.

## Make it better

When experienced writers write, they naturally leave out words that aren’t needed, or use pronouns to aid cohesion. **Worksheet 6** explores what writing looks like when this doesn’t happen, and challenges children to have a go at adapting it to aid cohesion.

**Worksheet 7** requires tense detectives to look through the piece and check all the verbs are in the past

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teachwire

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[tinyurl.com/trw-cohesion](http://tinyurl.com/trw-cohesion)

tense, changing them when they aren’t.

Structure matters in a non-fiction piece of writing. **Worksheet 8** is a muddled set of instructions for making chocolate chip cookies. The children have to decide on the correct order of the steps and then add numbers and time adverbials so the recipe can be followed.

Finally, children like nothing better than a word hunt! **Worksheet 9** challenges them to use a thesaurus to find synonyms for specific words and then use the most effective synonym to adapt a piece of writing.

It can feel daunting when a child’s writing isn’t cohesive, but this will ultimately be because certain devices are missing or incorrect. By identifying which devices are required, the skills needed can be taught precisely – which will ultimately lead to coherent writing.



Laura Dobson worked for many years as a teaching and learning adviser for a large company and local authority. She now provides consultancy and training in all areas of English.

@inspireprieng

# Breathe new life into YOUR LIBRARY

An audit can make a world of difference to your school's reading culture, and help build a strong community, says **Hazel Murrell**

**S**chool libraries are full of surprises, and I am not necessarily referring to the chicken that once sidled up next to me as I tidied the bookshelves in a lovely school! I am talking about the untapped potential within your library space.

Setting aside regular time to stop, think and gather inspiration for your library is so important. Forget Instagram, it is your school community that will provide the best feedback and new ideas for your setting. Invite colleagues and pupils to talk to you about the library. What would pupils like to see more of? What do staff need to help them deliver the curriculum? Does the library feel accessible to the whole school?

While it's important to consider every aspect of the library, its heart is its book collection. I remember working with a school that had a gorgeous new library; the space was light, open and inviting, but a quick look through the shelves made it clear why it wasn't being used: the books were old, dusty, irrelevant and uninteresting to the pupils.

This was an extreme example of outdated stock, but it highlights the importance of regularly reviewing and auditing your book collections. Here's how to do it successfully:

## Get tough

To do this properly, you will need time and space, so I recommend planning to conduct your audit at a time when pupils are not accessing the library.

As you are assessing each book, ask yourself: is it suitable for your pupils, their age and interests? Does it support the curriculum? Will it encourage reading for pleasure? Don't be afraid to weed – if you find yourself surrounded by piles of different books; one for discarding, one for repairs, one for re-shelving, then you're doing it right!

Don't be blinded by nostalgia, either. I completely understand the warm feeling created by books from our own childhoods, but those books will not necessarily inspire, excite and engage today's children.

## Get some help

The more knowledgeable you are, the more impact you can have on your pupils. Take steps to actively increase

your book knowledge and seek advice and recommendations from suppliers, children's book bloggers and organisations like the School Library Association.

If you are tackling the audit yourself, make sure you are equipped with the right tools - an auditing spreadsheet is a must - and recruit some allies. Involving other staff members or capable parent volunteers can help you feel more confident in your decision making.

Sometimes the best investment is professional expertise. A specialist consultant can bring knowledge, speed and fresh eyes to an audit. They'll spot issues you might miss and suggest replacements you hadn't considered.

## Budget for new stock

Your book audit will inevitably highlight gaps in your collection. Your school budgets should include ring-fenced funds to update the library books, but if not, speak to your PTA, start a wish list and share it with local businesses, make the most of discounts and sales, or see if you can team up with a local bookshop to accept donations on your behalf. No budget doesn't have to mean no books! Updating your school library with

fresh titles is a brilliant way to create whole-school excitement around reading. Take some of the new books to assembly and perform a live un-boxing, make displays sharing more information, or invite teachers to read and discuss their favourite books in the library.

The newly renovated library I mentioned earlier saw a huge increase in pupil visits after they updated their stock. The space became a hub of the school community, and the library experienced a steep increase in loans. Where there was once a beautiful space, there was now a real reading community, that grew from a collection review and audit.

Putting time and care into evaluating the books that are on your shelves can make an impact on your pupils that will last a lifetime. Don't look at the limitations – look at the opportunities. Small changes can make a big difference.



**Hazel Murrell is community and engagement officer at the School Library Association.**

[sla.org.uk](http://sla.org.uk)

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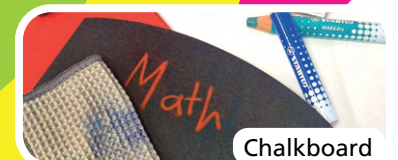
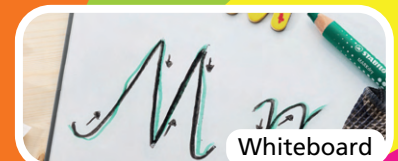
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# Talking THE TALK

To really observe a boost in oracy skills in your classroom, be the change you want to see, says **Tamsin Duckett...**

**W**e all know that oracy skills are crucial for children's academic and personal development; not only do they promote academic achievement, and help close the attainment gap for disadvantaged pupils, but they also play an important role in bridging cultural and linguistic divides. Being able to articulate their feelings and meaningfully engage with their peers also improves pupils' mental health and wellbeing. All of these factors are hugely important to ensure children flourish and thrive.

Employers also rank communication as one of the most important skills for employability ([tinyurl.com/tp-SkillsDemand](https://tinyurl.com/tp-SkillsDemand)). However, since the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the amount of time pupils (and teachers!) have been able to spend with one another, there has been an increased emphasis on developing the 'lost' communication skills for a generation of children.

While the government reviews the national curriculum and promises to embed oracy as a vital component, at the

Chelmsford Learning Partnership, we have already taken steps to guarantee that all our teachers have a strong understanding of the strategies they need to develop pupils' oracy skills, and have dedicated our Trust-wide Continuous Personal Development (CPD) sessions this year to oracy.

## **On the same page**

As a teacher, you know that oracy is more than the ability to speak; it encompasses the physical, linguistic, cognitive and social aspects of communication. At our Trust, we have begun the journey of using the Oracy Skills Framework ([tinyurl.com/tp-OSF](https://tinyurl.com/tp-OSF)) to provide a comprehensive roadmap for how all our teachers can support pupils across the Trust to develop their oracy skills. Designed as a tool to support the explicit teaching of oracy, the framework – which is broken down into

*“Oracy encompasses the physical, linguistic, cognitive and social aspects of communication”*



four pillars: cognitive, social and emotional, physical and linguistic – provides you with a shared language to use within your classroom and wider setting. It also helps you to identify gaps in your pupils' knowledge of oracy skills and plan how to address them.

We have used the tool as part of our approach to evaluating oracy across the Trust and sharing effective practice. Whether this is promoting cognitive oracy through the discussion of complex issues in PSHE, verbal reasoning in maths, or building the connection between the body and voice through reading aloud in

English, encouraging our pupils to listen and express themselves is fundamental to their learning.

### Oracy in practice

Giving children regular opportunities to speak in front of an audience, whether this is storytelling, poetry reading or presentations, can build their confidence and improve their tone, pace and fluency. As a teacher, you are an expert communicator and can also help improve your pupil's oracy skills by modelling

correct pronunciation and grammar during every conversation. As Dr Karen Treisman, clinical psychologist and author, says, "every interaction is an intervention". If you're talking to a pupil and they make an error, instead of directly correcting their mistakes, try repeating their sentences back to them correctly, which reinforces proper language use without discouraging them. For example, if they say, "I goed to the park," you can respond by gently repeating, "Oh, you went to the park? That sounds fun!" This method helps them to hear the correct form without feeling like they have made a mistake.

As pupils grow, it's important to encourage them to voice their opinions and explain their reasoning

within their dialogue. You can scaffold this learning by providing sentence starters that support pupils to build on and link to the ideas of others. For example: "My opinion is similar to Rose's because..." or "Whilst I can see Tim's point of view, I wonder if he's considered....". In science lessons, you could try making group predictions using prompts such as "To challenge you, I think the force of gravity might act differently depending on the object's shape, not just its mass." Using reasoning and problem solving to clarify understanding works well in mathematics lessons, too. For example, a good question could be "Are you saying that a square is also a rectangle because it has four sides and right angles?"

### Read the room

As a Trust, we have an advantage in that we can draw on the variety of techniques and strategies from across our schools through knowledge-sharing during CPD sessions. However, while we are lucky to have so many different schools within our Trust, it is important to be mindful of their individual contexts – we firmly believe, as educationalist Dylan Williams states, that "everything works somewhere, nothing works everywhere". By taking your individual school context and pupils' needs into consideration, you will be able to identify the approach that works best for your setting. This may be subscribing to a professional programme that provides training, support and resources, or simply applying some of the recommendations from the Oracy Commission and Oracy Cambridge, depending on the capabilities and knowledge that already exist in your school.

Building your understanding of oracy, and drawing on the tools and

## 5 STEPS TO FLUENCY

**1** Try making your own vocab cards, and play the guessing game Taboo to help your pupils learn new vocabulary. You can find instructions at [tinyurl.com/tp-Taboo](http://tinyurl.com/tp-Taboo)

**2** Try echo reading ([tinyurl.com/tp-echoreading](http://tinyurl.com/tp-echoreading)) to model fluency, expression and the impact of punctuation.

**3** Create knowledge organisers, outlining the key vocabulary that pupils will learn for each of the topics you're teaching. Provide concise definitions of key words, including Tier 2 and 3 words.

**4** Use talk tasks: most schools in the UK use 'talk partners' to some extent, but now is the time to review and refine your approach to ensure that the tasks are well-suited, appropriately challenging, engaging and have clear outcomes.

**5** Give your pupils the language to articulate their emotions. Many children will struggle to progress academically if their emotional needs are not met, so supporting them to identify and articulate their emotional state helps them to regulate their behaviour and leads to improved wellbeing.

resources available to support your pupils' development, means that you will help to equip them with the critical thinking, clear communication, and confident self-expression skills needed to strengthen their oracy alongside their reading, writing, and arithmetic.

*Tamsin Duckett is deputy director of standards and school improvement at Chelmsford Learning Partnership.*

 [clptrust.com](http://clptrust.com)

# STARGRAZER

Pie Corbett takes pupils on a thrilling skyship ride...

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## PROLOGUE

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**Y**ou've probably been on a skyship when the skies are blue and the breeze just enough to give the engines a helping hand. Remember how it feels to have the wind blow through your hair, to see the fields and towns far below and to feel totally free of everyday life.

I bet you've enjoyed holiday flights across the bay, journeys to see distant relatives, knowing that once you have landed you would be able to relax for several weeks.

But you should also try a trip when the winter winds are as sharp as knives, with the clouds darkening, for that is another matter. When the thunder explodes like cannon fire around you and a lightning strike would bring the skyship down, when the rigging strains and the ship's engines falter; that's when a skyship ride is not so much fun...

And some say, they've seen sky pirates, hiding in the clouds, waiting to strike. You probably won't believe this, but some say that there are flying beasts with claws that can tear apart even the toughest dragonskin balloon.

## Chapter 1 – Dragon Attack

---

Ty gripped the railings, his knuckles whitening. He gulped as the clouds engulfed the skyship. He glanced at his twin sister Mariana, who grinned as the skyship lurched from side to side. They had left the city behind about a week ago and should have been passing over the Snow Hills, but this storm had blown them off course.

At that moment, the sky dragons struck. Ty saw three of them streak out of a storm cloud, and fire roared towards the Stargrazer. Captain O'Shea tugged the tiller to one side, just averting disaster, and in one swift movement drove the engines as hard as she could.

For a moment, the dragons disappeared as she steered the skyship into a huge storm cloud to hide. Thunder grumbled around them and electricity crackled. Ty glanced at Mariana, who was staring into the telescopian, but it showed nothing.

The clouds blocked its view. "Hold tight! Prepare to land!" Captain O'Shea barked over the megascope.

The Stargrazer dipped below the clouds as the engines stilled. They drifted down, buffeted from side to side by the storm. Ty and Mariana glanced up, searching for the dragons. Had they managed to evade them?

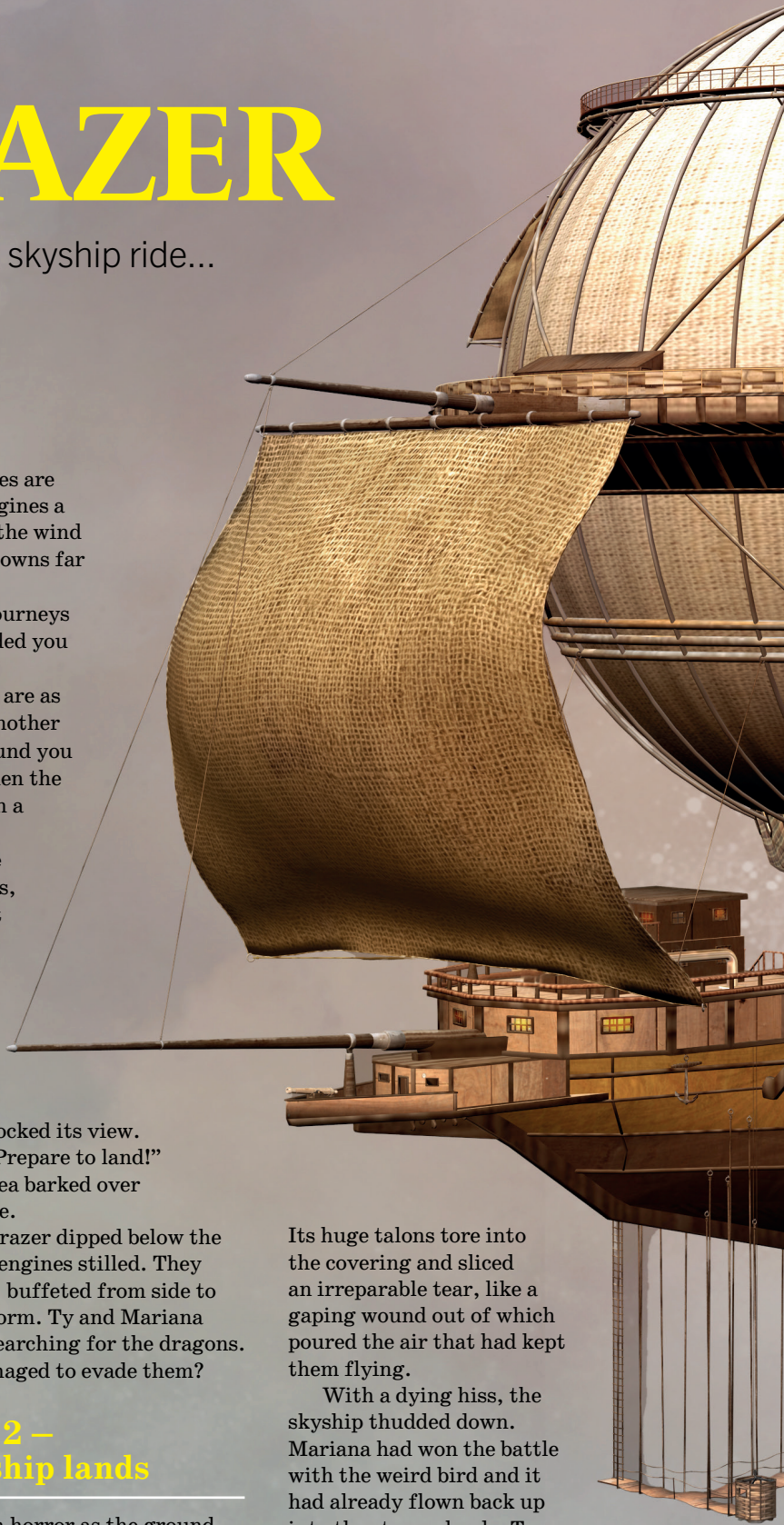
## Chapter 2 – The skyship lands

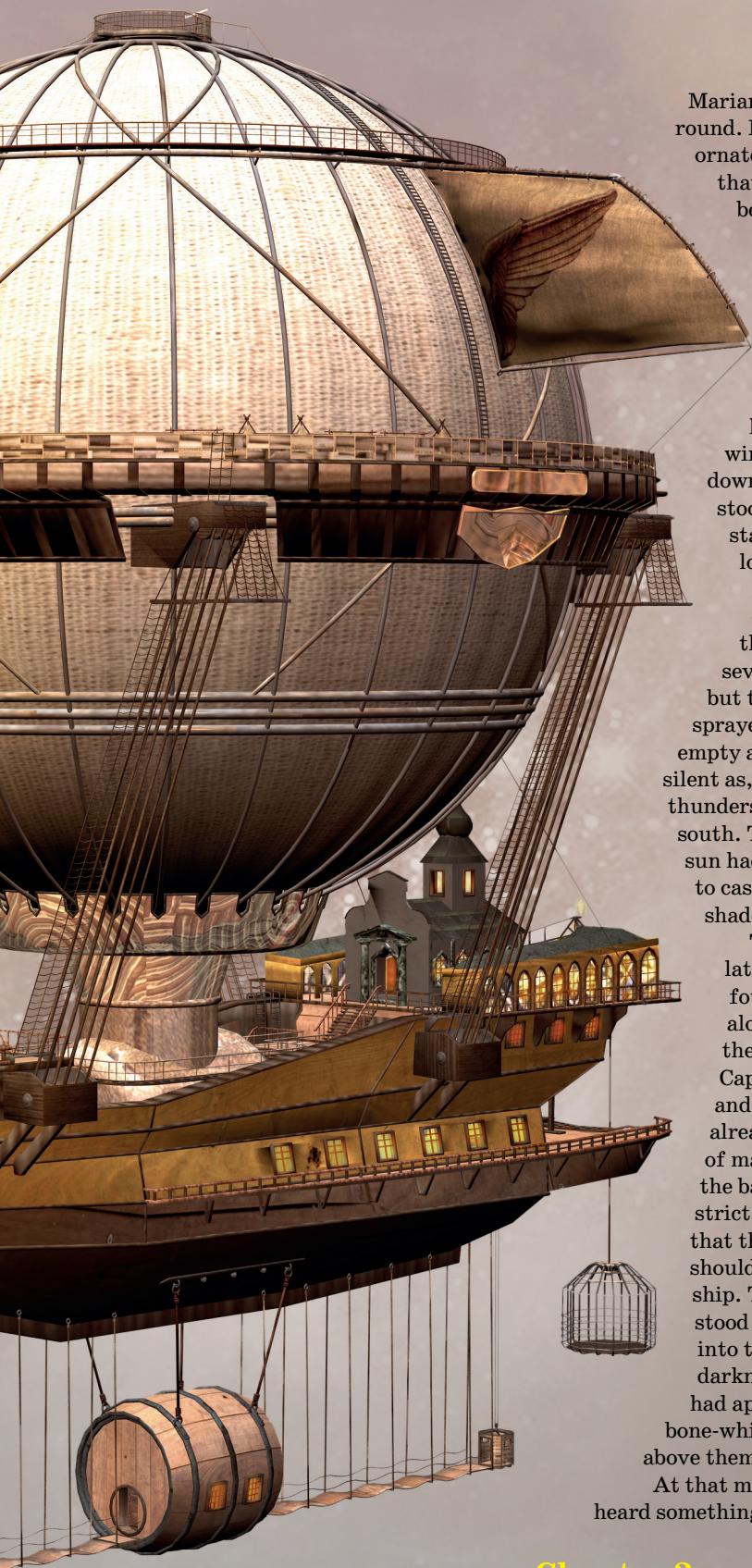
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Ty watched in horror as the ground rushed up to meet them. They swooped ever downwards to what looked like a ruined city. Captain O'Shea wrestled with the tiller, trying her best to steer the Stargrazer towards an open square in the city centre. By Ty's side, Mariana stood holding a sky grappling iron, fending off a strange, flying creature from the skin of the balloon.

Its huge talons tore into the covering and sliced an irreparable tear, like a gaping wound out of which poured the air that had kept them flying.

With a dying hiss, the skyship thudded down. Mariana had won the battle with the weird bird and it had already flown back up into the storm clouds. Ty peered over the railings at the city square that surrounded the wounded skyship. He saw three things: the evening moon shining down on the skyship like an albino eye, a stone tower looming above the abandoned skyship and a flurry of snow whipping across the city, battering the skyship's ragged balloon.





Marianna, too, peered round. In front of her, ornate, stone buildings, that once must have been magnificent, lay crumbled.

To one side, several great pillars jutted up, oak doorways stood ajar and huge, empty windows glared down. In a far corner, stood a ruined statue of some long-forgotten heroine. In a dark courtyard, there were several fountains, but they no longer sprayed. It was quite empty and strangely silent as, overhead, the thunderstorm drifted south. The evening sun had already begun to cast darkening shadows.

Twenty minutes later, the children found themselves alone on board the Stargrazer. Captain O'Shea and the crew had already left in search of materials to mend the balloon, leaving strict instructions that the children should not leave the ship. Ty and Mariana stood on deck, staring into the encroaching darkness. A few stars had appeared and the bone-white moon shone above them.

At that moment, they heard something.

### Chapter 3 – A new crew member

Something was crawling up the side of the skyship's wooden hull! Ty, whose face paled, shrank back and ducked down behind the tiller but Mariana rushed to the edge and peered into the gloom below. She could just make out something or somebody scurrying up the side of the ship. It was quite small

and had green eyes. It paused and stared back up at her. "It's a baby dragon," she called, "and it's hurt." Mariana, whose brow frowned with concentration, reached down to grip its outstretched paw and pulled it onto the deck. "It must have got hurt in the storm."

The dragonlet was shivering with cold and whimpering. Ty dashed off to fetch a ship's blanket, wondering anxiously if the dragonlet's mother would be pleased to know that they had helped her baby. Mariana spoke calmly to the baby, hoping that Captain O'Shea would not take a dim view of what they had done!

### Chapter 4 – Onward

Several hours later, the crew had returned, patched the skyship's air balloon and they were now sailing through the night with only the stars to guide them. Marianna had found a space in the hold for the baby dragon. It had eaten well, falling asleep almost immediately.

Ty stood alone on deck, wondering whether he would ever see home again. The moon cast a silvery light onto the clouds and the odd star shone through. Marianna came up to be with him. She thought that she would never tire of the wind in her hair and the great skyship moving silently just below the ragged edges of the clouds.

It was then that they both heard something. Something or somebody was crawling up the side of the skyship's hull towards them. Mariana grabbed Ty's hand and pulled him down. They waited, hearts beating. What could it be? Ty crossed his fingers, hoping it wasn't the dragonlet's mother! An angry dragon parent could be a terrifying sight!

Peering over the edge, Ty could just make out a strange shape, that appeared to be clinging to the wooden hull. Ty shuddered as he whispered to his sister, "I can't see what it is... but it looks huge. Look – is that an eye?"

Captain O'Shea appeared, lent over the railings and chuckled, "That's the landing ship's light. It's a tiny flying craft that we sometimes use if we don't want to dock the whole skyship. You two need to be in your bunks or you'll start to imagine all sorts of things."

Ten minutes later they were both asleep, dreaming of dragons and skyships and great adventures. The Stargrazer drifted on silently through the night towards dawn.

## TEACHER NOTES: Writing a skyship story

Place characters alone in the dark	<i>into the gloom below</i>
Name plus reaction to suggest how the character feels	<i>Ty shrank back and ducked down... Mariana rushed...</i>
Hide the threat with an empty word	<i>Something or somebody...</i>
Suggest fear with description	<i>whose face paled</i>
Characters HEAR something ominous	<i>crawling... scrabbling...</i>

Table 1. How the writer creates tension

Adventure stories like *Brightstorm* by Vashti Hardy and *Cogheart* by Peter Bunzl are an invitation to create skyship adventures. A good start is to draw a story map of the territory that the skyship might travel through.

- Step 1: Draw a wiggly outline for your map, showing where the skyship will travel during its journey and where it lands.
- Step 2: Fill in the landmarks: islands, trees, rivers, hills, mountains, volcanoes, cities, towers, swamps, and so on.
- Step 3: Make up names for the different areas of your map.

Before starting the adventure, the children write a persuasive letter to the captain, asking to become a crew member. A simple frame might help the structure:

- Introduce yourself
- Why you want to be part of the crew
- Your qualifications and skills
- Any major strengths
- Your commitment
- Why the job should be yours

### Introducing a new world

In my story, I decided to have twins – a girl and boy. I wanted to be able to show contrasting characters, so made the boy, Ty, less confident but very sensible. Marianna is much more headstrong and determined. The prologue is based on an idea used in the opening of Thomas Taylor’s wonderful book *Malamander*. Read and discuss my prologue, focusing on how it sets up the story and foreshadows what might happen. Focus your discussion around these phrases:

- *You’ve probably been...*
- *Remember how it feels...*
- *I bet you’ve enjoyed...*
- *But you should also try*
- *When the...*

- *And some say, they’ve seen...*
- *You probably won’t believe this, but some say...*

### Injecting drama

In Chapter 1, the skyship is forced to land. Practise showing character through your protagonists’ actions, implying a contrast. Explore how this is shown through the verbs in this extract:

*Ty gripped the railings, his knuckles whitening. He gulped as the clouds engulfed the airship. He glanced at his twin sister Mariana who grinned as the airship lurched from side to side.*

Practise injecting a sudden, dramatic incident to bring the skyship down. Try using sentence openers to help introduce a threat, such as sky pirates or goblins:

- *At that moment,*
- *Suddenly,*
- *Without warning,*
- *Abruptly,*
- *Out of the blue,*

By the end of the first chapter, the skyship has landed. Note how a rhetorical question makes a good way to round off the chapter, suggesting possible jeopardy:

*Ty and Mariana glanced up, searching for the dragons. Had they managed to evade them?*

### Building atmosphere

A key focus for Chapter 2 is to build atmosphere through the setting, describing where the skyship has landed. Start by making a list of what can be seen, heard, felt, smelled and tasted to build the atmosphere. Pick out details, using a sentence of three where possible. Play this game as an oral warm up:

- *I can see... [a wind-swept lake, gigantic oak trees and a lonely stone tower.]*
- *I can hear... [the wind moaning, the ship’s hull creaking and the distant call of skydragons.]*
- *I can feel... [the icy blasts of snow, the roughness of a wolf’s fur and the cold metal of the skyship’s seeing-stone.]*
- *I can smell... [stale fish, ancient swamps and a bear’s den.]*

The children should draw upon these ideas when writing their second chapter. Practise using a colon to introduce a descriptive list of three. Start with three nouns then elaborate:

- *Ty saw three things: the moon, a tower and rain.*
- *Ty saw three things: the moon shining down on the skyship like an albino eye, a stone tower looming above the abandoned skyship and a flurry of snow whipping across the city, battering the skyship’s ragged balloon.*



*“A rhetorical question makes a good way to round off the chapter, suggesting possible jeopardy”*

### Creating tension

In Chapter 3, suspense is built as the children hear something menacing. This turns out to be a baby dragon – or it could be a unicorn, elf or perhaps a storm fairy!

Ask pupils if they can work out how the writer creates tension in the paragraph reproduced below (the answers are shown in Table 1).

*Something was crawling up the side of the skyship’s wooden hull! Ty, whose face paled, shrank back and ducked down behind the tiller but Mariana rushed to the edge and peered into the gloom below. She could just make out something or somebody scrabbling up the side of the ship.*

### Ending the tale

In Chapter 4, the skyship sets sail again. The two main characters are alone on deck and hear or catch a glimpse of something ominous. Once again, build the suspense, which turns out to be a false alarm. End on a comforting note with the skyship sailing onwards, probably into further adventures.

*Ten minutes later they were both asleep, dreaming of dragons and skyships and great adventures. The Stargrazer drifted on silently through the night towards dawn.*

- Mariana saw three things: trees, pathways and a fox.
- Mariana saw three things: tall trees leaning inwards like strange doorways, crooked pathways snaking onwards and a russet-coated fox.

To build the setting description, introduce the place where the skyship has landed through the character’s eyes (*Marianna peered at...*). Then use prepositional phrases to introduce what can be seen.

Keep the description negative to build a more ominous atmosphere. Provide images of ruined settings to help build the imagination.


*Marianna, too, peered at the ruined city. In front of her, ornate,*

*stone buildings, that once must have been magnificent, lay crumbled. To one side, several great pillars jutted up, oak doorways stood ajar and huge, empty windows glared down. In a far corner, stood a ruined statue of some long-forgotten heroine. In a dark courtyard, there were several fountains, but they no longer sprayed. It was quite empty and strangely silent as overhead, the thunderstorm drifted south. The evening sun had already begun to cast darkening shadows and a cold wind blew dust across the square.*

Finally, provide a tense end to Chapter 2, by using a short dramatic sentence, introducing an ominous sound. For example: *At that moment, they heard something.*



**The Book of Dragons by Pie and Mel Corbett is available from the Talk for Writing Bookshop.**

 [shop.talk4writing.com](http://shop.talk4writing.com)

# Learner's PARADISE

Can rap make Shakespeare cool? Absolutely, says **Confucius MC**, and it'll boost your pupils' writing skills, too...

**I**n my life I've been fortunate enough to share stages with some of the most celebrated artists of our times, but without a doubt some of my most prized and precious experiences took place watching children tap into their creative potential.

I spent 15 years working in a community-based primary school (which also happened to be the school I went to as a child). I worked in a number of different roles from LSA to TA, running workshops with small groups and leading sessions with entire classes. I worked in the after-school club, I took Y6 kids on residential trips, and eventually became a children and families support worker.

This multifaceted remit became incredibly valuable in my delivery of creative sessions; I was able to feed into the curriculum-based topics as well as extracting points of interest to develop creative work. I also had an insight into things that were affecting the social dynamic in the school. A big part of my work was writing bespoke rap songs, which would be performed in weekly year group class assemblies. Originally, this started as something I would do with specific groups and classes, but it soon became evident that there was a demand from the children throughout the entire school to take part. I wrote raps about the water cycle, the Tudors, the seasons, and the

Mayans to name only a few, and where possible I would run a carpet session with an entire year group, where we collaboratively wrote a rap for their assembly. These sessions were particularly powerful, because they offered a different model for producing creative writing, more reliant on the quality of personal expression as opposed to the replication or regurgitation of form (both of which are incredibly valuable).

## Poetry in motion

I was part of a few theatre companies as a young person, and developed a real connection to and appreciation of Shakespeare (particularly after studying *Macbeth* in secondary school). I think part of the allure was knowing that at the time of writing he was breaking all the rules, not just for the sake of being rebellious, but because he believed in the power of what he was doing. Reminding kids that one of the most celebrated writers of all time was breaking lots of conventions and inventing words that didn't exist yet always seemed to plant a seed of both inspiration and determination in the young creatives I taught.

There are also crucial overlaps between rap and the work of Shakespeare. For example, in both cases,



*“There are crucial overlaps between rap and the work of Shakespeare”*

the words are written to a specific metre, which not only adds a pleasant aesthetic but heightens the meaning behind the words. The other crucial overlap is that, as pleasing as Shakespearean plays and poems are to read, the words were written to be spoken.

With that said, I want to take this opportunity to point out how sophisticated rap is. It borrows from many literary devices – metaphor, simile, allegory, personification, etc – and is also very conscious of and deliberate with time, and placing poetry to a metre.



### Take a beat

If the rise of social media has taught us anything, it's that people crave an outlet for their opinions, and can experience anxiety when they feel they're not being heard. But where social media platforms in many instances

Fig 1.

1st bar			
Humpty 1	Dumpty 2	sat on a 3	wall, 4
No. of syllables: 2	No. of syllables: 2	No. of syllables: 3	No. of syllables: 1

2nd bar			
Humpty 1	Dumpty 2	had a great 3	fall 4
No. of syllables:	No. of syllables:	No. of syllables:	No. of syllables:

3rd bar			
All the king's 1	horses and 2	all the king's 3	men 4
No. of syllables:	No. of syllables:	No. of syllables:	No. of syllables:

4th bar			
Couldn't put 1	Humpty to 2	-gether 3	again 4
No. of syllables:	No. of syllables:	No. of syllables:	No. of syllables:

encourage knee-jerk, reactionary expressions, the process of sitting down to write a rap is contemplative and reflective. There's an emphasis on choosing your words carefully and understanding their power, finding a way to refine exactly what it is you want to say. There's something about writing a rap that places you at the forefront of expression, too – from the minute you start committing words to the page, you're part of a lineage of powerful expressions of identity.

I think part of its appeal as an artistic discipline is that it exists outside the tropes of mainstream literary academia, and positions itself as a subculture, whilst simultaneously transcending written artforms.

### DIY

Want to write raps with your class? You could start by introducing the idea of a mission statement. This could apply to the pupils themselves, their class/year group, the school, or perhaps all three. Encourage a conversation and reflection

on the meaning of identity and gather a list of the values and goals that contribute to that identity and make up the contents of your mission statement. You can then use this list to shape the contents of your raps. I always found this can be a great way of unifying a class by creating a rap that almost serves as a mantra for the school year.

In terms of teaching structure, let's begin with one of the most universally known rhymes of them all – Humpty Dumpty! Use Fig. 1 to understand the structures, and then you can use the blank templates in the downloadable resources (link in the panel above) to create your own.

At first glance, this may all seem a bit simplistic, but much like musicians, even the most seasoned rapper still has to count and keep time! The key thing to notice is the pattern of where the rhyming sounds land in relation to the numbers, and the way the number of syllables match. In a carpet session you could ask half the class to hold the count of four, while the other half recites the words, and

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then swap. Remember, one bar = four counts. A standard rap verse is usually eight or 16 bars long, so groups of two or four pupils could work together to create a verse using four or eight bars each.

The real beauty of this process comes when you add music to the equation (you can find plenty of child-friendly rap instrumentals on YouTube). If you can hold the count of four to the music, the connection of all these things becomes instantly apparent as the count naturally houses the rap on top. Give it a go. You won't be disappointed.



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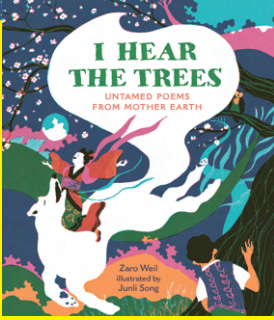
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Published by Hachette  
Children's Group, 2025

# I Hear the Trees

Inspired by nature, Zaro Weil's poetry collection – beautifully illustrated by Junli Song – offers an accessible way to encourage curiosity in children about the world around them...

JO CUMMINS

Performing poetry is such a playful way of introducing children to interesting new words and phrases. The rhythmic patterns in poetry make it easier to memorise than prose, even for those who are generally reluctant speakers. Poetry can also provide a safe and structured way for children to understand emotions and encourages creative thinking from an early age. And fortunately, there is an absolute treasure trove of poetry out there for young children to explore!

*I Hear the Trees* is an excellent collection to use in the classroom because it is grounded in nature – something that all of us have the

ability to experience, wherever in the world we may be. Many pupils have access to outdoor areas and forest schools within their own settings and will almost certainly encounter all manner of wild things in their play and through the school curriculum.

There is a wonderful variety of subject matter, language use, and poem length within this book. Whether you are simply looking to share a poem at the end of the day or perhaps play around with the use of alliteration in writing, you'll be able to find something appropriate.

Zaro Weil is an award-winning poet, with one of her anthologies winning the 2020 CLiPPA Award for outstanding children's poetry.

Her hope for this collection was that it should inspire curiosity and a deep love for the world around us.

## *I Hear the Trees*

This is the opening poem in the book and really encourages readers to use all of their senses to connect to nature. There are so many ways in which children can be encouraged to engage with it.

## A senses poem

- Start by reading the whole poem aloud to the group. Ask them to close their eyes whilst you're reading, and try to imagine some of the sensations described in its lines. Quickly gather feedback on which words or ideas

really stuck with the children, or how the poem made them feel.

- Focus in on the lines starting: ‘I hear the trees, I smell the orange crinkle..., feel the brushes of tiny beasts.’ Highlight all the verbs and ask the children which senses are being used (hearing, smell, touch).
- Create a chart and add to it what is described for each of the senses (e.g. hearing = ‘flutter-song of leaves’).
- Going outside and using your senses is very grounding. Take the children outside with clipboards and ask them to find one sound, one smell and one texture.
- Orally rehearse how to put those sensations into lines for a poem. For example, ‘I hear the wind whisper, I smell wet grass, I feel cold stone.’
- Use the same structure back in the classroom to scaffold the children’s own written responses.

## An imagery deep dive

- Focus in on the phrase ‘I smell the orange crinkle of leaves.’ When might the leaves actually be orange? What does ‘crinkle’ mean? Can the children think of any other materials which could crinkle? Why did the poet not just say ‘orange leaves’? This activity would work well if paired with a tuff tray or feely bag containing leaves, pinecones and other natural materials.
- Ask the children to invent colour and texture phrases of their own. For example, ‘a brown snap of twigs’ or ‘a white fluff of dandelions’. To extend this, add an adjective or simile.

## Soundscape drama activity

- This time, focus on the line: ‘... flutter-songs of summer-end birds...’

What other noises might you hear in the forest on a gentle summer’s day? The whispering wind? Clicking insects? Fluttering wings?

- Practise using body percussion and voices to create a soundtrack to accompany a reading of the poem.

## Bamboozled by Berries

I love the playful nature of this poem, which is a contrast to the more mindful tone of *I Hear the Trees*. There’s lots of scope here to have some fun performing and developing vocabulary at the same time.

### Alliteration hunt

- Read the poem aloud to the class. Ask the children to listen out for which sound keeps repeating. Which letter is repeated? What effect does this repetition have when read aloud? Have a copy of the poem on the board and highlight all the words beginning with ‘b’.
- Sort the words into those which begin with ‘b’ and those which don’t. This could be done physically into hoops, or digitally on the board. As an extension, pupils could add words of their own to each category.
- Give the children some starting nouns to create alliterative phrases with, for example, ‘snakes’ or ‘cats,’ then add adjectives or verbs to create a phrase. Some ideas could be: silly slithering snakes, cunning creeping cats.
- Extension – Go on to look at further examples of tongue-twisters and identify the repeated sounds. Extend and combine the phrases the children wrote previously to create class tongue twisters to practise performing aloud.

### Vocabulary investigation

- Pick out some of the more



challenging vocabulary for children to investigate: bamboozled, bombastic, barrage, brazenly, bounty. Have the children heard any of the words before? Discuss their responses.

- How can we uncover what these words mean? Try reading them in context. Does this help? How about acting them out or drawing them?
- The children could be shown how to use a dictionary to find definitions if appropriate.
- What simpler words could we replace them with? What effect would that have on the images the poem creates and to its performance?

### Warning poems

- The poem contains a big ‘beware’ midway through:  
‘bunches of bounteous berries  
brimming blazing bright balls  
beneath a blowy bonanza of balmy breezes but ...  
beware babbling boldface birds’

## General strategies → → →

To finish with, I’d like to share some fun, hands-on strategies with which you could enthuse your pupils. These would work with any of the poems within this book, or other poems with a ‘nature’ theme.

### BECOME THE POEM

Let the children pretend to be the animals or plants within the poems. Provide them with simple props such as masks, wings or leaves.

### VISUAL POETRY

Sketch a flower, tree or creature first, then add a couple of lines to describe it. Rather than drawing, you could create natural collages using found objects from outside instead.

### SOUND AND RHYTHM

Tap into children’s natural love of rhythm and let them clap, stomp, and tap to imitate the

sounds within the poem. You could also try turning verses or lines of a poem into songs or chants.

### POETRY TRAIL

Leave short lines of poetry around an outside space for pupils to find. Challenge the children to organise them into a poem, then mix them up and do it again. How have children organised the lines? Did any of them use theme or rhyme to help? How does the order of the lines affect the flow of the poem?



- The children are going to write their own mini warning poems. The first line describes a type of food, the next line adds to the description, the next line describes who eats it, and the final line is 'beware'. Each of these lines needs to be alliterative. Creating a class bank of alliterative words linked to foods or animals would support less confident writers, as would a list of interesting synonyms for 'eat' (munch, slurp, gobble, chew, devour).
- A sample verse could look like this:  
*Wiggly winding worms  
slippery slimy slugs  
munched by mighty magpies  
BEWARE!*
- Extension – Challenge pupils to include a repetitive phrase to mimic the 'bite bite bite' in the original poem.

### Art links

- Vivid illustrations are a key feature

of this collection, and juicy purple berries take centre stage for this particular poem. Experiment with printing berries – you could use sponges, cotton buds or fingertips.

- Create a rainbow of fruit and berries by printing with fruit and vegetables, or even creating natural paints using safe items from outside.
- Collage techniques could also be used to imitate the bold lines and colours.
- For older groups, simple lino-printing could be done using foam tiles, rollers and printing ink. The illustrator for this collection, Junli Song, specialises in printing and uses the technique throughout the book.

There are so many fantastic poems in this collection that I had to share a few more starting ideas to engage children and encourage them to respond to what they have read and heard.

### Recipe for a Spring Birthday Cake

**Before reading:** Ask the children what a spring birthday cake might look like. What ingredients would you expect it to contain?

**Reading the poem:** Ask pupils to listen carefully to the ingredients included.

**After reading:** Ask, "Which ingredient was your favourite? Which parts are real and which are pretend?"

**Further ideas:**

- Spot imperative verbs and descriptive phrases.
- Go on a 'season walk' to look for ingredients for children to include in their own recipe poems.
- Play a speaking and listening game: pass around a large mixing bowl, with each child saying "I'm adding a spoonful of...".
- Link to maths: practise counting out measurements (cups, teaspoons) and explore measurement language.

out using dance and gestures; a smell station with herbs, spices and foods to smell. Use the experiences to craft lines of poetry.

### POEM IN A BAG

Have a bag full of a range of objects (pinecone, teddy, shell, feather, toy car) for children to select an item from. Investigate the item, focusing on visual and textural qualities. What could the item be used for? Where did it come from? Use these ideas as the inspiration for a poem.

## Loved this? Try these...

- ❖ *The Lost Words* by Jackie Morris
- ❖ *A Great Big Cuddle: Poems for the Very Young* by Michael Rosen, illustrated by Chris Riddell
- ❖ *Big Red Dragon* by Jane Newberry, illustrated by Carolina Rabei
- ❖ *A Dinosaur at the Bus Stop* by Kate Wakeling, illustrated by Eilidh Muldoon
- ❖ *Zim Zam Zoom* by James Carter, illustrated by Nicola Colton

### Ten Mice Star in a Poetical Adventure

**Join in:** Read the poem aloud and dramatically. Get the children to join in with the repeated 'Uh oh!' and make appropriate mice actions (twitching noses and shaking in fear).

Discuss how the poem made the children feel. Were they worried? Why is 'Uh oh!' repeated?

**Maths links:** Act out the story with 10 objects. Count forwards and backwards. If one mouse ran away, how many would be left?

**Repetition writing task:** Look at the pattern for each verse (*ten mice, something happens, uh oh!*) Why do the children think the poet repeats this? Get pupils to have a go at writing their own versions. For example: *Ten \_\_\_\_\_ go to \_\_\_\_\_.*  
*Uh oh!*

**Story maps:** Create a large story map outlining each part of the adventure (start, eagle, cat, grass, safe?). The children can draw the main events and add key words.



*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.*

### POETRY SPINNERS

Get children creating their own poetry using spinners or dice with nouns, verbs, adjectives or emotions. Pupils spin them, then use the chosen words to build a line of poetry.

### SENSORY POETRY STATIONS

Set up different tables or trays with items to touch and describe (sand, leaves, water); a sound station with rainmakers, bells and onomatopoeic words to experiment with; a movement station with lines or words to act

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# Storytime SAVIOURS

Reading volunteers don't just help with decoding and fluency – they can transform children's attitudes to books and bring precious peace of mind for teachers...

TORI WATTS

**I** imagine you know it well – the common situation of having 30 children to teach, making it difficult to spend meaningful one-to-one time with each one, let alone providing additional support to those who need it most. Even with the support of a teaching assistant and daily whole-class reading sessions, hearing every child read individually is still a particular challenge; so for me, the introduction of a volunteer reader into the classroom was a potential game-changer. And I knew I'd made the right decision when one of my reluctant readers started to use new, expressive words in their writing. Such a small change in the classroom; such a huge difference.

## Getting it right

Every week, those 10-minute sessions with the volunteer would be filled with patience, encouragement and a dictionary to hand. They empowered children who had often struggled to broaden their vocabularies and find the confidence to put them into practice. This made me incredibly proud and reassured; I would heartily recommend trying it. *But how?*, you ask. Well, first you need to get organised. I'm aware how tough that can be when time is scarce, but you will thank yourself later when you are truly reaping the benefits of having a volunteer reader.

A clear induction process, including the teacher, the volunteer and the pupils, is key. That means, for example, taking the time to clearly communicate expectations and provide the volunteer with information on how to handle

different situations.

It is important to reassure the volunteer and create an open environment for feedback, which in turn will allow you to make the most of their time.

Introducing the volunteer to the pupils is equally essential in establishing their role and making everyone feel comfortable, particularly for children who will be directly supported.

I created a list of the children who were going to benefit most from one-to-one sessions every week, prioritising those needing extra help with confidence and fluency. I also explained to the children why they were receiving extra reading time. This equipped them to have a better understanding of the situation, and made the sessions run more smoothly.

For many of the less confident children, reading wasn't their favourite activity. But once these

sessions became a regular part of the school week, they began seeing their time with the volunteer as a 'treat'. They valued the one-to-one attention of an adult, something to which they didn't always have access.

Practical planning also made the process smoother. Having the volunteer come at the same time every week, for the same amount of time, and using a designated area like the library to keep distractions to a minimum helped enormously. Using the library allowed for informal catch-up time, too, helping the children to settle before reading.

Situating the volunteer in the library also helped when pupils, more often than not, had forgotten their book. I asked the children to collect the next reader after their session, reducing interruptions and keeping my class's excitement in check.



## No pressure

The main challenge I found was getting feedback from the volunteer. With most sessions occurring on teaching days, conversations often felt rushed. I addressed this by setting up dedicated feedback time between the volunteer and another member of staff, ensuring they didn't have to wait or interrupt my teaching.

The volunteer reader nurtured a genuine love for reading among my class. By listening rather than teaching, they removed the pressure often associated with reading at school and helped children to see it as a fun, life-enriching activity. It also gave pupils space to discuss the stories and ask questions. Volunteers definitely have more time for those 'silly' conversations, where children can let their imaginations run wild. This massively improved pupils' conversational skills and confidence.

Beyond reading, the volunteer became a valued part of our school family, helping out on Roman Day and school trips. They offered a new perspective – and above all, gave me the peace of mind that children who needed extra support were receiving it.



**Tori Watts** is a former primary school teacher, and is now

coordinator for national reading charity, **Schoolreaders**.

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REVIEWED BY: MIKE DAVIES

I'm old enough to remember what a boon it was for classroom practice when individual dry-wipe boards became available. They were a great way to gauge understanding immediately without having to resort to targeting questions at the usual suspects, or impose the lottery of selecting names on lolly sticks at random. It might seem like a small thing to the uninitiated, but it was so useful to have the whole class simultaneously showing me their proposed answers to questions. Teachers being teachers, they could probably enthusiastically explain a hundred other ways in which they use them in their lessons.

The trouble was, the markers seemed to run out depressingly quickly. It took me back to childhood disappointments of getting a brand-new pack of felt tips only to find them drying to scratchy uselessness after what seemed like just a picture or two.

Similarly, as a teacher, I can remember my heart sinking, not just as my supply of replacement whiteboard pens steadily dwindled, but also as I noticed the frequency with which I was adding to the world's pile of discarded plastic. How soothed my conscience would have been if only we had been using YPO's refillable whiteboard markers!

First things first, they perform as well as any other dry-wipe marker I have encountered. The ink flows smoothly and whatever mark you've made wipes clear easily. The difference, as the name makes clear, is that their ink can be topped up as many as 35 times. That's 34 fewer plastic tubes

heading for landfill for every marker you use. When you think of how many classes they could be used in, that's a huge amount of waste avoided. And don't forget, they're already made of 90 per cent recycled materials to start with. Refilling is easy: open the bottle, pop in the pen, leave for an hour or so. No mess, no fuss, job done.

In a way, that's all you really need to know. Nevertheless, there are a few other features that might catch your eye. For a start, they come in four different colours: black, red, blue and green.

They also offer a variety of nib sizes and styles: chisel, broad, bullet and fine. What's more, these gauges are clearly marked on the outside so that you don't have to scabble through boxes, removing lids, to find the one you want. (Maybe it's just me, but I really appreciate thoughtful little design considerations like this.)

Now don't quote me on this, because I'm sure my quick internet price comparison isn't

foolproof, but from what I've seen, it appears that these YPO pens would be remarkably good value, even if you just used them once, let alone refilling 35 times. To give you some idea, a pack of 50 black fine tip pens is available from just £15.99 + VAT. With refill bottles which can be used up to 25 times, going for around £3 + VAT, it's not hard to see how they make good economic as well as environmental sense. And, at those prices, you can afford to check my figures and work out on a whiteboard how much you might save per pen.

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- ✓ Effective and comfortable
- ✓ Perfect for classroom use
- ✓ Easy to refill
- ✓ Refill up to 35 times
- ✓ Environmentally sound
- ✓ Great value
- ✓ No mess, no fuss
- ✓ Gauges clearly marked, so no searching through boxes for what you need

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# Easy as ONE, TWO, THREE

Chuck old-school comprehension rigmarole out of the window, and focus on a few simple steps to improve reading, say **Christine Chen** and **Lindsay Pickton**

**H**ave you ever had the experience of believing that you'd done a good job of developing children's reading comprehension, only for them to demonstrate that you'd been, um, optimistic, once they complete a comprehension test? It's a common tension: discussion about texts is crucial in the development of understanding, but writing answers to questions is a different challenge. It's one of the reasons Year 6 teachers in particular invest time in 'SATs prep': comprehending what you read is not the same as being able to answer test questions.

And test prep is important: when learning to drive, before the practical exam we often have a mock, so that the real thing doesn't feel completely alien. In the context of a reading comprehension test, it is important that children have had experience of the vocabulary of the longer questions (character, impression, etc), format questions (matching, sequencing, true/false, etc) and yes, writing answers. However, preparation for tests isn't the only reason for teaching children how to express their understanding in writing; in fact, if the entire KS2 testing process were abandoned, it would still be a good idea to have written

responses as part of the reading curriculum – not just in Year 6, but as soon as children can express themselves in written sentences.

## Jot it down

Having children write a little as part of a reading lesson – an answer to a question, a single-sentence summary – will give you a record of their understanding, and a good idea of misconceptions to be addressed. It is also there for the children themselves to return to – it's powerful to have them revisit a written response over a sequence of reading lessons and rework their thinking as their understanding improves. And yes, it helps them write better answers in SATs tests. But more important than any of these things is the fact that written responses actually improve comprehension.

We really like the way Lemov, Driggs and Woolway put it in *Reading Rediscovered* (2016). They refer to "taking the analysis and hammering it into clear argument... writing an idea is the most rigorous and demanding way to express it... writing also requires every student to independently complete the analysis that synthesizes the lesson." We know that for some, this

language can sound a little harsh, but the essence – writing helps us to crystallise our thoughts and process our learning – is vital.

Let's be clear here: we are not advocating turning KS2 reading lessons back into traditional comprehension activities, in which children read a text and then write answers to the linked questions (this is practice at best, and often just assessment); we are talking about written responses following very careful teaching – synthesising the analysis, as Lemov, Driggs and Woolway put it. In fact, in *Reading Rediscovered*, they recommend a rigorous process of reading and discussion before introducing this expectation.

*Reading Reconsidered* is quite secondary phase-focused in its language and examples, but we have observed the processes in primary schools, and have helped a growing number adapt the approach to the specific needs of their pupils. Schools have such a



variety of contexts, and a major variable is how much time is given to these lessons; the length of each session, and the number per week. However, we have found the following principles, applied to whatever time is available, get good results in Year 3 upwards (and some Year 2 teachers have taken this on, part way through the year).

### Three simple steps

As with everything, start with the end in mind: better comprehension of a small piece of challenging text is the goal. A written response will enhance clarity of understanding (and let you check this, of course); it will require a close-read, which almost always requires several straight-through reads ('layered reading').

1) Doing multiple reads of the section of the text you're studying allows children to understand more each time, and is probably the world's most-used comprehension strategy.

These reads can take different forms; we tend to start with a model read, so children can hear what the text is meant to sound like and begin to understand it without the demands of word-reading or pronunciation; we usually follow this with a choral read, giving a different way of encountering the text while also helping the development of fluency. Often, we'll have a third

read, which may be pupil-paired reading, a 'jump-in' (model read switching to children-only choral, and back, several times), or similar.

This allows children who would otherwise struggle with decoding or fluency to access the text more fully; by the time we start discussion, they have heard it three times.

We don't analyse during this layered approach, but between each read we prompt paired discussion on pupils' developing understanding with very open questions like "What's it about?" and "What did you notice?" We find this keeps children meaning-focused, without taking up valuable time.

2) Next, we move into a close read: a line-by-line analysis of the text, using a combination of modelled 'thinking aloud' and very quick questions ("Tell your partner what..."). The goal is to ensure that children understand the text at the literal level, with guidance

on the little inferences necessary along the way.

3) This close read is followed by the written response. We have found that recording understanding at a retrieval or simple inference level each day is good way to build text comprehension towards what we prosaically call a Big Question: something that requires reference to the entire text, probably applying inference, possibly referring to a change that happens across the text.

### Divide and conquer

If they've never answered this kind of question before – or have, but have always struggled with writing an answer – we've found that teaching the skills required via shared writing is extremely effective. You might even use shared writing to answer one Big Question, then pose a second

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question of similar challenge (on the same section of text) for them to attempt independently. A crucial skill to model in this process is constant reference to the text, often with text-annotation, as many children try to work from memory or even pure imagination.

Composing and transcribing our thoughts focuses our understanding; it's a key reason for the popularity of journals in the pursuit of wellbeing – clarity is key. Making this a staple of reading lessons brings so many benefits, the most exciting of which, we believe, is crystallising comprehension.



*Christine Chen and Lindsay Pickton are primary education advisors,*

*supporting English development nationally.*

 [primaryeducationadvisors.co.uk](https://primaryeducationadvisors.co.uk)

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## HOW IT WORKS

**The full writing process is explicitly taught:** Pupils move through goal setting, planning, drafting, revising and editing – building independence in line with national guidance.

**Grammar is embedded, not bolted on:** Year 6 statutory grammar (including complex sentence structures and high-level punctuation) is taught within meaningful extended writing, not isolated exercises.

**Writing is driven by knowledge:** The Ancient Egypt context provides rich subject content and ambitious vocabulary, strengthening composition through secure understanding.

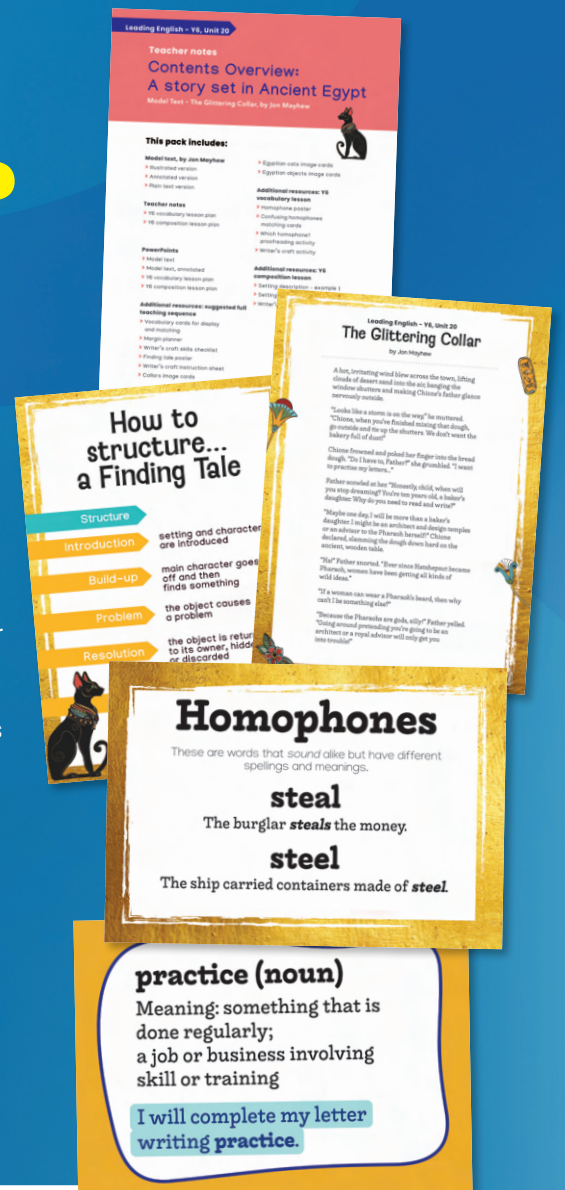
**Cognitive load is carefully managed:** Model texts, scaffolds and structured sequencing ensure pupils are supported towards success –

building confidence rather than overwhelm.

**Editing and independence are built in:** Planned revising and proofreading opportunities develop pupils' ability to improve and refine their work – a key KS2 expectation.

**Outcomes are assessment-ready:** The unit produces substantial, moderated writing outcomes supported by clear success criteria and formative assessment checkpoints.

Download your unit at [tinyurl.com/trw-LE-unit](http://tinyurl.com/trw-LE-unit)



# Leading English



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# FREE *the verse*

Pay attention to space, zoom in on words and lean into the light to show pupils that they already know much more about poetry than they think...

MEG GREHAN

**T**he first time I read a novel-in-verse was not, in fact, the first time I read a novel-in-verse. I *thought* it was. I had never seen a whole book written in poetry before; had never seen a book utilise so little space (or so I thought at the time). But the more I read the more comfortable and familiar I found it. It felt, almost immediately, absolutely perfect and absolutely *right*. I realised that I had encountered verse in my reading before, in many forms, I just hadn't recognised it. I'd read picture books, narrative poetry, even graphic novels. I'd read books that used space and shape in interesting ways. I just hadn't recognised it for what it was.

Verse can seem intimidating. It is poetry, after all. But verse is remarkably accessible; it's designed to be. So, how do we overcome this initial worry? How do we teach verse? One question I get asked quite often is 'does it have to rhyme?' and the answer is no, it doesn't *have* to. It can, if the author has the patience, skill and desire to make it rhyme, but it's not a requirement. Rhyme, to be oh-so-honest with you, is difficult for a writer and wonderful for a reader. It can help guide a reader, it can make the reading experience extra pleasant because you know what's coming, A will rhyme with B, and C will rhyme with D and so on and so on. There's an intrinsic rhythm; there's a predictability and a level of comfort. So what do we do when faced with a book made entirely of interconnected poetry that doesn't rhyme? How do we take away the totally understandable impulse to say, "This isn't for me", close the book and walk away?

## Space to breathe

For me, reading verse clicked the second I stopped wondering why they used so little of the page. The truth is that verse doesn't only use a little bit of the page – it uses every millimetre – it just doesn't feel the need to fill it with words. The white space is where we rest, it's where we breathe. It is where the unsaid hides and where we can find it if we want to. If you choose to see the white space as *everything* else, the page becomes easier to understand. My favourite way to show and explain this is to give readers a paragraph of text (usually something

they may be familiar with or are likely to have read already) and ask them to turn it into verse using line breaks and white space. I ask them to think about which words or lines they feel are the most important, which deserve extra space because they carry extra weight, which the writer might want to rush past, and which are so important they should be surrounded by white space, so they stand alone. Everyone ends up with a different piece of verse in the end, despite using the exact same chunk of prose.

This exercise is my favourite, because it shows readers (and writers) that they



do already understand verse. They know that a word given a whole line to itself must be important; they know that a shorter line carries a different weight from a longer one; and that shape affects how you read. We all know these things, whether we're aware of it or not, because from very early childhood we are told stories, and we tell our own. We know how to pause for effect, we know how to add drama, we know when to slow down and when to speed up, when to be loud and when to be quiet.

### Lean into light

Another way to teach this is to tell a story and ask pupils to write it as you tell it, as best they can. If you put a lot of emphasis on one word, how can they show that in writing? Do they make the word bigger? Do they give it a whole line to itself? Do they repeat it a few times? If you rush through a sentence to build drama, how do they show that? Do they write one long line, so the reader almost runs out of breath reading it? Do they give each word its own line, placing them one underneath the other so the reader is inclined to read quickly? What do their instincts tell them to do? This should be a quick exercise, without too much time to think; it's all about trusting yourself.

***“A common misunderstanding about verse is that it has to be serious; used only to explore heavy topics”***

A common misunderstanding about verse is that it has to be serious; used only to explore heavy topics. It is poetry and poetry is a serious form, surely? We are often taught serious poems. We all have that infamous last line of Seamus Heaney's 'Mid-Term Break' imprinted onto our minds, don't we? But I think a wonderful way to make poetry, and in turn verse, less intimidating, is to introduce young readers to lighter topics. There are many silly and hopeful poems out there, and they are just as important as the heavy, emotional and hidden-meaning-laden poems.



All poetry is important; all has its place and its value. But for those who find it difficult, it can be helpful to start with something that brings with it a giggle or a sigh of relief. Who hasn't read 'The Orange' by Wendy Cope and found themselves smiling when that final line arrives? It is lovely and uplifting and its use of simple language, shape and style make it so accessible. It is simply about joy, contentment and a very large orange – go and look it up if you don't know it; I challenge you not to smile. Finding poems and stories like that one, that lean into the light, can help demystify poetry. We've all been stuck wondering "OK, but what does it *mean*?". Maybe it would be more helpful to ask what it makes us *feel*,

what we imagine when we read it, how it affects us.

Verse is fun. It's about letting go of the rules and trusting your instincts, about doing what feels right, and above all, it is about expression. My final and truest piece of advice is simple: let your students go wild, there is no wrong way to write verse.



**Meg Grehan is the author of five novels in verse. Her latest book, *The Brightest Star* (£8.99, Little Island), is out now.**

[meg-grehan.com](http://meg-grehan.com)

# The unbelievable TRUTH

Unreliable narrators can be a barrel of laughs, but they're also great tools for critical thinking, says **Bethany Walker...**

Dear Teach Primary HR Team,  
I would like to apply for the role of in-school liaison officer. I love *eating* working with people and I find children particularly *delicious* inspiring.  
As you can see from Miss RR Hood's reference, I do have experience of working with children. I have been told my key attributes are:

- I have big eyes, which means that I am observant and always on the look-out.
- I have a big nose, so I can sniff out excellent opportunities.
- I have big teeth, proving I am hungry for this job.

I would very much like to discuss my suitability for this role with you at interview, and I look forward to *eating* meeting you then.  
Yours sincerely  
The Big Bad Good Wolf

**A**s a children's author, I love writing funny stories, and I particularly love epistolary – also known as diary-style – books. One of the main pleasures of stories in these formats is that the protagonists easily get the wrong end of the stick. The viewpoint character may completely believe what they are writing, but the child reader loves spotting where that character is deviating from the truth. The humour we can get out of these situations, plus the joy children experience from being one (or many) steps ahead of the book, are two

very good reasons why stories with unreliable narrators are fantastic for children.

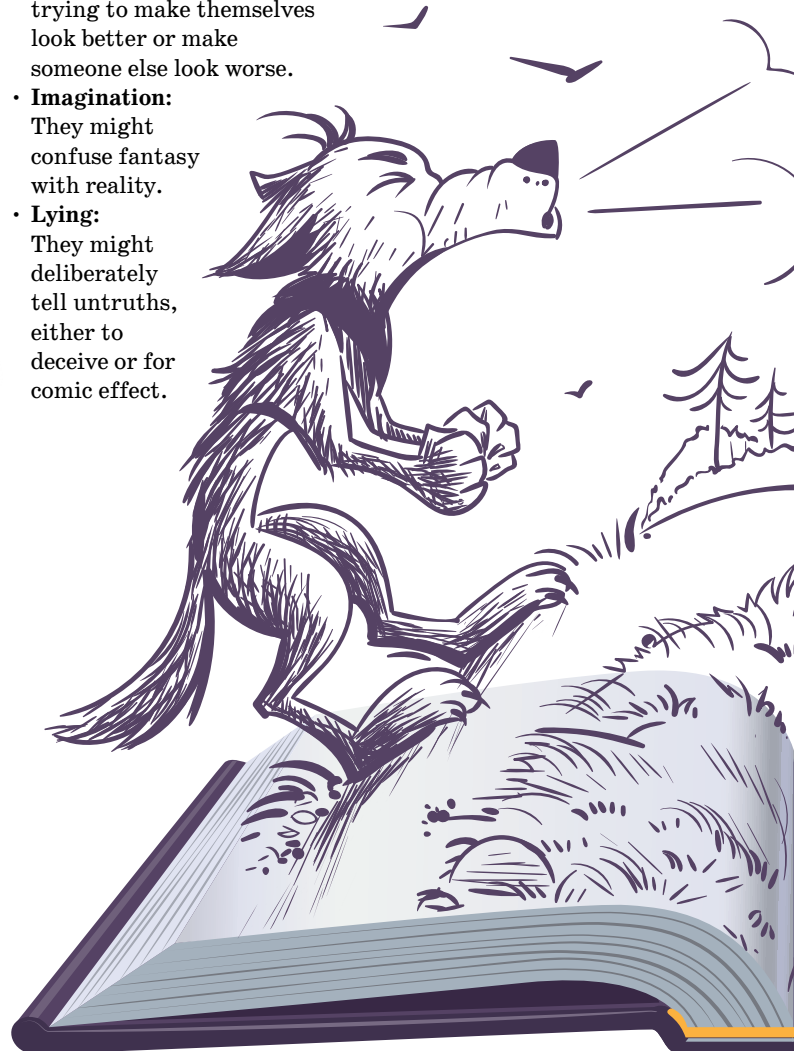
An unreliable narrator is a character who tells a story, but cannot be fully trusted to tell it accurately or truthfully. This may be because they are mistaken, forgetful, biased, or even deliberately lying. The narrator might misunderstand the world around them, or tell an outrageous version of events that readers are invited to question. In children's fiction, unreliable narrators can create humour, mystery, or surprising twists that help young readers think more critically about stories.

## What makes a narrator unreliable?

A narrator may be unreliable for several reasons:

- **Lack of knowledge:** They might be too young or inexperienced to understand what's really happening.
- **Bias:** They could be trying to make themselves look better or make someone else look worse.
- **Imagination:** They might confuse fantasy with reality.
- **Lying:** They might deliberately tell untruths, either to deceive or for comic effect.

Books that include an unreliable narrator allow the reader to realise that all is not as it seems, thereby allowing them to feel like they've unlocked a special secret hidden within the text. In this age of mass, unfiltered communication and information, children's ability to spot an unreliable



narrator, and understanding that they have to question what is written, are two skills that are becoming ever more vital. Engaging pupils with books that employ an unreliable narrator actually helps prepare them for a lifetime of misinformation!

### Where to start

• ***The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs*** by Jon Scieszka  
This book is a classic, but it stands the test of time as it encourages children to think about how stories can change depending on who tells them. In this retelling of the fairy tale, the wolf (Alexander T. Wolf) claims he was only trying to borrow a cup of sugar from his neighbours, the pigs. He insists the real story is a misunderstanding blown out of proportion by

the media. Readers quickly realise that he's bending the truth to make himself look innocent.

• ***Loki: A Bad God's Guide to Being Good (and sequels)*** by Louie Stowell  
This series, starring the Norse god of mischief, Loki, is a fantastic spin on the idea of an unreliable narrator. Loki's entire personality is based around being untrustworthy and sly, yet as part of his way of learning to be better, he has to write a diary in which he can only tell the truth. Through Louie Stowell's hilarious writing, readers see the battle between Loki's true nature and his attempts to tell the truth and achieve his goals.

• ***This Is Not My Hat*** by Jon Klassen  
In this darkly funny picture book, a small fish steals a hat and confidently tells readers why he'll get away with it. His smug claims contrast with the illustrations, which reveal the truth: he's being followed, and justice is coming. The unreliable narration creates tension and humour as readers piece together what's really happening.

### Why use unreliable narrators?

Using unreliable narrators in the classroom helps children develop:

- **Critical reading skills:** They learn to compare what the narrator says with other clues.
- **Empathy and perspective:** They understand how people can see the same event differently.
- **Creative thinking:** They explore imaginative storytelling techniques.

Unreliable narrators invite children to question what they read with greater awareness – and it is also fantastic for children to bring unreliable narrators into their own writing. By playing with this technique, pupils can learn simple ways to add humour and interest to their work, while also gaining a deeper understanding of storytelling, voice, and perspective; skills that will benefit them both in literature and in life.



Bethany Walker is an author of children's books. Her latest book,

***Medusa Gorgon's Bad Hair Day*** (£7.99, Scholastic), is out now.

[bethanywalkerwriter.co.uk](http://bethanywalkerwriter.co.uk)

## FOUR WRITING TASKS TO TRY



### 1. I, monster

**Task:** Choose a well-known story (e.g. *The Minotaur* or *George and the Dragon*) and retell it from the monster's point of view. What is the monster like? Did they mean to cause a problem? Are they misunderstood? Was it all a big mix-up?

**Learning focus:**

Understanding point of view; using persuasive or biased language.



### 2. "It wasn't my fault!"

**Task:** Write a diary entry from a character who got into trouble – but claims they are innocent. Let the narrator make excuses or exaggerate. Then ask pupils to illustrate the 'real' events.

**Learning focus:**

Identifying exaggeration and truth; using voice and character in writing.



### 3. Detective story

**Task:** Write a mystery story where the detective makes lots of silly assumptions or misses obvious clues. Let the readers figure out what's really going on.

**Learning focus:**

Developing plot and inference; using humour and irony.

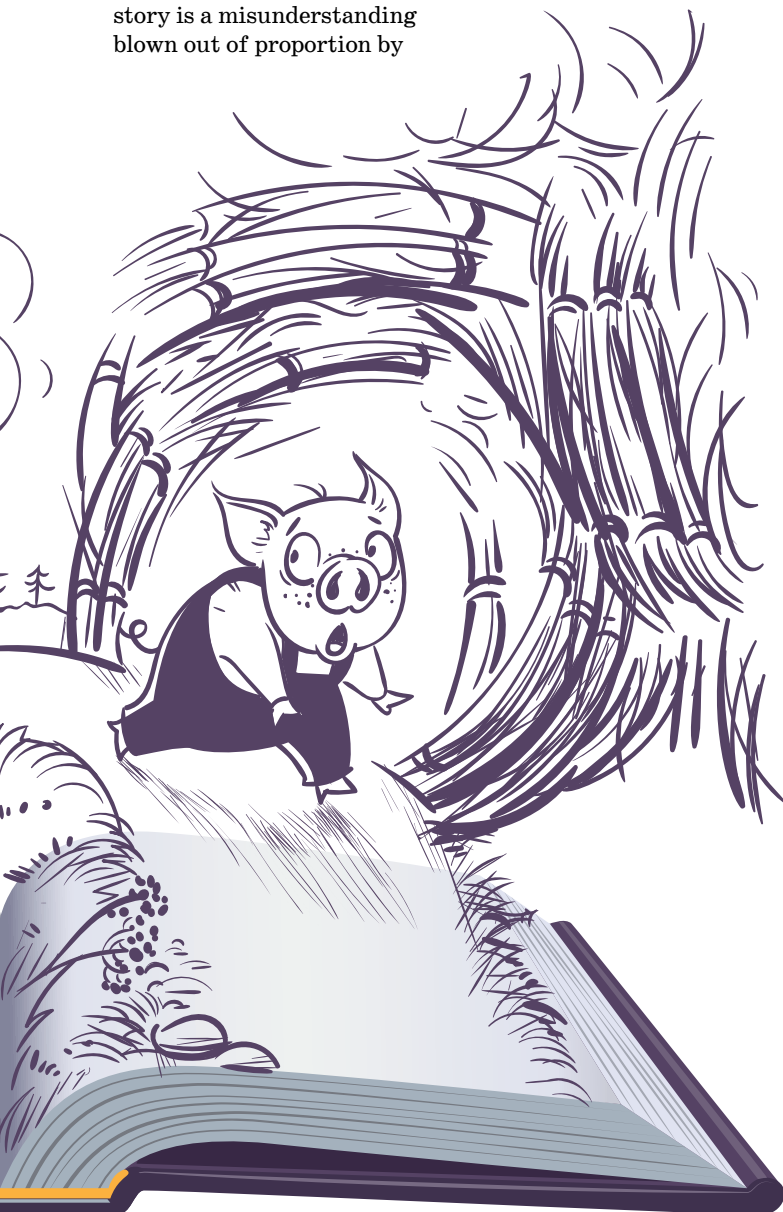


### 4. Two sides

**Task:** In pairs, one pupil writes a story from one character's perspective. Their partner writes the same event from another character's point of view. Compare the two and discuss the differences.

**Learning focus:**

Exploring bias; team writing and discussion.



ENGLISH 

# Big Cat Read On

Collins  
**BIG CAT**  
Read On

Compelling and inclusive new books aimed at upper KS2 readers



## AT A GLANCE

- Designed to bridge the gap between banded readers and longer chapter books
- Introduce pupils to sophisticated themes, plots and vocabulary
- Cover an impressive, cross-curricular range of topics and historical events
- Ideal for both individual and whole-class reading

REVIEWED BY: MIKE DAVIES



So, you've carefully and skilfully nurtured your pupils to a position where they can read with fluency and a fair degree of stamina. The challenge now is to help them embed a love of reading that will stay with them for the rest of their lives, with any luck.

The problem for time-impooverished teachers is how to curate a collection of suitable books that deliver the required degree of challenge without straying into themes (and even vocabulary) that are not suitable for primary pupils. Fortunately, the Big Cat Read On series from Collins is designed to do precisely that. These well-researched and perfectly pitched books invite pupils to lose themselves in fascinating adventures, gripping tales and non-fiction titles which cover a kaleidoscope of cross-curricular topics.

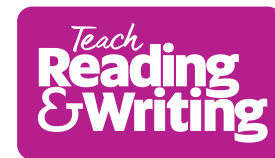
What I particularly like about them is how many of them broaden knowledge almost by stealth. For example, readers are invited to join Marco Polo on his travels along the Silk Road, or sail with Leif Erikson and his Vikings to North America, or take their place on the Titanic's doomed maiden voyage (if they really want to!). They'll be so engrossed that they'll barely notice they are learning.

There are also more directly educational titles which take a biographical approach to historical and contemporary events. What's more, there is a clear emphasis on providing an inclusive rollcall of diverse characters. *Mission: Space*, for example, details the careers of pioneering women in the field of space exploration. *Planet Protectors* documents the work of climate activists from around the world. *Three Queens* celebrates the lives of strong women who provided impressive leadership at key moments in the history of Asia.

Each book includes a smattering of illustrations, as if to lightly hold the reader's hand as they cross that bridge between banded readers and longer chapter books. Nevertheless, the emphasis is on using language and dramatic techniques to bring each topic to life. Where appropriate, the books include glossaries, maps and diagrams. There are 'Book talk questions' to encourage pupils to think more deeply about what they have read, while 'Ask the author' sections explore the influences, inspirations and research activities that provided the driving force behind each writer's efforts.

There is, however, no substitute for genuine enthusiasm for the subject matter you are writing about. I have seen enough school reading books which, perhaps understandably, seem more focused on ticking all the correct phonics boxes for the given level of reading ability, lending the text a rather synthetic quality, like processed cheese. These books do not fall into that trap, however. Indeed, you can feel the relish with which they are written. For instance, I had to drag myself away from *Station X*, an immersive exploration of the deciphering work carried out at Bletchley Park during World War II, because I was spending too much time trying to decode the hidden messages embedded in the text.

What joy it must be for pupils to have graduated from decoding letters and sounds to decoding hidden messages in a book created to spark their interest and hold their attention! And, given the wealth of subject matter in this series, there should be plenty to pique any child's interest and turn reading from a chore to a positive choice. If Big Cat feeds a love of books, Read On! (Ouch!)



## VERDICT

- ✓ Enjoyable, well-pitched stories and non-fiction texts
- ✓ Gently informative
- ✓ Inclusive and representative
- ✓ Perfect for more able readers
- ✓ A positive addition to any school library

## UPGRADE IF...

...you want to inspire a lasting love of books amongst your more confident and independent readers.

# ENGLISH Clicker

clicker  
unlocking writing **word** **by** **word**

Feature-rich, customisable writing support software

## 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.

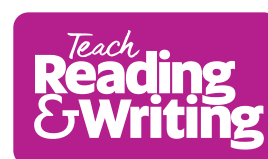
Clicker leads in inclusivity by offering a spectrum of writing grids with scaffolding that adapts to different needs. 'LearningGrids' are an excellent launchpad where you will find ready-made resources that will save you loads of time. Plus, because all activities are editable, you can adapt them instantly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



## 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](mailto:info@cricksoft.com) | 01604 671691 | [cricksoft.com/clicker](http://cricksoft.com/clicker)

# The demons have always been real...

If we use fantasy writing to help children understand that change is possible, says **Yassmin Abdel-Magied**, the real-world impact could be spectacular ...

**I** remember the first book I read that changed the way that I saw the world.

In Tamora Pierce's *Alanna: The First Adventure*, a young, precocious girl rebels against the gendered expectations imposed upon her.

She swaps places with her twin brother and joins a school for knights, where she finds community, her true self and, eventually, genuine belonging.

The series introduced me to my favourite elements in fantasy novels: magic, a determined female protagonist and a happy ending that required not the heroine to change, but the world around her. *Alanna* had *agency* – and this has since been what I always look for in the books that I read, as well as those that I write.

It took me a long time to work my way up to writing a work of fantasy. I had been intimidated by the genre for some time, feeling like the world-building element and rules of a new universe were somewhat beyond me.

I began writing for younger readers in worlds that felt more grounded and familiar, using school and the family home to explore resonant and urgent issues of migration, belonging, identity and friendship. Still, I found myself drawn to the possibilities fantasy novels encapsulated and, after publishing five books, I figured it was time to give it a go. Thus, the *Silverbrook* series was born.

Rather than inventing an entirely new system of magic, I tapped into the rich seam of folklore and myth I had grown up with. I leant into stories of djinn and miracles told in the



*“I was able to relax into the story and ask a more fundamental question”*

Quran, and tales passed on throughout my childhood in the manner of the Sudanese oral tradition.

In a way, it almost felt like using my version of the supernatural canon of vampires and werewolves; I wrote a new story using archetypes that already existed.

By leaning on that narrative backbone, I was able to relax into the story and ask a more fundamental question: what story did I *actually* want to tell? Fantasy is the genre, but not the plot – I still had to decide what it was that I wanted to say.

This is where I really enjoyed the freedom fantasy has to offer. I wanted to tell a story about forced displacement – about being run out of your own home because of difference, prejudice, discrimination, something I had intimate experience with – in a way that wasn't *too* on the nose. I wanted to write a story that was a true reflection of the challenges of today, but that

was also entertaining, heartwarming, maybe even inspiring.

So, the Maidstone family was born. Their evil nature was informed both by folklore and real life: the concept of *waswasa* in the books comes out of stories in the Quran. But the actions of the Maidstones reflect actions we see playing out in our neighbourhoods and villages today.

I wrote the first draft of *Silverbrook: Yumna and the Golden Horse* trapped in my room in Leeds during the riotous summer of 2024, wondering if I was going to be attacked in the street when I left the house for a coffee.

Scary, yes – but also, life. In bringing life and fantasy together, I felt like I was imagining a happy ending for my characters that has unfortunately still eluded us in the 'real world'. That's the power of fiction for younger readers: it allows us to engage with real demons, but conceive of outcomes where through a character's actions, the world around them can be transformed for the better. What a gift!



**Yassmin Abdel-Magied's Stand Up and Speak Out Against Racism was named a Best Book of 2023 by School Library Journal and longlisted for the 2025 UKLA Book Award and 2024 SLA Information Book Award. *Silverbrook: Yumna and the Golden Horse* is out now (£7.99, Hachette).**



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