Creating Quality Independent Writing

At Hallsville, we have found that there is not one magic ingredient for creating quality independent writing, but many. What do we think is the most important? Reading.

We have found that the longer you linger with the text, the better the independent outcomes are. It is easy to rush through the imitation stage, especially when you get further up the school, but choosing a challenging text and taking the time to explore it are both crucial. I will use the example of a Y6 unit on Macbeth.

Hearing the Story Retold

Creating storytellers is important to us and, where possible, we try to ensure that children hear stories retold without the book first of all. Anthony Glenn of *Shaking up Shakespeare* completely immersed our children in the story of Macbeth through his storytelling workshop, and after a morning filled with the drama, the children were already very familiar with the events of the story.

Reading as a Reader
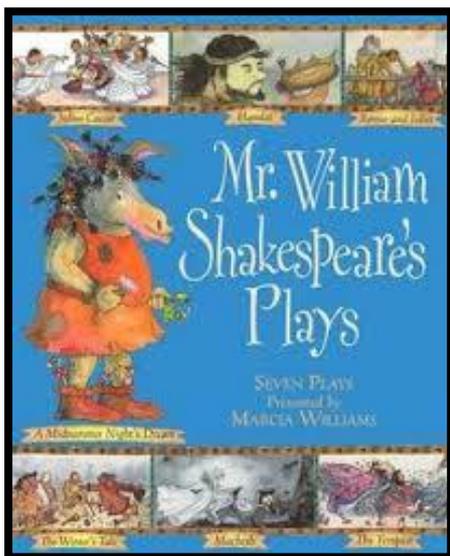
We like to start with a quality version of the text at the reading stage that ideally is in book form. For Macbeth, we used the Marcia Williams version. To ensure we can spend longer on the text at the imitation phase, we use our reading lessons for the first three days of the term to really explore the book and its themes. We use a three-part model to teach reading at Hallsville and we apply this model to all of our Talk for Writing texts. We always ensure our texts contain vocabulary that will be new to the children and we teach it at this stage using Isabel Beck's three-tiered approach.

Writing at the Reading Stage
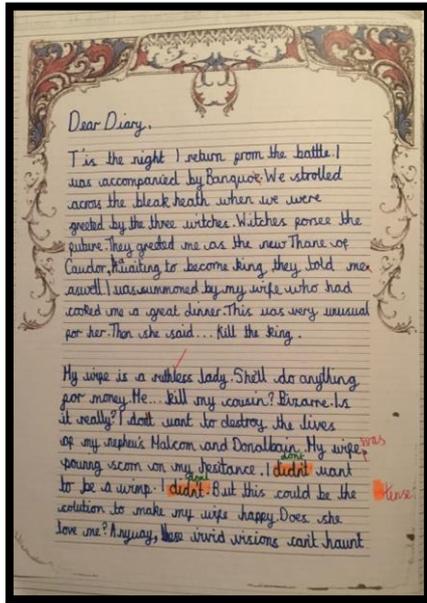
We believe that it is important for our children to practise the skill of writing every day and the reading stage is no exception. During this phase of Macbeth, we provided the children with two opportunities to write extensively.

The first piece was a diary entry. The children wrote this from Macbeth's point of view at the point of the story when he is tormented with the idea of killing King Duncan. Not only did this give the children a chance to produce an invented piece of writing, it also allowed us to assess the children's understanding of this character and their motivations.

The second piece of writing was an argument piece. The children were asked the question of who was to blame for King Duncan's death. Was it Macbeth's fault for committing the deed? Was it Lady Macbeth's fault for putting so much pressure on her husband? Was it the witches' fault for telling Macbeth that he would one day become king in the first place? The children used pie charts to show where the biggest proportion of the blame lied and took part in in-depth discussions, which covered subjects such as free will and predetermination. The children enjoyed sharing their own opinions during these discussions but also took the time to consider how other people's opinions might have differed to their own.
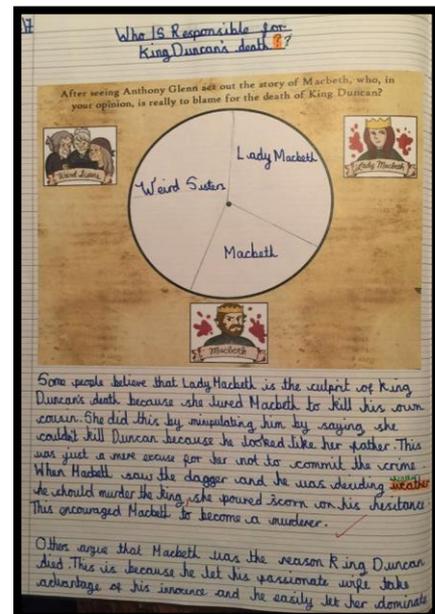
Shortening the Text

In order for the children to be able to learn the text, we shortened the version from the book so that it was under 400 words and then used this version to create the text maps. We find creating the maps ourselves allows the children to learn the text quicker but this is a personal preference. Here is an example of the map we used for this unit of work.
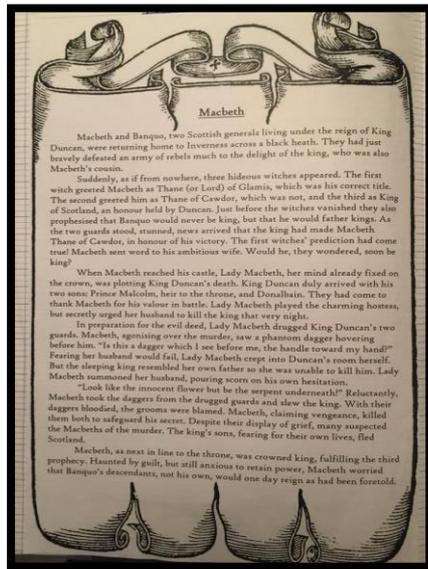
Reading as a Writer

Before we read as a writer, we always know which toolkit we were going to be focusing on and in this case, it was dialogue. We had noticed from previous narrative pieces that this was a weakness and we wanted to address it through this text. It can be difficult to build all the tools you want to use into the shortened version of the text and we often take a part of the shortened version to expand on so that we can read as a writer. In this case, we took the conversation between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth before the murder of King Duncan. The children identified the tools the writer had used and we co-constructed a dialogue toolkit with them.
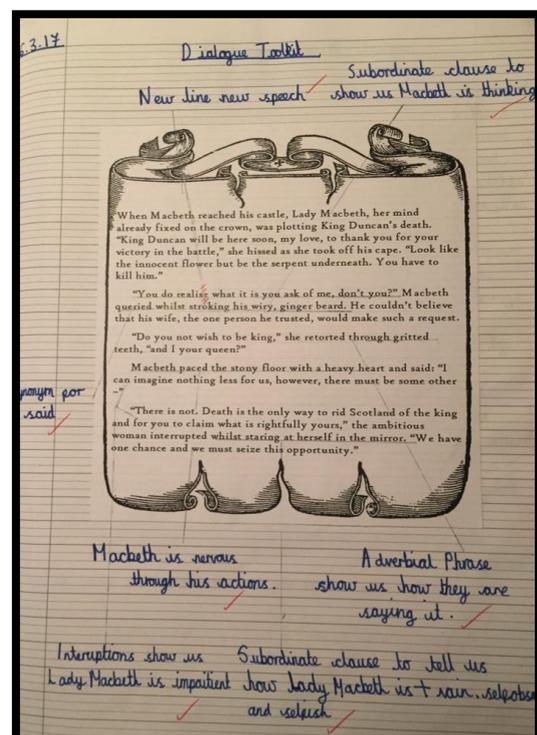
After the Reading Phase

Once we had read as a reader and as a writer, we were then ready to practise using our co-constructed dialogue toolkit. In the instance of Macbeth, we gave the children what the characters had said during a conversation between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth and asked them to embellish around the dialogue with the characters actions, the appropriate speech words and the correct punctuation. After this, we moved into the innovation stage and boxed up the text. We decided to innovate the text by writing modern versions and what we created were stories set in the current day that involved a character desperate for power. For our innovation, we all set our stories in school and chose a teacher as our main character. When it came to the independent application, the children had many ideas of their own. Some chose to write about footballers who had desires to be the team captain, some wrote about celebrities who wanted Simon Cowell's job on the X Factor and some wrote about our own Y6 monitors who wanted to be the head boy or head girl.

The time spent exploring the text led to the children independently writing stories with ambitious plots and complex characters, which were expertly conveyed through the children's use of dialogue. We were really pleased with the outcomes and the children were so proud of their work when it came to sharing their published pieces at the end of the unit.