



Story Reading into Writing

Children who read plenty of memorable stories avidly and repetitively, or are read a regular ‘bedtime story’, will implicitly internalise language patterns. Many of these children have the skill to draw on this resource for their own writing. Traditional tales are significant because they loiter in the mind powerfully due to their rhythmic, repetitive language but also because of their powerful images – wolves and trolls tend to hang around! Ted Hughes felt such tales were crucial because they offered ‘blueprints for the imagination’.

Internalising language and ideas by drawing on reading can be made increasingly explicit in school. I suspect that all writers develop the habit of reading with a ‘writerly’ eye and a writer’s curiosity, wondering, ‘how did the author do that?’ With children, it helps – *Because in a minute, we are going to attempt the same sort of thing...* In this sense, it is reading with a view to drawing on the approaches of different writers.

This aspect of learning to write is one that many writers instinctively know about because their advice to young writers is inevitably, *‘If you want to write then read, read, read’*. Reading with a writer’s eye can help to deepen understanding of how language has been crafted to create different effects – a ‘writer’s knowledge’.

The idea that ‘reading as a writer’ becomes a form of copying and therefore ‘cheating’ may be a barrier for some children. In fact, the imitating of sentence patterns gradually adds to the child’s linguistic store and later on they often use similar patterns and approaches in their own ways. For instance, a young child might reuse an opening sentence borrowed directly from a telling of ‘The Little Red Hen’ such as, ‘Once upon a time there was a Little Red Hen who lived on a farm’. Later in their writing the syntactical pattern may reappear, ‘Once upon a time there was a boy called Frostie who lived by a cave’. This ability to internalise patterns and use them to create new utterances is how language develops. It is often referred to as ‘generative grammar’ – which is the child’s ability to work out the underlying grammatical patterns of a language and then use them to create new utterances. This only happens when a child understands the meaning of what is being said so time spent on deepening understanding and appreciation of texts is crucial if the reading is to influence the writing. Instinctively, Maisie, 10 years, knows that the meaning matters when she says, *‘When I am reading and don’t understand a word, I check what it means. We got told to try and put tricky words into a new sentence, then we will remember it and what it means. Once we know it we can always use it.’*

The sort of attentive reading that consciously looks at the crafting of writing can help children see how other writers have handled narrative. It is especially useful when considering something difficult that a child would like to attempt. Of course such ‘attentive’ reading also helps the reader to internalise the patterns. Where the writing is especially effective, it may also trigger the imagination. It acts like a catalyst. Good writing makes you want to write yourself and provides an imaginative store of possibilities that can be drawn upon and extended. As Hursley Moss, 9 years, says, *‘If I’m writing about dragons or mythical creatures, I use my imagination.’*

But, if I was writing about a fugitive or someone being shot at, I'd get my inspiration from Anthony Horowitz "Alex Rider stories".' Children who read deeply and attentively live within the imagined world of a story. When they write, this can be drawn upon and creatively manipulated – providing the young reader with a sort of living library of characters, places, events and writing ideas. So, deep reading feeds the imaginative storehouse. Alexander is aware of the influence of his reading, *'When I am writing, I sometimes use phrases and wonderful words from books and also from the word board. It helps me to know what to do in writing. Books by Lemony Snicket are full of good phrases and words to use in any writing.'* Obviously, his class have benefited from gathering words and phrases onto a 'word board'. In the same class, Zak not only uses his reading but also involves his 'talk partner' in discussing possible choices, *'When I am writing, I sometimes use the ideas that I have read in books. They give me strong words or even openers. Sometimes I get my ideas from my Talk Partner because they might know better words.'* Callum is aware of recycling his vocabulary in different stories and knows that every take does not have to be totally new, *'When I am writing, I sometimes use strange words and phrases that I have remembered from different books. I also use WOW words that I have used before and I pinch words from my Talk Partner.'*

It is worth pointing out that words in themselves have no value – until they are used within a sentence. Lists of words decided upon by the teacher as being effective may lead into formulaic writing where a child misuses a word and adds it in without really thinking about the effect. This is not writing. Demi, 10 years, understands the importance of the word choice when he says, *'When I'm writing, I sometimes use words that I have read in a book. Some people say it is cheating but in English you are allowed to as long as it is good.'* Where teachers work with children to gather words and sentences, experimenting with vocabulary and thinking about the effects being created, 'word hoards' and 'word searching' can become an important part of becoming a writer. Mason, 10 years, not only borrows words from books but has another technique for making his dialogue realistic, *'I usually pinch ideas from books that I have read in the past and attempt to use them in my writing. I also listen to adults speaking in their conversations and try to put them in my work as well.'*

Of course, reading good books also acts as a yardstick so that when you are writing, and wondering whether what you have written is any good, it is your previous reading that helps you make that judgement.

In schools, we begin by reading for pleasure, to feed the imagination – and then to move on and read more deeply, to dig away at the meaning and deepen understanding. Once that is done – once the story has been discussed, acted, painted... then there may be space to move on and consider the words from a writer's angle... both what makes something effective or what makes something a weak piece of writing. It is worth remembering that it is easier to spot other people's weaknesses than our own because we are reading as a reader rather than as the writer. Of course, it is more obvious in music when a musician plays a wrong note. Bum notes are easy to notice. Looking at poor examples can help a writer think about what is needed to communicate more powerfully.

When writers in a class read together as writers, they begin to look carefully, reading more slowly than before, trying to notice what works. How was this magic

constructed? The class discuss what works and then move on to trying it out for themselves. In this way, stylistic features can be constantly noticed, referred to, discussed, collected and then imitated until they become an automatic part of the class's repertoire. In the end, this sort of curiosity becomes a habit that children apply when they are reading independently.

Those of us who took degrees or A levels in English are used to coming to a text in 'critic' mode, to consider a story as a completed object. However, 'reading as a writer' involves considering how the story is 'made' as well as the processes that got it there. Let's now consider what can be learned by reading stories 'as a writer'?

Noticing the Big Patterns

First of all, the overall pattern, theme of a text and the 'story idea' can be explicitly considered. There is a long-standing tradition in identifying different sorts of narrative patterns that are constantly recycled. Christopher Booker in his book 'Seven Basic Plots' demonstrates the similarities between 'Beowulf' and 'Jaws', both being classic 'overcoming the monster' story patterns. Many short stories and picture books lend themselves to children drawing the story map and moving onto drawing a story mountain, graph or flow chart that shows the key scenes. This helps to unpick the plot pattern. If children then keep a bank of such patterns in a writing journal, they can be re-used on many occasions. Later on they may begin to blend different patterns together to create new stories. It begins to help children gain a sense of story architecture.

One of the advantages of getting used to sorting out an underlying pattern is that this can be used as a basis for children's own writing. A flow chart or grid format helps to structure a narrative and for weaker writers even provides paragraphs. So, many stories act as blueprints for the children's own compositions. Of course, for the text to be well and truly internalised, the children have to 'loiter' with it for some time – rereading, dramatising, discussing, focussing on aspects until the text has entered the long-term working memory – until they almost 'own' the text because they are so familiar with it. This sort of intense engagement influences the writing.

Noticing the big patterns is simple enough in non-fiction where the organisation and structure is usually fairly obvious. Many people probably think that in narrative, it is less easy to identify building blocks in the same way. However, patterns in narrative often follow similar and simple lines when reduced down to the bare bones.

Begin by boxing up simple rhymes or picture books. For instance, here you can see the underlying pattern to Miss Muffett plus an idea for turning it into a new story. You will notice that the rhyme provides a similar build up to those that you find in most thriller/horror stories.

Original Rhyme	Underlying pattern	New story
Little Miss Muffet Sat on a tuffet		
Eating her curds and whey		
Along came a spider		

That sat down beside her		
And frightened Miss Muffett away		

As children become used to the process of 'boxing up' then they can begin to work on simple but well-defined stories. For instance, 'Adventure at Cambury Park' and 'Kidnapped' both provide simple story patterns that can be fairly easily identified and then used as a basis for the children to write their own version.

<p>Adventure at Cambury Park</p> <p>"Come on," shouted Sal as she ran towards the river. Laughing loudly, Jazzy followed. The two girls stopped by an old houseboat and began to feed the ducks. "Hey, look at that!" exclaimed Jazzy, pointing at something bobbing in the dark water. It was a strange looking package, covered in yellow plastic. Jazzy tugged the plastic loose. What was inside? To their amazement, gold coins spilled out onto the towpath.</p>	
<p>At that moment, a scruffy man appeared on the deck of the houseboat. As soon as he saw them, the man whistled. A terrier appeared and barked at the girls. The man's eyes were dark and cruel. 'Hey!' he called. Without hesitating, both girls ran back across the park, past the boatshed and towards the old warehouses.</p>	
<p>"Quick! Let's hide here," shouted Sal, dashing through the open door. They ran across the warehouse floor towards some old machinery. They crouched down behind a large engine and waited. The darkness stretched into every dusty corner. At that moment, they heard a scratching, scraping noise. Something was coming towards them. They froze, hearts pounding. Who or what was it? Peering round, Jazzy saw a shadow lurking....</p>	
<p>Suddenly there was a shout. 'Here boy!' whistled the man from outside. They heard the dog whining quite close to them but a moment later it turned and ran outside. As soon as it had gone, the girls dashed to the door. In the distance, they could see the man and his dog running in the opposite direction.</p>	
<p>Ten minutes later, the girls were back home. At first, Mrs Jenkins didn't believe them... But she soon did when Sal showed her the bag of golden coins. When the police arrived, the girls handed over the treasure. It turned out that the gold had been stolen only the day before from the local antique shop. Mr Carter, who owned the shop, visited them at school and gave both girls a reward.</p>	

<p>Kidnapped!</p> <p><i>Somebody was coming up the stairs! We ducked down behind an old crate and waited. I could feel my heart thumping like crazy and my throat felt tight and dry with the dust... and with fear. What if we were caught? The strange girl glanced at me in the semi-gloom and grinned. I thought she was trying to be reassuring.</i></p>	
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<i>The door opened and we could hear someone coming in. There was a pause and then a torch flickered on. Its beam pierced the darkness, seeking us out, nosing into all the dark corners. I held my breath and tried to make myself as small as possible. After a few moments, the light switched off. Whoever it was stood quite still. We could hear breathing. Then the door shut and the footsteps went back down the stairs. I let out a sigh of relief.</i>	
<i>As we clambered out of the window and slithered down the wet roof, I was trying to remember how I had got into such a mess. It had only been half an hour ago when mum had sent me down to the chippie with a tenner and strict orders for no vinegar on her chips. When I reached the McDonald's roundabout, I couldn't help looking at the old house. It was ready for demolition, which was a shame because we had used the windows as target practice! It was then that I'd seen it. A light at the window. Then a face, mouthing something. I stood there staring. It was a girl mouthing a word. And the word was HELP.</i>	
<i>That's how it happened. I'd found a way in round the back through a broken window. Half a minute later and I'd found her, trapped prisoner in an upstairs room. She'd only just finished telling me that she was the American ambassador's daughter Cindy Breakwell and about the ransom money when they had returned to move her to a safe house.</i>	
<i>So there we were, balancing on the wall as if we were walking the plank. Five minutes later and we were back at Mum's. "So, where's the fish and chips?" she asked, eyeing Cindy suspiciously.</i>	
<i>Half an hour later, Cindy's Dad arrived in an embassy car. That was the talk of St Petroc's estate for weeks. And that night it wasn't just fish and chips. He took us all out for a big meal. And the next day there I was. In the papers. A hero.</i>	

In writing journals and wall displays, show simple clear patterns for stories, eg

Adventure story writing frame

Opening	Finding something precious
Build up	Chased by a villain
Problem	Hiding from the villain
Resolution	Escaping
Ending	Reward!

In his book 'The Seven Basic Plots' Christopher Booker identifies, 'Overcoming the monster, Rags to riches, Quest, There and back again, Tragedy, Rebirth and Comedy'. While he was writing his book on this subject, I had been working in the same field, though with children. My list was somewhat similar. For children, the simplest plot pattern is the story mountain's 'problem/resolution'. In this plot, it is typical to begin with everything ok. We meet a character who is doing something enjoyable. Then a problem happens. This is eventually overcome and the tale ends with everything fine again – though perhaps the main character is a little wiser or stronger.

- **Main character is in an imagined place.**
- **The main character is doing something enjoyable.**
- **A series of events occur which involve some sort of problem or conflict.**
- **The main character attempts to resolve the problem.**
- **The problem is finally resolved**
- **Finally, all is well – and the character has changed, become stronger or has learned something.**

Story type	Example	Pattern
Quests and journeys	The Hobbit Red Riding Hood Where the Wild Things Are Rosie's Walk	A character travels in search of something or someone – or to find something or someone. Either from A to B or there and back again.
Cumulative tales	There was an Old Woman who swallowed a Fly The Hungry Caterpillar The Enormous Turnip On Friday Something Funny Happened	Very strong repetitive patterning – typical of some picture books but also used often in traditional tales, for instance where 3 brothers all carry out the same task.
Warning stories	Minpins Why The Whales Came	The main character is warned not to do something or go somewhere – ignores the warning and gets into trouble.
Beating the Baddie	The Iron Man Jack and the Beanstalk The Horse of Troy	Everything is fine till a threat appears. Eventually this is overcome.
Wishing tales	The Three Wishes Galactic Snapshots The Fib	A story involving someone who wishes for something but usually there is a barrier that has to be overcome. A variation is where a character is granted a wish but wastes it.
Transformations	Cinderella stories, The Gift from Winklesea Woof Beauty and the Beast The Snow Goose Harry Potter James and the Giant Peach	A character is transformed in some way – rags to riches, ugly to beauty, timid to brave. Occasionally, the transformation involves changing 'form' or personality. In some stories a character learns so much that their views or feelings are transformed.
Dangerous settings	Narnia Holes	These stories involve a character entering a forbidden or dangerous setting.
Losing and finding	Little Red Hen Owl Babies Charlotte's Web	A character finds or loses something of value.
Rescues	Sleeping Beauty The Magician's Nephew	A character has to be rescued.
Meeting someone	ET Dancing Bear Butterfly Lion The Midnight Fox	The main character meets someone or thing that then leads into a dilemma such as having to be looked after or kept secret.

Character Flaw	My Naughty Little Sister Horrid Henry	The main character is basically sympathetic but has a flaw, eg is greedy or does something silly.
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The more that children and teachers look at stories, the easier it becomes to identify the sort of story and its underlying pattern. To do it, you have to stand outside of the detailed meaning and try to notice the underlying pattern, forgetting the details and reducing a story down to the main elements. Once these have been drawn as a story map or grid or flow chart, the children can visually see the main sections where they will need to loiter – to show the scene in detail. The big pattern makes the spine of the tale.

Noticing the Building Blocks

In narrative, the ‘building blocks’ also have to be thought about – how does a writer build and develop a character, handle dialogue, use setting to create atmosphere, build suspense, handle action, open a tale invitingly or draw a story to a conclusion?

Paragraphs can be talked about rather like mini ‘scenes’. They are the chunks that indicate where the writer has to slow down, using detail to bring the story alive. When a new paragraph begins, the narrative changes, possibly taking a new direction. Changes may occur in the speaker, a shift in time, a new event, place or character. A new paragraph can introduce a surprise or twist. A paragraph shift changes the rhythm of the story. A long, descriptive paragraph may slow the pace whilst one punchy sentence may speed up events.

Generally, the start or end of a paragraph carries the most meaning. The opening usually introduces the main thrust of the paragraph or acts as a form of transition from the previous scene. (It is also worth keeping an eye on paragraphs to check that they are not becoming too long for the reader.) Study paragraphs carefully to discover why authors start a new one. Generally this is to introduce something new – a change in character, place, time, event, action or when someone new speaks.

While reading, it is worth building up a sense of different paragraph types such as suspense, action, hiding, lulling the reader into security, chasing, building atmosphere and so on. These building blocks can then be manipulated to create new stories. It is also worth collecting strategies to ‘hook’ a reader.

When writing stories, children will draw on their reading but it is just as important for them to use their own experience, using real people, places and events and fictionalising them. This provides the concrete details that make a character, setting or event sound realistic. It helps if the writer can visualise what is happening in their head, painting the picture for the reader.

How do you make your characters seem real?

Probably the major building block of all narrative has to be the characters. Careful reading of books with well-defined characters can help children begin to build a sense of how to create real characters so that they live on the page and in the reader’s mind. For a character to live in the reader’s mind, it probably has to be real

in the writer's mind. It can help to collect the names of characters from books and store these. Add in invented names. Sometimes a name can suggest something about the character. For instance, to me the name 'Scrooge' sounds scrunched up and mean. Roald Dahl was good at choosing names that already told the reader something about the characters, eg Boggis, Bunce and Bean!

Writers usually do spend too much time describing a character. One or two descriptive details that suggest something about the person is sufficient. One handy trick is to notice how writers often drop pieces of information into a sentence to show the reader what a character looks like.

*The woman, **dressed in a scarlet catsuit**, wandered across the stage.*

Children could practise dropping descriptions into sentences in a similar vein.

*The girl, wearing an old overcoat, ran into the shop.
Bryony, dressed in her school uniform, slouched on the sofa.*

They could then rehearse the idea of dropping into the sentence a description of what the character is doing.

*The policeman, twiddling his thumbs, waited on the street corner.
The teacher, tapping his foot impatiently, glared at the class.*

Notice how the sentence about the teacher really suggests a lot about how he is feeling. Ask children to scan their reading books and find sentences in which the reader is shown what the character feels or thinks by what they are doing, saying or thinking.

The key aspect about characterisation is for the writer to have a clear view on what their character feels or the sort of person that they are – a bully, kindly, generous, greedy, angry... This then influences what the character will say, do and think. It can also help to use detail and reveal what the character is thinking.

Carly flicked the crumbs off her blue jeans. She had already phoned Mrs Dalloway twice and was thinking that it was typical of her not to be at home just when she was needed. She stared at the baby and wondered yet again where on earth it had come from.

The main character will also have something they really want – a desire or goal. At the start of the *Spiderwick Chronicles* it is clear that Jared feels angry because he wants his father to come home and the family to be back together again. This extra dimension adds realism to the story.

Toolkit to make characters sound real

– collect examples in reading and use in writing:

- invent suggestive names – Mr Hardy
- drop in a few descriptive details
- think about how the character is feeling

- show this through what they say or do
- reveal a character's thoughts.
- know your character's desire or goal
- use detail.
- have you main character change during the story

How to Handle Dialogue

Look carefully at well-written dialogue, display it and make sure that the children have dialogue patterns in their journals. They can use these to remind themselves of the punctuation and layout when writing.

To write powerfully, it is helpful if children listen in to what people say and re-use phrases and expressions. That can really help to make their writing sound real.

If you look carefully at a writer like Betsy Byars, you will notice that what the characters say springs out of what they think and feel. Many children become trapped into a string of dialogue, forgetting to show the reader what the characters are doing. In this extract, the writer tags on what the speaker is doing.

Usually Zennor enjoyed visiting the glass city but today was different. "Personally, I have no intention of going anywhere," muttered the genie, dropping another sugar beetle into her mouth.

Zennor stared in fascination as the genie chewed thoughtfully. They waited while a wizard's cart trundled by. "But the Princess..." Zennor hissed, anxiously folding the telescope's frail wings.

Find examples of the writer tagging on what the speaker is doing in the same sort of way. Then imitate:

- ... *muttered the genie, dropping another sugar beetle into her mouth.*
- ... *Zennor hissed, anxiously folding the telescope's frail wings.*
- ... *Melanie whispered, sitting down on the park bench.*
- ... *Pie stated, angrily slamming the back door.*

Toolkit to make dialogue sound real

– collect examples in reading and use in writing:

- show how a character feels in what they say
- use powerful speech verbs – *hissed*
- use said + adverb – *he said nervously*
- tag on what a character is doing when speaking – *"No," he hissed, shaking his head in disgust.*
- use only a few exchanges

How do you create atmospheric settings?

Try the game of 'compare' where you show the children a rather sparsely written setting and one that builds the picture for the reader. Which is better and why?

Kezzi went into the shed. It was messy, dark and dirty. There was a load of stuff in there. She hid.

Kezzi stared round the shed. A fly crawled up the dusty windowpane, cobwebs hung from the rafters and a broken chair lay beside a pile of old carpets. The air smelled musty. From the back of the room, where it was quite dark, came the sound of something scratching, something scraping, something alive. But she had not got time to worry about that. Kezzie ducked down behind a large box and waited.

Generally, writers describe settings to tune the reader into imagining where the action takes place. However, as in the example above, a setting can be described in order to create an atmosphere. Collect examples of such descriptions and you will notice how writers use sensory impressions to build pictures. One useful habit is to show the reader the setting through the eyes of the main character (Kezzie stared round the shed). For instance, in Book 1 of *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, Jared finds himself in a hidden room:

'Jared looked around the room. It was a smallish library, with one huge desk in the centre. On it was an open book and a pair of old-fashioned round glasses that caught the candlelight...'

It is also helpful to show what is in a setting by using prepositions (*nearby, below, above, under, on*) as well as making lists of things.

'A collection of glass jars containing berries, dried plants and one filled with dull river stones sat at the edge of the desk. Nearby a watercolour sketch showed a little girl and a man playing on the lawn. Jared's eyes fell on a note tossed on top of an open book, both coated in a thin layer of dust...'

In this extract you can see how the author introduces into the setting something that will lead the story forwards – a message!

Toolkit to make a setting sound real

– collect examples in reading and use in writing:

- sensory details
- show the scene through the character's eyes – *Jill looked round at the shop.*
- introduce something out of place that will lead the story forwards
- describe what is there in detail
- make lists of what can be seen
- use prepositions – *below, above, nearby, on top of...*

How do you create suspense and action?

Most young writers want to write stories that are exciting. This means that they will have to pay attention to finding out about writing suspense and action. If you find suspense chunks in stories, you will begin to notice that there are certain similarities.

Often the main character is on their own in a lonely place, perhaps somewhere dark or dangerous. They then either hear something with ominous connotations – or catch a glimpse of something. Whatever is threatening them, the author hides for as long as possible so that the reader’s imagination works on overdrive. In this extract, we find two children camping in the garden.

Kevin zipped up the tent flap and we chatted for a while. I could just see my watch hands giving off a strange, green glow. It was creeping towards ten o’clock. Kevin had just told me a joke about a man with a dog that wore shoes when we first heard it. A strange scratching noise coming from just outside the tent. We froze. What on earth could it be?

Then it came again. Something or somebody was moving along the side of the tent towards the entrance. It was making a scraping noise like somebody’s last rasping breath! There was no escape. All we could do was lie there waiting. Terrified, both of us ducked our heads deep into our sleeping bags and waited. I could feel my heart thumping.

A close reading of the paragraphs also shows how the author uses occasional short sentences for dramatic effect but also shows how the characters feel by their reaction (we froze). A rhetorical question is used to alert the reader to potential danger by revealing the characters’ thoughts (what on earth would it be?). Empty words (something/ somebody) are used to hide whatever is threatening. Gradually, the author brings the threat closer. A close look at books by writers such as Anthony Horowitz will show the same sort of tactics.

‘Action’ uses many of the same techniques. One key point for the writer in all story writing is to ‘see’ and ‘show’ what happens rather than resorting to telling the reader. The writer has to make the action happen. For instance, show the children these two passages to decide which is more effective and why.

<p>Action – fight</p> <p>Sid ran. But within seconds, a hand grabbed his shoulder in a vice-like grip. He spun round. Without warning, a sickening punch smashed into his stomach. He fought for breath, doubled up in pain. Somebody seized his hands and the next thing he knew, he was hand-cuffed.</p>	<p>Sid ran. They got him. They put handcuffs on him.</p>
<p>Action – chase</p> <p>Sid could hear their footsteps, heavy on the road, thudding along behind him. He spurted forwards, dodged into an alley and ducked behind a low wall. A moment later, they charged past. Sid sighed. He had escaped.</p>	<p>Sid ran for it. He hid from them. They ran past.</p>

Toolkit to make action and suspense sound real

– collect examples in reading and use in writing:

- balance short and long sentences
- use questions to draw the reader in
- use exclamations for impact
- use an ominous sound effect – *something hissed*
- show a glimpse of something – *a hand appeared at the door*
- use dramatic connective – *at that moment...*
- use empty words – *something, somebody, it*
- use powerful action verbs – *run, dashed, grabbed, gripped, seized, crouched, pounded, screamed, shrugged, shook, pinched*

How do you write good openings and endings?

Pile up books and let children sort out openings to stories that grab them and make them want to read on. Try categorising openings into different types, eg:

Warning – *‘Don’t you go near that old house,’ snapped Mr Korkle...*

Mentioning the monster – *Timo had never believed in ghosts...*

Using the character’s name and showing what they are feeling through what they are doing – *Betty glared out of the window, tapping her foot impatiently.*

The setting - *Outside the castle, the wind howled and snow blew across the forest...*

Starting with a question – *“Where are you two going?” hissed Mrs Buckley...*

Read openings to favourite books and imitate the same approaches. For instance, Philip Reeves book ‘A Darkling Plain’ begins, *‘Theo had been climbing since dawn; first on the steep roads and paths and sheep tracks behind the city, then across slopes...’* This might be re-written as, *‘Barry had been walking since dusk; first down the High Street, then past the station...’*

Many stories begin with some sort of ‘trigger that is designed to hook the reader’s interest. This could be:

- **something dramatic** – *A car screeched round the corner...*
- **something out of the ordinary** – *The Old Bridge was sinking...*
- **an odd character** – *At the end of the lane, a clown appeared....*
- **a strange object** – *On the ground was an enormous broomstick*
- **mentioning a monster** – *Baz had always been afraid of trolls...*
- **dismissing a monster** – *Simrach had never believed in ghosts...*
- **a warning** – *‘Don’t play by the canal. It’s dangerous!’*
- **a question** – *‘Where are you going?’*
- **an exclamation** – *‘Run for it!’*

- **a magical object** – *The teapot stretched its legs and tiptoed across the table...*
- **something scary in the setting** – *In the distance a dark storm cloud... appeared... or even scarier* – *She thought that she saw a shadow but it was gone before she could be certain.*
- **starting with a negative character** – *The old man glared at Sivo as he walked by...*
- **an unusual characteristic** – *Mrs Jenkins had once been a wrestler.*

Collect openings from stories and list them – as potential patterns for writing or just because they remind us of stories that we love. Here is one of my favourite openings plus an imitation:

"Where's Papa going with that axe?" said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast. *Charlotte's Web.* (E.B. White)

"What are you going to do with that dynamite?" said Billi to his Father as they settled down to watch the television. (Me)

It is worth comparing openings and endings. The children will soon realise that the opening draws the reader into the story. The ending usually wraps the tale up but also often shows the reader how the character's feelings have changed – *Bill grinned* – or comments on what has been learned – *They knew it had been stupid...*

Play a game where you provide 5 openings and their endings – muddled up. Can the children match the openings and their partner endings. Provide openings or endings. Discuss what is happening.

Noticing the pace of a story

Weaker writers usually struggle with pacing. There are two common problems:

- a. they may add in irrelevant detail;
- b. or they dash through key events.

Too quick	Too slow
The robbers got the money. The police came and the robbers were caught. The End.	When Tom arrived, Gary was there. He was his best friend and they had a gang together and they liked to play on his BMX with his friends Tony and Billy who lived down Manningham way....

Pacing is about deciding how much time needs to be spent on different parts of the story. Of course, there are different levels to pacing. At the whole text level, the story needs to be planned into chunks or scenes – deciding, where we need to loiter and build description or suspense or spend time making the story exciting. The next level comes down to words and sentences – how we actually achieve the pacing – how do we loiter and how do we move quickly, for instance, indicating the passing of time?

Once the writer has a basic story idea and a possible structure begins to develop, this helps with the overall pace. Being able to see the underlying pattern in a story

flowchart or grid helps the young writer know which scenes matter and when to speed up. The planning process might look like this:

- Chart out the story onto a story mountain, story board, flow chart or grid.
- Decide on the key scenes where you need to slow the pace or speed it up - and annotate the plan with ideas, words, images, etc.
- Use the plan to tell the story to a partner.
- Get feedback from your partner – any bits that were rushed – and any places where irrelevant detail was used that could be trimmed. What about the impact, did characters sound real?
- Refine and retell in the light of feedback before moving into writing.

A word of caution needs to be added here. Many young writers benefit from planning because it allows the story to develop. However, some children find this kills the sense of story writing being an act of discovery where the story comes into being as they write. In other words, before they start writing the story is unknown – creativity means bringing something new into being and actually writing the tale for some writers is the act of unfolding. Indeed, many writers do little planning. Over-planning can kill the enjoyment of story writing. Having said that, weaker writers are often supported by some planning and time to develop a story orally. The likelihood is that those who can launch in successfully have probably internalised a strong story architecture.

Pacing a story is often taught by using examples from the teacher or by using children’s stories on an OHT or interactive whiteboard either with the whole class, in guided sessions or during writing conferences with individuals. Here are some key activities.

Spot the pacing

Children who read as writers have an ear for writing that flows. Try comparing sections of stories – perhaps with the children giving a rating (scale of 1 to 10). For instance, what rating would you give to these examples? Where does the writing need to speed up or slow down?

The news that Jason was stopping by for lunch came as a shock to Mrs Chuckle. She was not used to visitors and it made her feel flustered.

However, she knew that it had to be done so Mrs Chuckle began to peel the potatoes as she stared out of the window and wondered what sort of adventure Jason would be facing. Was it dragons and trolls this time? She shook her head and tutted to herself. Once they were ready, she popped them into a cooking pot and began on the carrots. These were too stringy and by the time she had finished they looked positively skinny. The runner beans were easier and she had them prepared in no time. Then she began to shell the peas. By now she was tired and some of them shot onto the floor. She seemed to spend ages looking for them, crawling on all fours. In the end, it took her over an hour to get the meal ready.

When Jason arrived, the lunch was on the table. He was starving...

Jason stood at the dark cave mouth. He could smell the dragon. For a long while he stood quite still and listened. He thought that he could hear its deep breathing. A sort of gentle rumbling from deep within the mountain. Every now and then he imagined that he heard the dragon moving and the scrunch of precious stones as its great belly heaved on top of its treasure hoard.

Once he was certain that it was asleep he crept into the darkness. It was a long way into the mountain before he reached where the dragon lay. He stood staring. To his surprise, it was much smaller than he had imagined. No larger than a big dog. While he was staring, its eye flickered open.

Jason ran, stumbling back up towards the mouth of the cave...

Usually the children will be able to hear if the story has irrelevant detail or if the writer has dashed. Read examples that you have cooked up as well as the children's own writing – can we hear places where we have added in too much or where we have dashed? And most importantly, they need to hear plenty of stories where the writing is well paced!

Compare

Another tactic is to take a perfectly written extract from a well-loved story and ruin it by adding in detail that is not needed or by rewriting it without any detail and rushing through it. This can sound very funny and really makes the point for the children:

They looked at the peach. It was getting bigger.

**

The two women and the small boy stood absolutely still on the grass. James was eleven years old. He liked skateboarding. His favourite meal was chips and beans on toast and his best friend Billy liked burger and chips but they were not allowed those at home. James was with his aunts underneath the tree, gazing up at this extraordinary fruit.

With all of this, we need to bear in mind the impact on the reader – too much; too little; to what purpose? Do we need to slow the pace down and build description or suspense? Are we loitering to build up a false sense of security because in a moment there will be a dramatic event? Do we need to reveal a character's thinking because we want the reader to feel sorry for them? Every detail should have a purpose.

'Slow down' a scene

Find a piece of writing (or invent one) that has a dashed scene and demonstrate how to freeze the scene and take a snapshot of it, adding in detail to bring it alive, giving depth. Try writing an example in front of the children where you dash through events:

Bill ran down the lane. He fell over. He was caught.

Discuss why this doesn't work – how might the writer make the scene more dramatic? Then rewrite, trying to create the 'snapshot' of the scene, adding in detail to create a picture of what happened for the reader – in other words, slow the pace and make more of the scene. To do this, try to see the scene and use sensory detail to bring it alive, painting the picture for the reader.

Bill ran down the lane, his feet thudding on the tarmac. He could just hear the gang behind him, shouting and yelling. At the bottom of the lane he turned the corner, stumbled and fell over. A second later, he felt someone grabbing him, pinning him to the ground. He was caught.

It helps if the children have thought about which scenes to linger on before they start writing. However, when responding or marking, it can also help to identify a place where the writer dashes – and ask the writer to 'slow down' the scene and make it happen for the reader by describing what happened. As ever – this has to be modelled many times by the teacher!

Trim it

This is the other side of the coin to loitering on key scenes. Demonstrate how to spot and cut out irrelevant detail by writing up a scene in which irrelevant detail has been added. Can the children suggest what needs to be trimmed.

Bill ran down the lane. He was wearing a light brown pair of trousers and had a fudge bar in his pocket. The night before he had been to the cinema where he had seen a good film. The tickets had been pricey. Then he fell over.

Once again, this idea can be used when responding to children's writing to help them delete places where they may have added in information that is not needed by the plot.

'Speed up' a scene

Children will need to develop the ability to slow down a scene so that the story can be told. They will also need strategies for getting rapidly from one scene to another. These techniques can be gathered from skimming stories. You will notice that temporal connectives are handy for speedy movement as well as 'sentences of three' that provide a quick list.

a. Moving speedily from one place to another:

We walked round the house, across the field and into the forest. Once there....

They crossed the ocean in their brightly coloured boats and arrived in Norfolk one blustery day in December....

b. Time passing that does not need elaboration:

- *Over the next month we searched the shoreline, checked the caves and looked in all of the beach huts...*
- *It was twenty minutes later, when they reached the house...*
- *They ran as fast as they could till they arrived...*
- *After one week, Old Mr Jerund found the wooden doll...*
- *Timo worked for many hours before he was able to...*

c. Speed up the action:

- *Bill ran down the hill, over the road and dashed into Woolworths...*
- *That summer, Sally built the radio, completed her novel and ran the marathon...*

Varying the sentences

Good writers vary their sentences to create different effects. It is worth putting paragraphs under the microscope and thinking about different ‘types’ of sentence as well as how writers vary their sentences. Short sentences will add drama and are also useful for making a point. Longer sentences can delay events happening or pile them up in quick succession. Read passages of writing aloud so children can hear the rhythm. Make sure they read them aloud for dramatic presentation because just looking at a sentence will not help a child internalise its patterning. They should:

- look and discuss the impact;
- hear it read aloud;
- perform it aloud and savour the sound and rhythm;
- imitate by doing a similar sort of sentence;
- jot it in a writing journal;
- see it written on the class wall.

In classes where children find it hard to vary their sentences, teachers have found it helps to collect different common patterns and provide reminders about:

Ways to vary sentence openings:	Ways to vary sentences:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘when’ starter – <i>Last night...</i> • ‘how’ starter – <i>Carefully, he crept...</i> • ‘where’ starter – <i>Across the road...</i> • name starter – <i>Bill wandered...</i> • adjective starter – <i>Tall trees towered overhead...</i> • simile – <i>Like an eel...</i> • one worder – <i>Tired, he ambled...</i> • ‘ing’ clause – <i>Running quickly, Tim fell...</i> • ‘ed’ clause – <i>Excited by the news, Joanna ran...</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short, simple sentences – for drama and clarity: <i>Tom ran.</i> • Compound sentences for flow – <i>Tom ran and Kitty walked.</i> • Complex sentences to add in extra layers of information – <i>As Tom ran, Kitty ate the cake.</i> • Questions to draw in the reader – <i>What was that?</i> • Exclamations for impact – <i>Run for it!</i> • Sentence of 3 for description – <i>He wore a dark cloak, shiny shoes and red trousers.</i> • Sentence of 3 for action – <i>Tom ran across the beach, jumped over the rock and collapsed.</i>

Children finds these sorts of notes helpful if they are stored in their writing journals and used on a regular basis as illustrated by the quotations below:

- *My favourite page is adverbs – and my favourite adverb is – ‘majestic’*
- *The journal is good because if you forget something like punctuation you can always find an example to show you how it is done.*
- *I use my journal to remind me of the things that I find hard.*
- *My writing is definitely better since I started using the journal because before I was always forgetting how to do things like speech marks. It is also good because it gives you better words, like ‘dashed’ is better than ‘went’.*

Noticing the tiniest bits

Children who love writing will notice and sometimes just want to gather words and phrases and sentence s because they love the sound of them. As a fan of Andy Stanton’s Mr Gum books, I cannot help noticing such gems as these from the opening chapter of ‘Mr Gum and the Biscuit Millionaire’:

‘The day stretched out long and lazy like a huge glossy panther made of time.’
‘When she laughed, the sunlight went splashing off her pretty teeth like diamonds in search of adventure.’
‘The afternoon had grown fat with shadows.’

Whilst a child would not imitate directly such language use, they may well be encouraged to be similarly adventurous.

Word hoarders and searchers can gather such beautiful gems and then experiment with their own creations. There should be a link between finding words or sentences and then ‘trying them out’. But ‘reading as a writer’ can also be used to help children find correct spellings. Several years ago I found a Year 4 boy searching through a Darren Shan novel while he was supposed to be writing a poem. He told me he was looking for the word ‘woeful’ because he wanted to use it and wasn’t too sure of the spelling. Sophie, 10 years, makes it clear too that just having a list of punctuation marks is in itself not as helpful as actually seeing how punctuation is used:
‘Sometimes I don’t know how to use punctuation from the list, but if I see it in a book then I know how.’

Final thoughts

Even if we teach our socks off, there is so much to learn that we cannot do it all! But, if we can awaken that curiosity that a writer has in noticing how others write, then the power to teach themselves when they are reading would deepen their writing. We need to develop greedy readers and then turn them into writers who are attuned to the daily possibility of learning how to write from their reading – the curiosity of a fellow writer. Remembering, that writers are thieves!

I am grateful to Suzanne Hughes’ y6 class for most of the children’s quotes. All other quotes © remains with the authors.