



Reading into Writing: Short burst writing inspired by a novel

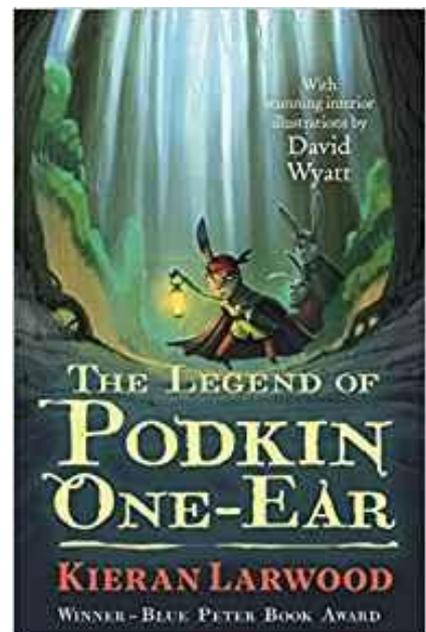
The Legend of Podkin One-Ear by Kieran Larwood

The inspiration

After reading (and thoroughly enjoying) *Podkin One Ear* by Kieran Larwood, I wanted to explore ways of using it to support the teaching of writing.

I could see that there were many passages within the novel that showed incredible examples of characterisation, setting and suspense. These are perfect to use as snippets to supplement the children's understanding when co-constructing toolkits within the Talk for Writing process. They are ready to be raided when looking at how the writer has created specific effects and are perfect for 'magpieing' and helping children to see how the author chooses the right words and phrases to interest and intrigue the reader.

Incidentally, it was simple to collate these extracts as I read the book. Each time I came across a great example of a particular technique, I added a post-it to the page and labelled it with the effect it was showing - easy!



However, I wanted to do more than just raid the book for passages; I wanted to use it to inspire children's writing. This led me to combine it with my other passion - Short Burst Writing. In my previous article on *Short Burst Writing in the Talk for Writing sequence* (<https://www.talk4writing.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Short-burst-writing-Maria.pdf>) I outlined the process of using it to teach description.

This time I wanted to use it to extend and contextualise the children's writing ideas, by using elements within Podkin to help them invent new passages for the story. Ultimately, they could then use these to invent new storylines and stories.

Below is an outline of the lesson I used to do this, taught to mixed Y3/4 classes, as part of our Transforming Reading and Writing projects in Somerset and Dorset. It has since been used to teach a variety of classes, in different settings and contexts, all the way up to Year 6 (adapted accordingly).

The Lesson

As a warm up, I showed the children the image below and asked them what they thought it *could* be, for example: an ancient fan used for keeping a grumpy giant cool. This was to get the children thinking creatively and going beyond the obvious.

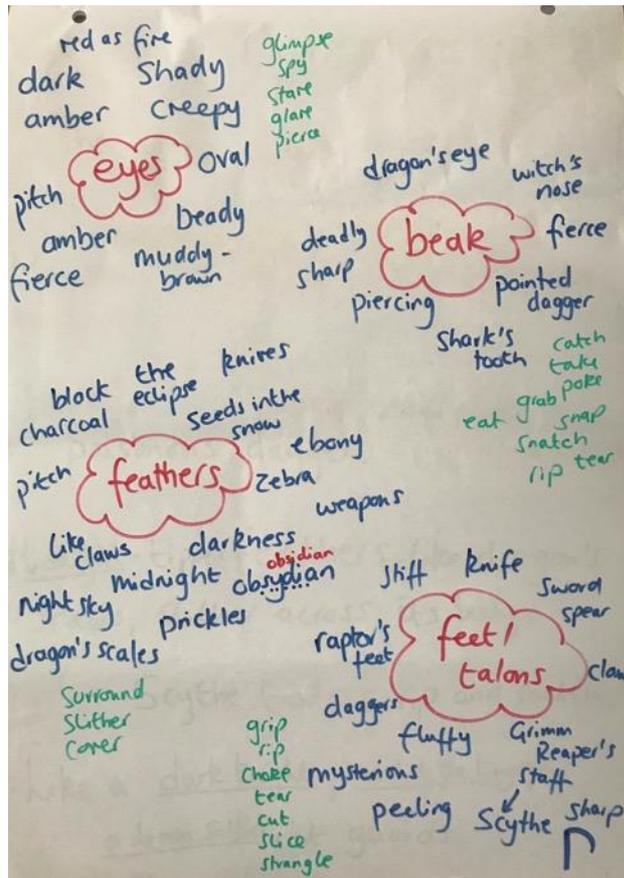


I then explained that I wanted us to use our imagination to write a description of a new character for the novel I was reading. I introduced them to Podkin, read them the blurb and gave them a brief synopsis of the storyline. I got them to close their eyes whilst I read them the passage below, to set the scene for our writing. I explained that the main characters were on a quest to find help and refuge and ended up in this setting and this was where our new animal character was going to appear. (Pg 111 of the novel & I stopped at ...'thirsty for blood.')

Boneroot

Following Brigid's map, the young rabbits found the Red River again and walked along to where it forked. There was a little bridge made of fallen logs lashed together, which they slipped and slid across, and then they followed the smaller branch south again. Before them lay Grimheart forest, a huge mass of trees that filled the entire horizon. The silver-grey, frosted branches were like an ocean of icy wood; the whole Gorm army could be hidden in there, or a thousand packs of hungry wolves, thirsty for blood. Robbers, bandits, murderers – Podkin's

My first question to the children was: *What kind of atmosphere does this create?* Replies included scary, sinister, evil, dark, mysterious, spooky. I explained that Podkin was going to meet a new animal character here and the way we described it needed to fit with the atmosphere. It was then that I showed the children the new character we were going to write into the story, using this visual:

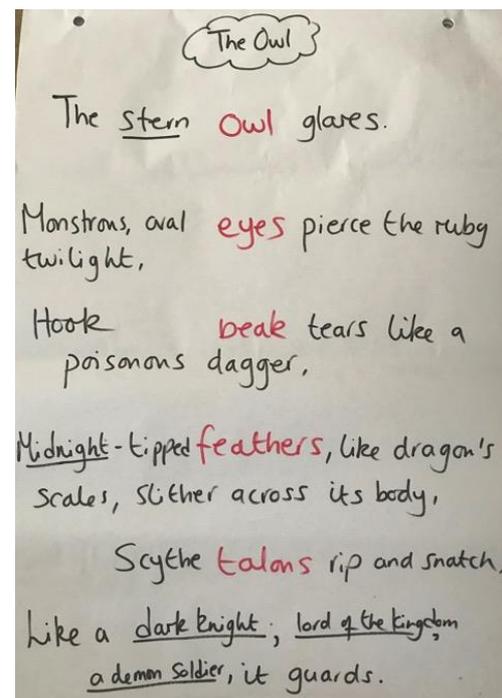


We looked separately at each aspect that we wanted to focus on and generated vocabulary (adjectives & verbs) to describe it.

Taking each element in turn, as the spine to our description, we crafted the writing together; me leading the discussions on what worked best, referring children to the vocabulary gathered and constantly considering the best descriptions with fresh, new ideas. Here is an example of what we created:

The Owl

The stern **owl** glares,
 Monstrous, oval **eyes** pierce in the ruby twilight,
 Hook **beak** tears like a poisonous dagger,
 Midnight-tipped **feathers**, like dragon's scales, slither across its body,
 Scythe **talons** rip and snatch,
 Like a dark knight, a lord of the kingdom, a demon soldier, it guards.



Now it was time to put our character back into the story. After the setting description on Pg111 of Podkin, the characters push on with their journey, eventually finding the place they have been searching for. I read the children this extract from Pg 118 and explained we were going to drop our new character into this scene:

The rabbits stared at it for a while. It was a wonder to them why anyone would build something like this above ground, and how they had even managed to do it. The thing towered over them, sculpted so cleanly. There had been a stone fireplace in the Munbury warren, but everything else had been built out of wood, carved all over with patterns of twining leaves and the daisy that had been their tribal symbol. To make something this big out of stone would have taken such effort; and it was only *part* of a doorway. What had the rest of the building been like?

A voice suddenly echoed out of nowhere, making them all jump. 'Who goes there?' They looked around the darkening woods, trying to spot its owner, but couldn't see anything. Surely it hadn't come from the stone pillar itself?

I gave them a linking sentence start: *Then Podkin saw it...* and showed the children how to drop our creative description in to narrative, keeping the mood and atmosphere the same. This was the result:

And then Podkin saw it. A stern-looking owl was glaring at the siblings. His monstrous, oval eyes pierced the ruby twilight and Podkin could just make out his hook-beak, like a poisonous dagger, ready to tear them to shreds. Midnight-tipped feathers slithered across his entire body like menacing dragon scales. Nervously, Paz took a step back at the sight of the creature's scythe talons, ripping at the ice and ready to snatch any intruder attempting to storm the entrance of the tunnel. Just like a dark demon, it guarded Boneroot.

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What next?

Over a series of lessons, the children could then use this method to create alternate animal characters to drop into this scene. They could also add to other parts of the story where action or interaction takes place, either extending the storyline or dropping in scenes. They could practice extending the description of settings or adding in suspense at various parts of the novel and they could also take the new animal characters created and use them when writing a sequel or prequel to a 'Podkin-like' story. This could be done in the same Journey story structure or any that fitted their composition, like a Tale of Fear or a Warning Story.

Overall, using the novel as the main stimulus for practising writing skills and ultimately using it as a springboard for new, invented writing was extremely successful. It also sparked so many other ideas on how to use snippets from novels to practice or inspire writing. Watch this space for more novel-inspired lessons in the future!

Maria Richards Talk for Writing Primary Expert

Maria Richards is available to deliver Talk for Writing training throughout the UK & internationally. Please visit the training page on the Talk for Writing website for more details. Want a project to run in your area? Contact Maria for details.

