Creating Writers

A creative writing manual for Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3

James Carter

REVISED AND UPDATED EDITION

‘Every school should have a copy of Creating Writers!’
Pie Corbett, poet and educational consultant
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Revised and updated edition

James Carter
For Lauren (a real wiz with words) 
with infinite love
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‘Where do you get your ideas from?’ It’s what everyone asks of an author. Yet it is an impossible question to respond to with any certainty, except perhaps with the answer: ‘Anywhere and everywhere.’ Above all else, it is the aim of this book to help children to discover this answer for themselves.

Many authors feel that, to an extent, ideas are the easy part. It is what you do with them that counts. So Creating Writers sets out to show what many popular and established children’s writers do with their ideas and how they grow and develop them into fully fledged poems, stories, novels, plays and information books.

The material in Creating Writers comes from a variety of sources. Some of the author quotes stem from interviews conducted especially for this book; some material comes from public talks, performances or writing workshops. Other quotes derive from my book of interviews, Talking Books (Routledge 1999). In all cases, full permission has been granted to use the material.

Creating Writers is a creative writing manual, and covers poetry, fiction and non-fiction. The ideas, advice, activities and models of writing featured are provided by a variety of contemporary children’s authors, and offer teachers contexts and opportunities in which they can help enable young writers to:

• enjoy, explore and feel confident in their own creativities
• discover their own literary voices
• express themselves in a range of literary forms, modes and genres and for many purposes and audiences
• reflect upon the craft and processes of writing
• discover their own writing methodologies
• appreciate that writing is a craft skill that requires patience, time and dedication
• be adventurous and take risks in their writing
• engage with and respond imaginatively to the work of others
• consider the key elements of poetry, fiction and non-fiction
• perceive themselves as writers and as members of a writing community.

The authors represented here were chosen because they each had something invaluable to contribute in terms of passing on advice about creative writing to young people, as
well as sharing their writing methods and of talking about the wealth of experience they have had in schools as writing workshop leaders. Extracts are taken from their texts that are not only relevant but also prevalent and popular resources in Primary and Secondary schools.

Creating Writers could be used in one of two ways – either as an entire creative writing course to be followed through from start to finish, or alternatively and more likely, as an ‘off the shelf’ source book for ad hoc writing activities. The book has been written, where possible, in accessible, everyday language in order that it can be used with KS2 and KS3 children. Teachers will observe that the majority of the material is pitched directly at – and could be read aloud to – the children.

None of the workshop activities presented in this book are set in stone. Teachers are encouraged to view these resources as starting points to be adopted and adapted according to the varying needs of classes, writing environments and individuals. Indeed, a number of the workshop ideas that appear in this book have been used with adults as well as Primary and Secondary age children, and have been adjusted to suit the ages, ability levels and interests of the writers.

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Creating Writers has been a most exciting and rewarding project in which I have met many generous and inspirational people who were only too willing to give up so much of their precious time. I wish to thank all of them for helping me to assemble this book. I am most grateful to all of the authors for inviting me into their homes and offices, for talking with me, for digging up old manuscripts and for revising the interview transcripts. Please refer to the p. 168 for website addresses for each of these authors.

I wish to thank the illustrator Peter Bailey for allowing me to reproduce his fantastic artwork, which always inspires young writers. Ian Beck deserves a very special word of thanks – for his unfailing commitment to this project, his warm and congenial support and the truly excellent artwork he has provided for the cover. Thanks must also go to Rob Vincent for his wonderful photographs and to Ken Bentley for his technical wizardry in designing the word wheels.

This is an updated version of Creating Writers – not a radical re-write, more a slimmed-down, hopefully more dynamic version, in what we trust will be a more teacher-friendly format. Sadly, since the first publication, some of the contributors have passed away – three very fine writers, Helen Cresswell, Anthony Masters and Neil Ardley – but their books continue to be published and enjoyed, and their words and reflections on writing that permeate this book are still as relevant as ever.

I must highlight the fact that all of the material in this text – from child or adult, professional or otherwise – has been donated without charge. I am genuinely touched by the generosity of each and every contributor.

To the very special Helen Fairlie (formerly of Taylor & Francis) – whose adept insight, verve and unfailing enthusiasm helped me to establish and shape the project at the outset – I extend my warmest gratitude for her invaluable input throughout the production of this book. Finally, I wish to thank a few more people who have given much time and energy to this book – Sophie Thomson and Annamarie Kino of Taylor & Francis (who
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Sarah, for all her faith, her encouragement and her support and for bringing us our
wonderful daughters, Lauren and Madeleine.
A positive writing environment

In practice, a positive writing environment must surely be one in which each and every person in a writing workshop feels that their ideas and contributions are valid and valued. The writing environment is very much the responsibility of the teacher or the workshop leader. A healthy and positive workshop ethos can be achieved in a number of ways, including:

- listening with genuine interest when children make contributions or read their work aloud;
- creating a warm and positive environment in which children grow in confidence and ability;
- writing alongside children on a regular basis, and sharing writing with the group;
- publishing work on a regular basis (see ‘Publishing’ section on p. 13);
- making supportive and sensitive but critical comments on students’ drafts;
- allowing pupils to work at their own pace and to spend time thinking about their writing (see ‘Time to think’ on p. 5);
- keeping an open mind on the length of a piece, as creativity should ideally not be quantified;
- asking only volunteers to read aloud a first draft; there can be set times when all pupils can prepare for a reading of their pieces;
- taking time to read children’s drafts on an ongoing basis;
- being flexible as regards the content of workshop activities – at times allowing pupils to take their writing in directions of their own;
- recognising and accepting that some activities will inevitably work better with one group as opposed to another;
- encouraging pupils to be supportive and attentive to each other;
- organising the group into ‘feedback partners’ or small groups on an ongoing basis (see below);
- above all, generating real enthusiasm for confidence with creative writing.
**Feedback partners**

Feedback partners work together on a regular basis to read each other’s work and to offer useful support, advice and criticism. When a piece of your own writing is still fresh, it is hard to be objective and to distance yourself from the piece – so having a feedback partner is ideal. When you are giving feedback to a partner, it is important to be sensitive and polite at all times. As Brian Moses suggests, it is best to start with a positive comment and then make a suggestion for developing the piece, for example, ‘Your main character seems quite interesting, but do we know enough about her yet?’ or ‘This poem has a lovely rhythm, but I’m not sure about the last line – do you think it has too many words?’

Make sure that you read your partner’s work slowly and carefully. You could even ask whether your partner minds if you make notes in the margin in pencil. You may choose to discuss your ideas for a new piece with your partner before you begin writing. Sometimes you could ask your partner to read your piece of writing to you, as this may highlight anything that is not quite working and may enable you to find what needs to be done next.

The ‘Poetry checklist’ in Chapter 2 (p. 66) and the ‘Fiction checklist’ in Chapter 3 (p. 139) provide a range of issues to consider when reading your own and your partner’s writing; these can also be used by teachers when commenting or responding to pupils’ pieces (see ‘Drafting and editing’ on p. 7).

**Time to think**

We all need time to mull over and explore our ideas, to ponder over how we are going to start or even develop our writing. Thinking and daydreaming are vital to creativity, as these authors emphasise:

**MICHAEL MORPURGO:** The first stage of writing a book is the looking, the listening, the researching, the collecting of ideas, the reading, the learning, the feeling – the living. It’s the most important time. Before I start the actual writing I will make little notes of various ideas that I don’t want to forget. I’ll then focus on an idea and go into my dreamtime. My dreamtime can and does take place anywhere – even, I’m afraid, when I’m talking to people – which I shouldn’t do! More often than not I do it lying on the bed, and if that doesn’t work then I’ll go for a walk. I’ll walk the lanes around us and talk it out loud to myself as I go – entertaining the sheep!

**CELIA REES:** It took me a long time to realise that writing is not just about sitting at a word processor or a pad of paper and getting things down. Writing is everything: reading, going to the library, visiting places, researching, taking photos and even thinking – thinking is an inherent and very important part of the writing process.
Though daydreaming can be very creative and productive, actively thinking too hard and for too long can often lead to a blank sheet of paper or computer screen. Many authors say that their best writing occurs when they have stopped thinking intently and the piece just seems to write itself, as Malorie Blackman believes:

**MALORIE BLACKMAN:** When you sit down and begin to write, don’t think too hard about it. If I think too hard about what I’m going to write, I get really stuck. When I just sit down and do it, even if I eventually chuck away ninety-nine per cent of what I’ve done, at least I’ve got something to work on. If you get to a difficult bit, just do it – you just write through it. There have been times when I’ve written a whole chapter and later I’ve deleted all of it and only kept a page, but at least I know where I want to go once I’ve done that.

**Time to explore**

As Pie Corbett comments, we need to be flexible in our approach to creative writing and give children freedom to explore:

**PIE CORBETT:** There are times as teachers and workshoppers that we need to let children follow their own creativities. For instance, I was working in a rural school using Kit Wright’s ‘The Magic Box’ as a structure. One girl, Molly, who was nine at the time, wrote her own poem. It was clearly inspired by ‘The Magic Box’ but it had its own form and structure. It went something like ‘I’ll ride away on a journey to a dream / and capture midnight magpies’ wings’. It was one of the most fabulous pieces of writing from a child I’ve ever heard. It rhymed and it was beautiful. She wouldn’t have written that if I had asked her to stick to ‘The Magic Box’. You can start children off, but sometimes they’ll need to follow their own path. A writing frame can actually restrict some writers. Teachers though, will know their classes well, and know who to let loose and who to rein in. We have to develop children as creative, innovative writers. We do not want classes full of automatons that fill in gaps and do exactly what you tell them to do. But at times, this is the way that children learn to write. So it’s a fine balance. Children need opportunities to do both.

**Freewriting**

Many people find it hard to go into a writing activity cold. Freewriting allows pupils time to adjust to the creative demands of a workshop. Tony Mitton has used this method himself:

**TONY MITTON:** I used to do freewriting exercises – which involved sitting down and writing for ten minutes per day. The intention of the exercise was to keep writing non-stop for ten minutes. It didn’t matter if you got stuck, or if you wrote rubbish, just so long as you were writing something, anything, and the words were coming out. I discovered by doing that what a torrent of creativity the human brain is.

It is best to avoid going straight into a workshop activity. Even a couple of minutes of freewriting will help pupils to focus and allow ideas to start flowing.
**Workshop structure**

A workshop ideally needs a coherent structure, something along the lines of:

- **Opening** – informing the class what they will be writing later.
- **Freewriting** – as an occasional warm-up – or even a quick writing game – say, writing an alliterative phrase or a tongue twister (see ‘Writing warm-ups’ on p. 15).
- **Discussing the writing activity** or reading a text as a model.
- **Teacher modelling** – writing on the board with contributions from the class.
- **Class writing** – doing the writing activity (and this may even be ‘free choice’ – occasionally allowing children to choose their own writing activity).
- **Sharing writing** – with partners, small groups or the whole class.
- **Concluding** – where to take writing next – discussion of developing, revising, drafting and editing.

With regard to the forms of writing to be covered over a period of time, balance and variety are important. Interspersing different forms and genres will also serve to highlight the similarities between the various literary forms. Some workshops need to be ‘free choice’, allowing pupils the opportunity either to develop drafts produced in previous workshops or to explore areas of interest.

The workshop leader will need to have a good supply of appropriate texts that can serve as models to show to the class. Changing text models from year to year will help to keep workshop activities fresh. There can also be times when pupils source their own books or poems as models.

**Drafting and editing**

Drafting is the process of producing different versions of a text so that it develops and improves. Sometimes you can do a number of different versions of a piece – either handwritten or typed out – or you may work on one single sheet of paper and keep making changes on that one sheet. Pupils regularly ask how many drafts it takes to produce a successful and final version. There can be no set answer: a piece will need to be polished until it feels right, however many drafts it takes.

Whether you are writing prose, poetry or non-fiction, it is vital to take time to read aloud work in progress. All forms of writing take on a new life when read out loud. Clearly, it might not be possible to do this in a classroom or workshop context, but you can read through your text in your head, and hear it in your mind’s ear, as many writers do. Ensure that you read as carefully as you can, looking for anything that could be developed further or improved upon. For areas to consider when reading through your drafts see the ‘Poetry checklist’ (p. 66) and ‘Fiction checklist’ (p. 139) worksheets.

As you are reading your text you will no doubt need to make various changes. You will make notes in the margins, add extra text, delete words, phrases or sentences – or even change the order of passages of text. This is all perfectly normal and is exactly what professional authors do, and it is evidence that you are crafting your piece of writing. See how David Almond changed his text on a manuscript page for his novel *Skellig* on p. 76.
In your first couple of drafts you do not need to be concerned with the presentation of the piece – that is, the spelling, handwriting, or even the grammar or punctuation – as this type of work, known as ‘editing’, can be done at a later stage. As these authors believe, in the early drafts of a piece of writing you should be concentrating on getting your ideas down:

**BERNARD ASHLEY:** Don’t get it right, get it written.

**ANTHONY MASTERS:** You mustn’t ever worry about spelling and grammar when you’re creating, or you’ll ruin the flow of your ideas.

**JACQUELINE WILSON:** Surely it’s best to write the story and to imagine it as hard as you can first, and then you can go back and do an exercise on how to punctuate it.

Gillian Cross focuses upon the story first and goes back later to work on the phrasing:

**GILLIAN CROSS:** I tend to concentrate on my language more when I’ve got the shape of the story right. The hang up I used to have as a child and teenage writer was that you had to get the language right first time. That was something that made it difficult for me. I know some people will correct chapter 1 until it’s right and then go on to chapter 2, but I’d be on chapter 1 for ever!

Philip Pullman has his own view of drafts:

**PHILIP PULLMAN:** I don’t agree with the emphasis that teachers lay on drafting. I never write drafts – I write final versions. I might write a dozen final versions of the same story, but with each one I set out to write it as a final version. If you set out to write a draft you’ll take it less seriously than you should.

Pie Corbett believes writers have two roles:

**PIE CORBETT:** As a writer, you are both writer and reader. One moment you are creating, writing, and the next you are reading back. Writing is both generative and judgemental. On one hand you generate the words and ideas while the other side of the brain is continually listening, judging – helping you to shape, order and fashion your ideas, as well as lose the things that aren’t working.

As the authors in the ‘Poetry’, ‘Fiction’ and ‘Non-fiction’ chapters of this book demonstrate when discussing their books and poems, a polished and successful piece of writing does not come about in one sitting. A piece of writing takes time to craft. Therefore children will need time to draft their work over a number of workshops.

To demonstrate the drafting process to young writers, teachers can produce displays of work in progress by professional authors, and the manuscript pages from Roger McGough’s ‘The Cats’ Protection League’ (p. 35), Tony Mitton’s ‘Little Red Rap’ (p. 41), David Almond’s *Skellig* (p. 76) and Jacqueline Wilson’s *The Dare Game* (p. 100), could be used for this very purpose.
Realistic expectations of the first draft

The first version of any text is rarely, if ever, the last version. You cannot expect your first draft to be the only one you will do. Most of the poems, plays, information books, short stories or novels that you read will have been drafted, redrafted and revised numerous times. Once you have worked on a piece and you cannot do any more to it, leave it for a while. Let it breathe. When you come back to it in a few days, you will see more clearly what needs to be done next. Do not worry if you find yourself making quite a few changes – this is often a sign that you are viewing your work analytically and objectively. The author Ernest Hemingway was keen on redrafting – he rewrote the first paragraph of his novel *Fiesta* forty times! And this paragraph has itself been reworked some five or six times.

Young writers can have unrealistic expectations of a first draft, and can feel that it has got to be perfect in every way. You are expecting the impossible if this is how you feel. Here is some useful advice from Tony Mitton on writing poetry – but the principle could be applied to prose as well:

**TONY MITTON:** When you’re writing poetry you have to be prepared to write rubbish as you go along, rubbish that you can get rid of later. You just have to keep going until you write something that you like. It’s a bit like trudging through a desert until you find your oasis, finding a place where you want to be.

Melvin Burgess adopts a very similar attitude to Tony Mitton:

**MELVIN BURGESS:** The first draft is like ad-libbing on to paper. You take out the rubbish afterwards. I spend a couple of days on the ad-libbing, then I go over it again pulling out the bits I don’t want. Then, when I’ve finished the whole thing, I’ll go through it again, checking as a reader to find the bits that I’m doubtful about, bits which don’t work. Then I drop into the manuscript at random to check various things, so the whole thing gets re-read a lot.

You may even choose to think of your first draft as just experimenting with ideas. Poet Roger McGough and author Alan Garner both use the word ‘doodling’ to describe this process of exploring early ideas.

**JACQUELINE WILSON:** Don’t fuss too much about how you start off, because you can always go back and rewrite the beginning. Just think about getting yourself into the story.

**RUSSELL HOBAN:** Don’t worry about the form, and don’t worry about beginnings, middles and endings. Take hold of the thing, wherever you can, whatever of an idea presents itself to you, whether it’s the foot or the elbow, grab it, and work out from there.

Most of all, do not expect too much of yourself when you start writing – simply put a few words down on the page and see what happens.
Process, product and portfolio

There has often been a preoccupation in schools with pupils having to complete each and every single piece of creative work that is started. But why?

Writers often find that some pieces of writing ‘go cold’ on them and, as a result, these pieces are never finished. Alternatively, some of these stories and poems may be ransacked for ideas at a later stage. With creative writing, nothing is wasted. Ideas can be recycled.

Process, as many authors have said, is as important as product. For children to experience and experiment with writing in a wide variety of forms is arguably of greater value than completing just a few. And it is not only the finished piece that matters, but also understanding and appreciating the inherent elements of each form as well as the processes involved in creating different types of text.

What can be very useful is a portfolio – a folder or file (or even a notebook) in which pupils keep ideas, drafts, completed pieces, brainstorms, story outlines, character sketches, planning sketches and so on. Rather than start a new piece of writing every workshop, by doing this a young writer can go back to unfinished pieces or start a piece that was simply an initial seed of an idea. Finding fresh ideas on a regular basis can be very draining, and portfolios can be an ideal way of overcoming a lack of inspiration.

Ideas and notebooks

The whole notion of creativity and of discovering ideas is a difficult one to discuss with any certainty.

TERRY DEARY: Ideas come to you out of the blue, and that’s why it’s sometimes hard to talk about the writing process. Inspiration is not definable. You can’t bottle it, and if you could you would be a millionaire. Yes, there are moments of inspiration, where suddenly you think, that’s what I’ve been looking for. It’s very exciting!

JACQUELINE WILSON: All writers get asked where we get our ideas from. No writer can ever come up with a reasonable, convincing answer. You just don’t know – an idea bobs into your head, just like that.

JOHN FOSTER: Where do I get my ideas from? My answer is that you get your ideas in three ways: from your own experiences, from your observations and from your imagination.

But once you get an idea – what are you going to do with it, and what happens if you are not writing anything at that time?

ALAN DURANT: I have a notebook in which I write various bits and pieces – ideas for titles, jokes, interesting names, descriptions of interesting faces – all kinds of things. Every now and then I go through my notebooks to see if there’s any material I can use.

JACQUELINE WILSON: Keeping a notebook gives you the feeling that there’s always something to work on. As a fiction writer, it’s frightening – you do literally have to conjure things up out of nothing. Even half a page of jottings in a book can be a big help.
Most writers keep notebooks and regularly use them to jot down ideas. But what can you write in a notebook? Here are a few suggestions:

- interesting names that you come across
- something that might serve as a good title
- words, phrases or descriptions that you come across in conversation, in magazines, books, newspapers, on TV or in a film
- details on a character or plot you might be working on
- a striking image
- an unusual situation or event
- a phrase, a line or a verse of a poem
- in fact, anything that might serve as a potential idea!

Ideas come in all shapes and sizes – but, unfortunately, one shape and size they do not come in is that of a finished story or poem, as Ian Beck comments:

**IAN BECK:** An idea never arrives perfectly formed. It has to be built upon. It will arrive as a nudge saying, ‘You think about that’. And your instinct just tells you that this idea is worth thinking about.

Sometimes one idea needs another to connect up with.

**RUSSELL HOBAN:** Things circulate in my skull waiting for other things to hook up with them.

**CELIA REES:** Often I’ll get an idea, but it won’t be complete. I may have a story or a plot, but it will need more. Then I have to wait until there is something else to add to it to make it whole.

Within reason, nearly any idea is good – in the right place. But do not spend too long trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. If something is not quite working, leave it and come back to it later when you can view the piece more clearly. Just because a poem or a short story might not seem to work the first time you write it, do not throw it away. You may find yourself redrafting it at a later stage, or using some of the ideas for another piece. Sometimes you may find that a piece contains too many ideas. Do not be too precious about deleting whole chunks of writing. It is what is best for that piece that counts.

**Ideas and good habits to get into**

The more you get into the habit of writing, that is writing on a regular if not daily basis, the more ideas will come to you, and the more you will experience and observe many things that will serve as potential ideas for writing.

**RUSSELL HOBAN:** Do something every day. Let the ideas develop as they will – don’t require of yourself that you do a whole story or a whole novel, just do whatever you can, every day.
**PHILIP PULLMAN:** I believe that success in writing, as with any other enterprise, is due to three things: talent, hard work and luck. Of those, the only one you have any control over is the hard work. You can’t decide to be talented; nor can you say ‘I’m going to my room to be lucky for two hours’. But you can say: ‘I’m going to write a page every day’, and you can go on doing it. It soon mounts up. After a few months, you’ll have written the equivalent of a book. You might want to change most of it, but at least it’ll be there to work on, which it won’t be if you waste your time wishing you were talented or waiting for your luck to change.

**Versions of one idea**

Sometimes you may find you have an idea that you think is worth exploring, but when you start to write it down it does not seem as good. If this is the case, leave what you have written and keep pondering over that original idea. Keep coming back to that idea and trying it until you have a version that you like. It could be that your earlier versions were not working for a number of reasons – perhaps the idea worked better as a poem rather than a story, or perhaps your story should have been in the first person and not the third person (see Chapter 3), or perhaps the idea needed developing or being joined together with another idea. Illustrator/picture book writer Satoshi Kitamura believes that his own stories are often centred around three different ideas that come together to form a narrative. Try not to be too precious about what you have written – keep an open mind as to how a piece should grow.

Occasionally, an idea that you are working on will want to change shape. You may be working on a short story and find that it wants to become a rhyming narrative poem, or that a free verse poem wants to be a shape poem, and so on. If an idea such as this comes to you, go with it, and see what happens.

**ALAN DURANT:** Ideas come in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes I know where to put an idea – if it’s a novel or a short story or picture book. But ideas can change at times. One of my books, *Little Troll*, for example, started out as two different picture books. However, something wasn’t quite right about them, and I rewrote them as one storybook text for younger readers.

An idea is like a lump of clay. It can be moulded into many shapes. But some clays make good coffee cups, other clays make good floor tiles. Your idea, say, could be about someone starting at a new school. That idea could be turned into a funny rhyming poem or a comic strip, a school drama story, or a more serious free verse poem or monologue. You have to work out what that idea wants to be. It is as simple – and as difficult – as that!

**Stimuli for writing**

Later in this book you are encouraged to use a variety of stimuli to generate writing. These include:

- **Music** – instrumentals from any genres and also song lyrics.
- **Pictures** – photographs, postcards, paintings – in books, magazines, on the Internet or in art galleries and museums.
• **Artefacts** – anything from presentation boxes to musical instruments to objects from other countries or cultures to historical artefacts.

• **Clips** – from films, documentaries or TV dramas (ideally with the sound turned off).

• **School trips** – visits to a variety of places.

• **An original story or poem** – to spark off a piece adopting either the same form, structure, character(s), voice, theme or point of view.

**Dictionaries and thesauruses**

It is always useful to have a collection of dictionaries and thesauruses to hand. Do not be afraid to use either of these two books. A writer needs to have access to a wide vocabulary, to know the meanings of many words, and to be able to think of alternative words and phrases. When used in the right way, a dictionary and a thesaurus can be an extension of one’s own knowledge and word store. But try not to become too preoccupied with the book you are researching in – your own writing is what you need to focus on!

Other texts that might prove useful are a rhyming dictionary and a baby-naming book. The latter can be very helpful when choosing fictional characters’ names.

**Publishing**

Publishing needs to occur on a regular basis and gives writing a sense of purpose. If pupils are actively involved with publishing themselves, it can be a source of motivation. Publishing takes many shapes and forms, such as:

• class or year group **anthologies**

• school **magazines**

• local community **magazines** or **local newspapers**

• **displays** in classes, corridors and school halls

• school **websites**

• **performances** in class, assemblies or at parents’ evenings

• **children’s magazines** such as *Young Writer*

• **websites** such as ‘Poetryzone’: http://poetryzone.woodshed.co.uk.

For details of **poetry competitions** contact the Poetry Society: www.poetrysociety.org.uk.

**Using word processors**

Most writers agree that computers are a great asset to creative writing.

**MALORIE BLACKMAN:** I write straight on to my computer, but I always edit and rework my stories on paper. I can’t imagine writing the first draft on anything but a computer. I like to chop and change and play about with sentences, paragraphs, pages and sometimes whole chapters. On a computer it’s a doddle. I’d go crazy if I had to use a typewriter and type each page again every time I changed even a word.
**CELIA REES:** Word processors have changed the whole concept of drafting in that it’s not quite the same process as when people wrote by hand or used a typewriter. Then you would have to do numerous individual redrafts to get the final draft. Now, I draft as I go along, as I’m writing.

However, Roger McGough has a word of warning regarding the use of computers with creative writing:

**ROGER MCGOUGH:** The thing about the word processor is that you can work too quickly. The poem looks too professional – and too good too soon – on the screen.

John Foster has the following advice for writing poetry on a computer:

**JOHN FOSTER:** I suggest to children that if they use a computer they should do lots of printouts. I recommend that they don’t use the ‘delete’ button too often and I advise that they type out all the different versions as they go along so that they can keep all of their ideas. I write my poems by hand, and I do all my drafts on one single sheet of paper. This enables me to use words or phrases or lines that I might have crossed out in an earlier draft of a poem. This way, I don’t ever lose any of my ideas. More of my poems are written by hand than on a computer – but that’s because the idea will come when I’m away from the screen. I don’t find sitting in front of the screen conducive to finding ideas for poems.

One major disadvantage in using computers for writing is that PCs are not portable, and not everyone has a laptop. But a notepad can be taken anywhere – and can save you having to write on bus tickets and envelopes when you are feeling inspired! Some writers – although they may write directly onto a computer – choose to do a printout on rough or recycled paper in order that they can do a penultimate draft by hand. You might wish to try this yourself. Some classes will use a word processor for typing up final drafts prior to publication. Another instance in which a computer can be a very useful tool is when creating shape or calligram poetry (see Chapter 2).

**Talking points**

Many children’s writers begin their workshops by discussing various ideas and issues surrounding the writing process. You may wish to discuss some of the following:

- Why do we read and write?
- What happens when we read and write?
- Could society survive without language or stories?
- What are the similarities and differences between oral and written language?
- Do we develop as readers after teenage years?
- Why is reading essential to writing?
- When did storytelling begin? How has it changed in the past 200 years?
- Has technology affected how we write and also read and work?
• Can you think of a different book that you have read in each year of your life after the age of four? Make a list.
• What would your three ‘desert island’ books be?

A fun and interactive way to explore storytelling is to work in pairs or small groups and to tell a story of your own, something either amusing or interesting that has happened to you.

**Writing for the reader in you**

Both Alan Durant and Melvin Burgess stress how important it is to entertain yourself as you write:

**ALAN DURANT:** To be a writer, you’ve got to be a reader. You write first for yourself as a reader.

**MELVIN BURGESS:** Write for yourself – but make it so that it's accessible for your reader.

And finally, the late Helen Creswell’s top tip for young writers couldn’t be simpler or more true:

**HELEN CRESWELL:** Read, read, read and write, write, write!

**Enjoy yourself!**

This has to be the most important aspect of writing – because if you do not enjoy what you write, how can you expect others to?
**Writing warm-ups**

Try some of these fun warm-ups at the start of a workshop, simply to get the brain going and the ink flowing:

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**Daisy chain**

Write a sentence in which the last letter of the first word becomes the first letter of the second word, and so on:

- The enormous shark killed daily yet . . .
- The egg grew wobbly yesterday . . .

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**Keep the ‘e’**

Write a long sentence in which every word includes the letter ‘e’:

- Every year, Edward the bear . . .
- Eagerly, the eagle made nests every June . . .

---

**Lose the ‘e’**

Write a long sentence without using any words that include the letter ‘e’:

- Alan always had spinach for lunch – and also gravy, mash and carrots too.

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**Alphabet story**

Write a very short piece in which every word in sequence has to begin with the twenty-six letters of the alphabet. It’s not easy. Good luck! Two examples:

- A Boy Called Daniel Evans Found . . .
- All Birds Can Dance! Eagles Foxtrot! . . .

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**Vowel then consonant**

Write a sentence in which alternate words begin with vowels or consonants:

- Daisy ate bananas every Tuesday and Wednesday, alternatively she ate cherries on Thursday and Friday.

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**Write with the Bard!**

Shakespeare invented some 1,705 new words that appeared in his plays, such as: leapfrog, majestic, gust, lonely, excellent, dwindle, gloomy, monumental, summit, hurry – to name just a few.

Write a short piece, say a paragraph – or even a free verse poem – in which you include as many of these Shakespearean words as you can.
MATTHEW SWEENEY: As Robert Frost said, poetry is a fresh look and a fresh listen.

A new way of seeing: some thoughts on writing poetry

The quote from Matthew Sweeney and Robert Frost that opens this chapter – ‘Poetry is a fresh look and a fresh listen’ – can be adopted as a very useful approach to writing poetry. It can encourage us to aim for something new and ‘fresh’ when creating a poem, not only ‘fresh’ in terms of what we are writing about, for example a new way of thinking about a subject, but also ‘fresh’ in terms of how the poem is expressed – in terms of the language and the imagery that we use. Colin Macfarlane expresses very much the same thing when he says that in poetry ‘a good description gives a new way of seeing’.

Some people feel that poetry is easier to write than other forms of fiction or non-fiction. Indeed, a short poem can come about fairly quickly. However, even the shortest poem may need revisiting a number of times to rework, amend or even add to: perhaps the rhyme in the fourth line is not quite right, or the adjective in the opening line does not precisely capture the mood or image you want it to. There is always something that can be done to develop or improve a piece. Yet it can be difficult to know when to stop tweaking a poem, as Brian Moses reflects:

BRIAN MOSES: What I enjoy about poetry is that you can create a poem quickly and it’s there and you feel good that you’ve done something that day – but a poem can take anything from five minutes to a year to write. An average poem will initially take an hour or two – but I’m always tinkering away at it afterwards. Then I’ll perform it and modify it. And then maybe perform it to a different audience and modify it again. Performances can help me to see if there are any flat points. Sometimes I’ll start to write a poem, put it away for a couple of months, and then go back to it, and do a bit more to it – and it might take a year to get written. I don’t think I ever quite know when a poem is finished. The only time I’ll finally leave it alone is when it’s published in a book.

In one sense, poetry writing requires a lot of patience – perhaps more so than writing fiction or non-fiction – as more time is spent concentrating on the smaller details. With a poem you are focusing upon individual words and phrases, or the ordering of the
lines and the stanzas, or even the combination of word sounds or the number of syllables in a particular line. The writing of poetry requires a fascination with language, and the desire to spend a great deal of time experimenting with it, moulding it and shaping it:

**TONY MITTON:** If you want to write well you need to become an expert with words and language. You need to be as skilful with words as a painter is with paints or a composer is with sounds. You’ve got to care about every word, every pause, every last detail of what you put.

One way of perceiving poetry is that it is language at its most musical and playful. What makes it so musical is repetition. For it is repetition that is poetry’s most basic and essential ingredient: repetition of sounds, vowels, consonants, syllables, words, phrases, lines, choruses – not to mention rhyme, assonance, alliteration and so on. Poetry has many tricks and devices, all of which are basically just repetition in different forms.

Children often and indeed wrongly (but understandably, due to the heavy diet of rhyme they are given) believe that rhyme is the main ingredient of poetry, though rhyme is only one of many such ingredients. It is true to say – as Pie Corbett reiterates later in this chapter – that, in the main, children rarely create successful rhyming poetry. This is not to say they shouldn’t write rhyming poetry – of course they should. It’s great fun and an important skill for them to acquire. But children do not yet have the necessary linguistic skills to generate good end-rhymes and also write tight, rhythmical rhyming poetry that scans well. Yet free verse is the perfect medium for children to adopt for writing creatively and imaginatively as well to write about their own experiences and memories. Free verse can help them to explore, preserve, celebrate and make sense of their experiences as well as to share them with other people. And, as Michael Rosen recommends in his influential book *Did I Hear You Write?* (1989), young writers must be encouraged to use their own voices in their poems – their own everyday, colloquial speech.

As fiction and non-fiction have genres, poetry has its many forms, from modern to classical, oral to literary. So Benjamin Zephaniah’s image of poetry – that of a tree – is most apt:

**BENJAMIN ZEPHANIAH:** I see poetry as this big tree that has many branches. You can get introduced to the tree by climbing up one of the branches, but it doesn’t mean to say that you can’t explore other parts of the tree. I got on to the tree via oral poetry, but I’ve gone on to love all kinds – from nonsense verse to classical poetry like Shelley – and I love them all equally.

This chapter considers a range of poetic forms – including free verse, rhyme, rap, haiku, kennings and shape poetry. As many poets advocate, pupils should begin by writing mainly free verse and non-rhyming forms, as rhyme is a challenging discipline for those who do not have the extended vocabulary of older, more experienced writers. Advice on using rhyme as well as writing free verse is provided in this chapter.

In libraries, poetry can be found alongside non-fiction books. This is not so unusual as much poetry is based on real events, real lives and aspects of the real world. Having said that, there is also a strong fictional strand running through much poetry, and always has been. In the past, poetry was used as a vehicle for telling stories – for instance, to recall myths and legends.
Once you have read the poets’ definitions of poetry in the next section you could give thought to the following issues yourself:

- What is poetry? Where can you find poetry? How do you feel about poetry? Why?
- What do you think is the difference between poetry and prose? Which do you like best?
- When is an idea best served as a poem or as prose?
- Is poetry fiction or non-fiction?
- Can you write poetry using sign language?
- What can a poem do that other forms of writing cannot do?
- Why does poetry work so well when read aloud?
- Why do people tend to read more prose and non-fiction than poetry?

(For further discussion points, see ‘Talking points’ on p. 14.)

**What’s so good about poetry?**

- Most poems are **short**, bite-size chunks of text, perfect for reading, sharing, enjoying, discussing.
- Poems highlight the **musicality** of language.
- Poems are in **many forms** (raps, haikus, free verse, etc.) so are ideal for children exploring structures and modes of language.
- Poems cover a range of **subject matters** – material can be fictional, autobiographical, anecdotal.
- Poems can have a range of **tones** – from the lightweight and frivolous to the more profound and spiritual.
- Poems are perfect for **learning** and **performing** in class, assemblies and concerts.
- Poems are ideal for **displays** and **publishing**.
- Poetry is one of the best **literary media** for children to write themselves – and to write about their own ideas, thoughts, emotions, memories and experiences – to help them to gain confidence in their writing and to discover their own literary voices.
- Poems can be written **anywhere** – in the playground or on school trips to farms, art galleries, museums, etc.

Here, Pie Corbett considers how fundamental poetry is to children’s literary experiences:

**PIE CORBETT**: I don’t think schools always recognise how important poetry is to children. The people who devise curriculums don’t either. Poetry is where you learn how to be a writer – probably even more so than with prose. Because of the brevity of it, it’s more achievable. It’s where you learn how to play with words, to craft language, to love the words and the ideas expressed in words – and value the power, the pleasure and beauty of words. With poetry you can do all kinds of things – boast, lie, imagine, wonder, wish, hope and dream.

Every poet has their own interpretation of what poetry is. Here are a few poets responding to the question ‘What is poetry and what is it good for?’
PIE CORBETT: Poetry is a way of capturing and recreating our lives – a way of explaining the world to ourselves and ourselves to the world. Or, put another way, language is a template which you put upon life to understand yourself and what is happening around you. Or seen yet another way, it’s a refinement of everyday language and anecdoting. And what’s more, as people we need to create – and if we don’t have language to create, then this can lead to the opposite – destruction.

JAN DEAN: A poem is to wake you up. It’s to make you connect more vividly with the world and to be more alive in how you see and respond to everything around you. One of the many things that a poem needs to do is to create a tension between recognition – ‘Oh yes, it is like that’ – and strangeness – ‘I never thought of it like that before’. Recognition and strangeness are like opposite poles of a magnet, and they give a poem its energy.

MICHAEL DONAGHY: With poetry, we use words to go beyond words.

JOHN FOSTER: I’m often asked what poetry is and the only definition that I can come up with that actually works is that poetry is words patterned on a page. Also, poetry can be about any subject matter – for example, Michael Rosen has written a poem about a tube of toothpaste! Poetry can explore anything that writing can explore. What distinguishes it from prose is that it doesn’t have to have a narrative element and it’s patterned differently.

ROGER MCGOUGH: I don’t really want to add to the list of definitions – though most reading is for information or for entertainment, and poetry is neither of these two. Poetry is something that is coded and it seems to come from another way of thinking. When I first discovered poetry it seemed almost secretive in that it worked in a way that I couldn’t define. What’s it good for? It’s good for tapping into something unconscious. Most writing is to carry information from A to B, whereas poetry is the wandering off, it’s the looking at things from a different angle or in close-up.

TONY MITTON: Poetry is patterned language. The patterning of free verse may be very elusive, but even free verse patterns language. Though it could be said that, to an extent, all writing patterns language. Certainly I know that well-written prose is not easy to write – and is just as crafted as poetry. Then you might say how do you distinguish poetry from prose? I would say that prose tends to be more narrative-sequential linked, whereas poetry is much more varied. It can be more theme-based. As a teenager I got very excited when I read T.S. Eliot’s comment that poetry is the ‘dance of the intellect’. I don’t necessarily agree with that, but I do certainly think that poetry is the dance of the language, and that poetry dances more than prose does. If I had to sum it up in one sentence, I’d say that poetry is language dancing.

BRIAN MOSES: I suppose because I’m attracted so much to music and the rhythms of music, I’m attracted to the rhythms of poetry and language. I love words and how poetry allows you to string words together in a variety of ways. For me, a poem is a snapshot giving you a brief glimpse, but a glimpse that is often so powerful that it can stay with you forever. It enables you to look at the world in a different way.
**BENJAMIN ZEPHANIAH:** What’s poetry good for? It’s good for capturing big emotions in a small, concise way, or for taking little teeny things and stretching them out. It’s good because Ted Hughes can do it, Bob Geldof can do it, Benjamin Zephaniah can do it – but also Mr Brown at the allotment can do it. It’s the most democratic art form you can get. All you need is a pen and a piece of paper, and when it comes to oral poetry, you don’t even need a pen and paper. When someone comes to me and says that they’re a poet, then they’re a poet. I don’t know if they’re a genius, a mad person or what. If they’ve written a couple of lines, if they’ve had some imaginative thoughts, then they’re a poet. I often tell people that publishing poetry is not the be-all and end-all. I tell them to perform it, because audiences will tell you what’s good and what’s bad. It’s a very simple philosophy, and it’s always rung true for me until this day. Another thing that poetry’s good for is spreading the message of peace, love and unity.

How do poems begin? Poets examine the ways in which their poems evolve

As with fiction, an idea for a poem can come from almost anywhere. In this section, poets reflect upon some of the ways in which their own poems come about.

**JOHN FOSTER:** An idea for a poem often comes from something I see or hear. One of the things I’ve discovered as I’ve written more and more poetry is that I’m often trying to find something that is a common experience. What I try to do is to write in a way that kids will connect with that common experience. One example might be the experience of waking up in a strange room and wondering for a split second where you are, or the experience of being afraid of the dark. Or, alternatively, there might be something specific that I read about or I see on the television that will spark a poem off. Or, when I’m editing poems I might come across a form of poetry that I want to imitate. One example would be a piece by Tony Mitton called ‘Ten Things You Never Thought To Ask About Elephants’. I thought that was so funny that I then wrote ‘Ten Things You Never Thought To Ask About Hippopotamuses’, with lines like: ‘What do you call a young female hippo? A hippopota-miss!’ So, you can get ideas for poems from other people’s structures.

This goes to the heart of my philosophy as an English teacher. As teachers we should present poems as models. I believe the way to develop people as writers is to present them with a text and to analyse it, to look at what the writer is doing and the techniques that the writer is employing in that particular text. Then, the children can have a go at writing in the same way – not using the same content, but the techniques and the appropriate form. Then comes the stage that so often is missed, which is for the children to analyse where they have succeeded or not. This is not for the teacher to do, but for the children – and for them to look objectively at their own work. Until you start to evaluate your writing critically you can’t begin to develop or improve as a writer.

**ROGER MCGOUGH:** Well, if I don’t have anything specific to write about, doodling with words and phrases usually sets me off. Words themselves lead me on to an idea often. Of course, it can often be a concrete or a visual idea that will spark a poem off. In the way that an illustrator will draw a line, and a line will become a circle, and a circle will become a face, and so on – I just frequently start doodling with a few words. And as with drawings, you don’t know what the poem is going to be about until you’ve finished it.
As Gertrude Stein once said, ‘Poetry is a process of discovery’ – it’s not a process of describing the known. But people still seem to think that with poetry you have an idea and with it the whole poem just comes into your head in a shape, and that’s it. It’s very rare that it happens like that. The exciting thing for me is discovering what a new poem is about. Then part of the trick is knowing when to step away from the creative process and to let the poem that’s emerging have its own life.

BENJAMIN ZEPHANIAH: Most of my poems start in my head with a rhythm:

I luv me mudder and me mudder luv me

It can be just that for a while. Then I might go on:

We cum so far from over de sea.

And I’ll pace up and down the room as I’m saying it, and sometimes I’m actually kind of dancing. I think a lot of oral poets do that. I remember hearing a story about Dylan Thomas building a shed at the bottom of his garden. It was his daughter telling the story, and she said she could hear him in there at night chanting his poems out.

For me, one of the most important things about poems is how they’re said. When they roll off my tongue nicely, that’s when I know that they’re ready for writing down. Sometimes I just create the whole thing in my head. But it really varies. One thing I don’t want is a technique – I like to do it all different ways. I’ve got a recording studio downstairs and sometimes I’ll write in there and perform to a drum machine rhythm. Other times, I’ll record a poem on to a little tape recorder or dictaphone. But if I’m doing free verse, I’ll do it on paper.

I sometimes feel that I’m writing all the time, that I’m always collecting ideas, whatever I’m doing. There’s a difference between creating a poem and writing a poem. I create poems anywhere and everywhere – like when I’m jogging – but the actual writing happens here in the office.

Masterclass: poets respond to questions often asked about writing poetry

What is the right beginning for a poem?

JAN DEAN: It’s the one that allows you to write the next line. Until I’ve got the right first line – and I’m happy with the sound and feel of it – I can’t move on to the second line. Sometimes you can be stuck on a first line that won’t let you carry on, and maybe that’s because it’s not meant to be a beginning and it should be somewhere else. You only realise that when you leave a poem for a few days or weeks and then come back to it. Only then can you see that there should be other lines in front of your original first line.

BRIAN MOSES: The first few lines are what hooks the reader, so the opening has got to make an impact and to encourage the reader to want to read on. It’s like the first page of a novel – you want to read on because you’ve been intrigued somehow by what you’ve read. And a good ending can be one of many things. It can be a good idea that you saved till last to round off the poem, or something that sums up the poem in some way or a joke or even something unexpected.
How does the rhythm of a poem become established?

**COLIN MACFARLANE:** If you’ve written a first line or two, or even a short verse, say it over and over in your head so that the rhythm is fixed and you know the feel of it well – then carry on – with that first verse in the back of your mind. Don’t forget to keep doing this throughout the poem.

**TONY MITTON:** I try to establish the rhythm from the first stanza. I also consider in that first verse if I’ve found a rhythm I can satisfactorily work throughout a poem or whether I’m going to have to move away from it.

What advice do you have on writing free verse?

**PIE CORBETT:** Though it’s called ‘free’ you can’t write any old thing. Free verse is usually very carefully crafted and structured. When writing free verse, I’m very much led by the sounds of the words – with alliteration and assonance – as well as using internal rhymes and half rhymes. When I’m writing a poem, it’s all about the conjunction between the meaning – the thing I’m trying to say – and the music, the sound. Both are happening at once, informing each other.

**BRIAN MOSES:** Free verse isn’t just prose that’s been chopped up on the page. In my workshops I say that a free verse poem must look like a poem on the page right from the start because then it makes it much easier to inject a rhythm into it. Whatever type of poem it is, it must have a rhythm. Rhythm often comes from the rhyme, but in free verse, the rhythm has to come in some other way – such as the repetition of certain lines or phrases.

(See Pie Corbett’s ‘Stars’ on p. 30 for an example of free verse – as well as James Carter’s ‘Amazing Inventions’ on p. 61 and ‘Empty Bucket’, p. 62.)

To rhyme or not to rhyme?

**JAMES CARTER:** There are no strict rules about this, but generally speaking, if you are writing about your life, your memories and experiences, these are better served by a non-rhyming form such as free verse (see introduction to this chapter). If you are writing something upbeat and comical, then rhyme might serve your poem well. Sometimes, you just begin writing and do not know what the poem will be like, it just starts. But after a few lines, you will probably know what form and shape the poem is taking. So, if you wrote:

You’re never lonely as a cloud.
For like sheep, you’re with the crowd.

*from ‘Clouds Like Us’ by James Carter*

you would immediately see that this is a rhyming poem, and you would need to follow the rhythmical rhyming pattern throughout. Yet, if your poem began:

You never quite know
when you’ve met an angel.
One may appear
at any time at all.

_from ‘Angelness’ by James Carter_

you would know it’s a non-rhyming piece, and that you will write without rhymes in the main, and use short lines.

How can I write good rhymes?

**VALERIE BLOOM:** Rhyme is something that is hard to do well. Because of this, children are sometimes told not to use rhyme. Yet children really love rhyme. You just have to look at nursery rhymes and the majority of poems published for children. They’re nearly always in rhyme. Rhyme helps to make a poem more memorable, and injects rhythm into a piece. But like fire, it makes a good servant and a terrible master. You have to stay in control of it. I recommend that children don’t just use the first word that springs to mind, that they brainstorm alternative words. I encourage children to go through the alphabet thinking of alternative word beginnings to help them find a rhyme, for example: A.. / B.. / Bl.. / Br.. / C.. / Ch.. / Cl.. / Cr.. – and so on. Bad rhymes – words just used for the sake of it that have no meaning in the context of the poem – need to be highlighted, so that children are aware of what they shouldn’t do. I also encourage the use of a rhyming dictionary.

Like anything else, rhyme can be taught. One of the main ways is by imitation – looking at other poems with good rhymes and using these as models to be read and discussed. Children need to listen to poems. Poems need to be read aloud by the teacher or children, or played on CDs. Children can learn very quickly. I did a session with Year 2 children and introduced the concept of re-drafting. When I went back to the school the following week the teacher said that she couldn’t stop her children re-drafting!

**JAMES CARTER:** Try and avoid using ‘lazy’ or ‘random’ rhymes. If you are using a word simply because it rhymes, and it doesn’t make any real sense in your poem, it has to go! Try using a half or near rhyme: ‘Do I love you / to the Moon and back? / No. I love you / more than that.’ Or try re-writing the poem as free verse. If you are writing a poem about a real experience, it is more than likely you will want to be writing it in free verse anyway.

**JAN DEAN:** If you start using rhyme at the beginning of a poem, you must use it for the whole piece. But it’s perfectly reasonable to have a non-rhyming poem that ends with rhyme, and it can finish a poem off quite nicely. And that can give a poem a bit of extra colour and extra music at the end. I really like using internal rhymes and playing around with rhymes, and putting them in irregular places.

**JOHN FOSTER:** Young children do enjoy rhyme and like writing their own rhymes. Many children come to poetry through nursery rhymes and rhyming stories. But rhyming is difficult. In my workshops I’ll tell children that if they want to rhyme, then fine, but they’ll find it much harder than free verse.

In one workshop I did recently I asked the class if they knew the golden rule of writing rhyme. One very bright child put his hand up and said ‘Don’t give up!’ I thought that
was great! My golden rule is that if you are going to rhyme, then the rhyme must fit the sense and the meaning of the poem. Therefore, children need to be given tips on how to find more rhyming possibilities than the ones they can immediately think of. My first tip is to brainstorm through the alphabet, not just using initial letters, but using common letter strings too. So, if they come to ‘s’ in the alphabet, they can also do ‘sc’, ‘sh’, ‘sl’, ‘st’, ‘str’ and so on. So, for example, if the word they want to rhyme with is ‘tall’, they put all the letters of the alphabet at the front of the word until they get a word that fits the poem that they’re writing: ‘a-all’, ‘b-all’, ‘c-all’ and through to ‘z’. But you must also bear in mind that the spelling of the ‘-all’ sound may vary, because it could be ‘-awl’ or ‘-aul’.

What I learned from the children’s poet Eric Finney is that you can dip in and out of rhyme in poems and it can work. Just so long as you don’t start with rhyme, you can move in and out of it through the poem, and that’s fine. The other way – starting with rhyme and then not using it – would sound wrong. So if you start with a strict rhyming and rhythmical pattern you must stick with it. Eric Finney does this very well in his work.

ROGER MCGOUGH: Usually the best rhyme isn’t the first one that pops into your head because that’s usually a rather obvious one. Listening to the poem can make ideas for rhymes come because rhymes are part of the music of what you are writing.

TONY MITTON: One very good way of learning to rhyme is a way that Michael Rosen has shown in his ‘Down Behind the Dustbin’ poem – in that you take a nonsense or humorous form in which it doesn’t really matter what you say. If it’s pathetic, if it’s funny, it doesn’t matter. The dangerous thing to do is to write a really serious thing in rhyme when you’re not experienced, as you might trip up and you might write something unintentionally comic in rhyme without realising it, while you actually intend to be serious. So, a good way to learn to use rhyme is through comedy, nonsense rhyme, doggerel or limerick. Or, as I’ve said, you can take a poem like ‘Down Behind the Dustbin’ and use it as a model poem and make up your own verses:

Down behind the dustbin
I met a dog called – Nell
I thought she was a cat –
But who can tell?

If what you come up with is slightly nonsensical, it doesn’t matter in that context. The important thing is that you’re learning to work the rhythms and rhymes.

(For rhyming, rhythmical poems, see ‘The Cats’ Protection League’ by Roger McGough on p. 33 and ‘Little Red Rap’ by Tony Mitton on p. 38.)

What stages can a poem go through?

TONY MITTON: I do a first draft or two of a poem in my notebook. Then I’ll type it up onto the computer and print it out and work on it manually again. Then, I’ll go back and rework the poem on the screen. I like that late stage of working with the poem on the computer as by then I’m feeling that the poem is pretty much finished. At that late stage I might make some crucial changes – such as moving verses about or adding new lines. I tend to spot any weaknesses in a poem at that stage.
BRIAN MOSES: My first draft is done either by hand or by dictaphone. I take a dictaphone around with me everywhere I go. If I’m in the car and I get an idea, I’ll speak it into the machine. I always do a lot of work with a poem on paper first. Then there arrives a time that it just needs to go on to the computer. Then I jigsaw the lines around until it’s finished.

BENJAMIN ZEPHANIAH: When I work on the page I write it out really rough and then I type it out immediately. Then I’ll see whether I like it or not. What I do next is to perform it, and I’ll actually say to the audience, ‘This is brand new. I don’t know if you’re going to like it or not.’ I’ll see by their responses what they think of it. Some poems will end up being scrapped. When I’ve had some half-hearted responses to new work, I can usually tell why, and I’ll know that I’ve used the wrong ending or I should have put another verse at the end, or that I need to change a certain word or whatever.

When is a poem finished?

PIE CORBETT: I think it was Philip Gross who said that poems are never finished, they just get abandoned. You kind of give up on a poem because you can’t do any more to it! You can certainly over-work a poem and kill it by doing this. But this is a difficult thing to communicate to a young writer. I strongly feel that children shouldn’t do too much drafting. I tend to call it polishing. Drafting sounds like a chore. Polishing doesn’t. I encourage children to do a few little tweaks. By tweaks, I mean possibly changing a word here or there, maybe adding a word or taking one out. If you’re not careful, you can go into overdrive and produce too many adjectives, like in – ‘the whirling, swirling, twirling snow fell on the frail, fragile bleak crisp crunchy landscape!’ As a writer, you have to generate ideas, but then you have to judge, choose, select what works and what doesn’t. So you need to say it in your head as well as out loud to hear as a reader what is working and what needs some polishing. Each word has to earn its place.

JOHN FOSTER: This is a very difficult question – but I would say that a poem is finished when every word counts and when every word sounds right. Even if I’m writing a non-rhyming poem, I’ll read it aloud or at least say it through in my head to see if it is sounding right and every word is doing the job it should be doing.

ROGER MCGOUGH: The rhyming will be working well and the tone will be just right. I test out a poem by reading it out softly to myself, I’ll be mouthing the words and I’ll run it through many times. The words have got to fit in the mouth well.

What makes a good title?

PIE CORBETT: A title has to earn its place, and is a central part of a poem. On one hand, it’s what lures the reader in and makes them want to read the poem. It also explains to the reader what the poem is about. What’s more, it’s also part of the work of art.

TONY MITTON: Usually, it’s the last thing to come. I’m not usually very interested in titles. I sometimes regard them as an unfortunate necessity. What counts is the poem. With the title I usually go for something simple and direct, though if it’s a wordplay poem, I might go for a wordplay title. And I do like assonance and alliteration in a title – like in ‘Freak Cat Flea’ or ‘Puzzled Pea’.
My advice on titles? If it’s a serious poem and you want to title it, then try and look clearly at the poem and see what title suggests itself. If nothing comes, just be logical and say ‘What is this poem about?’ Say it was about Stonehenge, then why not call it ‘Stonehenge’? Also, you might want to think about your reader and the fact that you are giving your title as a doorway into that poem for the reader, and that it helps to inform them what the poem is all about. If you were writing a metaphorical or playful poem about some rocks you might not actually say in the piece what it is about, so you might need a title like ‘The Rocks’ or ‘Seashore’ to tell the reader what it really is about. It’s like with an abstract or figurative painting – you have to look at the title to fully understand the piece.

Is there a difference between a performance and a page poem?

**PIE CORBETT:** Performance poetry is poetry that is engaging in a live context and will have an impact on you as a listener but it won’t necessarily work on the page. This is because if you try and read it yourself you can only really do it in that poet’s own voice. That type of performance poetry doesn’t always scan or read well on the page, but when performed by that poet, it can work brilliantly. Having said that, there are a lot of performance pieces that anyone can pick up, read and even perform out loud. And that’s what all poets need to aim for: tight, well-crafted poetry that anyone can read – like the works of A.A. Milne or Allan Ahlberg – great page and performance poetry. These poems are easy to understand, and they’re very well written. They’re not performance poems per se, but they lend themselves so well to being performed.

A good poem is not just the words on the page. It will be deeply memorable because of the conjunction of the words on the page and the sounds of those words – the combination of syllables, vowels and consonants. A case in point is when I played John Agard’s recording of William Blake’s ‘Tyger, Tyger’ in an INSET session recently. One teacher burst into tears. Afterwards, she told me that it was as if the world was speaking to her. That’s because the strength of the poem is not only the meaning of the poem coupled with Agard’s truly magical and outstanding performance of the poem, but also how the sound and the musicality of that language works upon you. Poems are not just what they mean, they are experiences in their own right. You can’t always pin down what a poet means, what imagery it conveys, what personal imagery or recollections it instills, let alone the music of those words and what impact they’ll have to a listener. It’s like music itself – it can be hard to explain why exactly one song or piece makes you feel a certain way as opposed to another.

For poems to perform see ‘Little Red Rap’ by Tony Mitton on p. 38.

**ROGER MCGOUGH:** People often ask me if I write poems for performance or for the page. I think the two are one. It seems a strange question to me! I don’t think you can put words down on the page unless they really work well verbally.

**JAN DEAN:** Yes! It’s very, very important to me to hear a poem out loud as I’m writing it. I can sound it out in my head – and the more you write, the more you’re able to do
that. When you get the idea that will spark the poem off, you hear that in your mind’s ear. But how you hear something in your mind’s ear can be very different to how the mouth will actually say it. When I go into schools I tell children to trust their ears and to test their poems by reading them out loud. Something might look right on the page, but if you say it, it might not sound right.

What general advice do you have on using words in a poem?

**JAMES CARTER:** You do not have to use long or difficult words in a poem. Simple words – more often than not – are best. But if you want a poem to have a big impact upon your reader, you have to find fresh and exciting ways of expressing yourself. So rather than the lazy phrase ‘the wolf howled’ (which is over-used), try ‘the wolf wailed’ or ‘whined’ or ‘whimpered’. Similarly, rather than the corny phrase ‘the spooky house’, try something like ‘the gloomy house was full of shadows’. Try and avoid lazy language – and take risks in your writing!

**JAN DEAN:** When you are writing a first draft of a poem you tend to use familiar words. But the most familiar word is not necessarily the best one. I like to approach things sideways, and poetry is all about approaching things from different angles. So, you might want to choose a word that is almost familiar, but not quite. So if you’re describing an action you might think of something obvious. And then when you read it back later you realise that it’s not quite the word that is needed as it doesn’t describe your subject as well as it could.

**JOHN FOSTER:** Every single word, even down to the last pronoun, counts. It matters in a poem whether you use, for example, ‘a’ or ‘the’. I spend a lot of time just improving single words to find the best one for the job. A message I spread to children is that you can actually spend up to half an hour working on just one single word.

**COLIN MACFARLANE:** Be highly descriptive but beware of using too many adjectives or adverbs. Instead, find exactly the right adjective that you need. Also, if you are using adverbs too often it may mean that your verbs are weak and not expressive enough.

**BRIAN MOSES:** Each word is very important. There’s that old adage by the poet Coleridge – ‘Prose is words in the best order, poetry is the best words in the best order.’

How do I write about images?

**VALERIE BLOOM:** You need to ‘show’ and not ‘tell’. By this I mean that you need to actually ‘show’ your reader things, not simply ‘tell’ them about them. And you need to let your reader experience things in your poem – that is, seeing or hearing or feeling something. These are what I refer to as ‘sense words’. Take the sentence ‘He was a very fat man.’ This is ‘telling’. It is not very imaginative and does not conjure up much of an image. If we want to really ‘show’ what the man is like we could say, ‘His stomach bulged over the waist of his trousers’ – and then we understand he’s fat. Likewise, ‘He was very upset’ might be better expressed as ‘Tears streamed down his face.’ This way you are providing your reader with a clear visual image. When children use bland words
such as ‘beautiful’ and ‘nice’ I’ll go through the senses with them and say ‘Can you see
the word “nice”?’, ‘Can you smell the word “nice”?’, ‘Can you taste the word “nice”?’. And I say, if you can’t, you can’t use the word!

PIE CORBETT: Ted Hughes used to visit a zoo and he’d stand outside the jaguar’s
cage and he’d watch the creature and make notes. He did the same later, on his farm.
He’d actually be there, in the moment, watching, observing, looking at a creature,
experiencing it and he’d write down any thoughts, phrases or ideas that came to him.
Children need to have real experiences like this and be given the opportunity to word
them as they happen. Children need to see a butterfly, watch a candle burn, hold a
piece of bark, invite a man with an owl on his arm to come in to school. With imagery,
you first need to look, to observe the subject. And then you have to look in, to hold the
image in your mind, and find the language that wants to express it, see it, feel it, word
it. You have to train children to do this, to find the truth and the voice of an experience.

What general advice do you have on writing poetry?

JAN DEAN: The process of writing a poem involves the three S’s:

- **See it** – using the words to describe an image or feeling.
- **Sort it** – drafting the poem as the first version is rarely the last.
- **Sound it** – anything that doesn’t sound right, won’t do.

Trust your ears. Always sound a poem out loud as you are writing it. Don’t just say it,
but actually sound out the words of the poem. By this I mean listen to the music of the
poem – the rhythm, the sounds of the words, the combinations of the words.

JOHN FOSTER: Become a word-hoarder. Collect words and play with them – juggle
with them, try out unusual combinations – stretch them and twist them until they say
whatever you want them to say.

TONY MITTON: Look at lots of poetry and try to find how many things a poem can
be. Poems come in many shapes and sizes, many types and forms. If you find a poet
or a kind of poetry you really like, get to know that poetry well. You may like to try writing
like that yourself. It’s all right, especially early on, to copy other writers occasionally. And
the more you write, the more you’ll develop a voice of your own.

MATTHEW SWEENEY: The big enemy in poetry is vagueness, the other cliché. Be like
spies – keep your eyes and ears open for anything you see and hear that’s interesting
or different.

Growing poems

In this section, three poets talk about the evolution and crafting of specific poems. They
reveal the origins, the themes and the ideas behind each piece. At the end of each
discussion there are related poetry workshop activities. The form of the poem and the
literary devices used by the poet in each piece are highlighted in bold at the start of
each discussion.
Stars

Stars

Are to reach for,
beautiful freckles of hope
speckles on velvet,
to steer ships,
to comfort those trapped in the darkness of their making,
to lead the wayward when the compass falters,
to remind us that the day is almost breaking,
dawn is just out – taking time to warm the other side of the world.

Stars are for wishes.

Stars are
tiny lights of hope,
fireflies in the night,
golden specks to gaze at,
tin tacks on a dark cloth,
studs glittering,
sequins on a first party dress.

Stars are
our brightest and best,
shards of hope to keep us going,
marking the place,
marking the seasons, giving us reasons
because somewhere out there

there are other star gazers
gazing back.

Pie Corbett

‘Stars’ by Pie Corbett

‘Stars’ (see facing page) is a free verse poem. Here, Pie Corbett talks about the writing of the poem and discusses such issues as drafting, alliteration, assonance, imagery, similes, metaphors, internal rhymes and half-rhymes, structure and colloquial language.

PIE CORBETT: For me, the writing of a poem is a very fierce, meditative process. Most poems take a series of drafts, yet ‘Stars’ came quickly – in a very intensive half an hour – and only needed a few minor tweaks. As I write, I block out absolutely everything. Once you’re in, you’re in. And if you stay in, you’ll get something reasonably good. This is exactly what Ted Hughes talked about in his seminal book Poetry in the Making.

When Coleridge was writing his classic ‘Kubla Khan’ poem, he wrongly answered the door to the man from Porlock selling fish. By the time he got back to the poem, the moment of inspiration had gone. He should have hidden behind the sofa! And it’s the same with prose for me, I need absolute concentration.

As I’m writing a poem like ‘Stars’ I mutter away to myself. Like when people are in exam rooms, writing under pressure, they’ll be verbalising the words they’re writing out loud to themselves in a kind of muttering. That’s what I do – whether I’m at home, on a train, anywhere. I don’t care! You have to hear the music and flow and sound of what you’re writing. It’s essential. I mainly write on trains, and frequently late at night.

I wrote ‘Stars’ for a poetry anthology I was doing – The Works 6: Poems for Assemblies (Pan Macmillan). There’s a section in the book on symbols. I didn’t have enough material for it, so I started thinking about religious symbols. I tried the Moon and the Sun as topics, but they didn’t work. Then I got thinking about stars, and as soon as I hit the word ‘stars’, I heard in my mind the phrase ‘stars are’. It’s the musical repetition of ‘ar’ – ‘stars are’ – and that got the poem going. So, the two things happened together – the concept of stars, and the music of the words. You see, you wouldn’t get that if you said ‘the Moon is . . .’ or ‘the Sun is . . .’. It sounds mundane, and there’s no music there. Then all I had to do was seek out lots of different ideas to work with ‘stars are . . .’. And why ‘stars’ as a title and a first line? I think I wanted that first line to seem like a little star itself. For me, stars are a metaphor for hope. I actually mention ‘hope’ three times in the poem to emphasise this.

This poem follows a tradition of poets seeking similes, images for the stars. I’m calling them freckles, fireflies, golden specks, tin tacks, studs and sequins – all kinds of things, each of which has its own personal meaning for me. The freckles image first came to me in a story I wrote, ‘The King of the Fishes’. It came to me as I was describing the night sky – ‘freckles on the face of the night’. Then once I had the phrase ‘beautiful freckles of hope’ for the poem, I then thought of ‘speckles’, because of the internal rhyme with ‘freckles’. And then, in the phrase ‘trapped in the darkness of their own making’, I’m saying we often create our own despair through the things we do, but beyond the prison window, we all need a star, a little dream to give us hope that things will get better in the future. This, for me, has echoes of political prisoners receiving messages from the outside, giving them hope too.

The word ‘wayward’ in that verse of the poem is a play on words – and can infer ‘forward’ or ‘homeward’, but initially means those people that are ‘wayward’ – i.e. off course in their lives, as their internal moral compass has gone wrong. Then the word ‘breaking’ echoes musically with the word ‘making’. There are words throughout the poem that all echo each other with the internal consonant ‘ck’ and ‘k’ sound – ‘freckles’,
‘speckles’, ‘darkness’, ‘making’, ‘breaking’, ‘taking’. And then there are also internal rhymes with ‘dawn’ and ‘warm’. There are other examples of this kind of musical language throughout the poem.

As I write, I keep re-reading all the time. This helps to give me the flow as well as the sound effects – the alliteration, assonance, rhymes or whatever – what I call the ‘inner regularity’. It also helps me to focus on the meaning – what I’m saying, and what I want to say next. I’m listening out for potential echoes – so when I wrote the line ‘Stars are for wishes’ – and looked for a rhyme for that, nothing came, so I left it on its own. I think it works well as a single line as it draws the eye and has impact.

Then with the next verse, I open with ‘Stars are . . .’ again, as that is my framework. The ‘tiny lights of hope’ phrase here echoes the ‘beautiful freckles of hope’ from earlier. And it’s quite moving re-reading the line about the glittery party dresses, as that is about my own daughters when they were young. It’s about the excitement of going to a party. It’s all about going out into the world – and feeling hopeful and optimistic. And for me, the poem is a spark of encouragement for my children – and the reader – a little star itself, to guide the way whenever the darkness descends. All these personal memories are purely my own. They feed the poem, yet the reader will never know about them.

This poem is a distillation of many such memories, thoughts and experiences I’ve had.

With poems like ‘Stars’, I use a combination of short and long lines. It’s not always deliberate or conscious, I instinctively write them that way. With long lines I become more rhythmic, then the short lines are more staccato. A poet I enjoyed as a late teenager was the Greek poet Alexis Lickyard. All the internal rhymes in my poetry are influenced by him – as well as the attempt for elegance, style, grace, clarity, and the music of the language – all stem from him.

In the last long verse, I’m referring to stars as people – icons who guide us, inspire us – and it’s given extra punch with the alliteration in ‘brightest and best’. At the end of the poem I’m being less metaphoric. I’m literally saying that stars guide us, keep us going. They mark our place in the universe. I like that device in poetry. Going from metaphor into colloquial language, into everyday speech. John Donne used to do it.

I do believe that there probably are other beings looking back at us. But really, our own world is full of stargazers – looking up and looking back, all hopeful, looking to the stars. And we are one world, as people all very similar, and our wishes, hopes and fears are fundamentally the same. So we all have a connection. Of all the poems I’ve ever written, this is definitely one of my favourites.
The Cats’ Protection League

Midnight. A knock at the door.
Open it? Better had.
Three heavy cats, mean and bad.

They offer protection, I ask, ‘What for?’
The Boss-cat snarls, ‘You know the score.
Listen man and listen good

If you wanna stay in the neighbourhood,
Pay your dues or the toms will call
And wail each night on the backyard wall.

Mangle the flowers, and as for the lawn
A smelly minefield awaits you at dawn.’
These guys meant business without a doubt

Three cans of tuna, I handed them out.
They then disappeared like bats into hell
Those bad, bad cats from the CPL.

Roger McGough

(from *Bad Bad Cats* © Roger McGough 1997
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(www.pfd.co.uk) on behalf of Roger McGough)
‘The Cats’ Protection League’ by Roger McGough

‘The Cats’ Protection League’ is a rhyming poem. Here, Roger McGough talks about the writing of the poem and discusses drafts, rhymes, testing poems and wordplay.

ROGER MCGOUGH: This poem came about when an editor from the publisher Hutchinsons rang me and asked if I had any poems about cats for a collection from which all the proceeds would go to the Cats’ Protection League charity. At that point I didn’t have any cat poems, but I told her that I would write one for her. In the meantime, she sent me some brochures with information on the organisation.

However, this poem really began before that at the time when a fox once came into our garden. It came right up and sat down in the middle of the lawn. It was in broad daylight, so the fox was being very bold. It stayed there for ages, and I just stood there in the conservatory staring at it. As a result of seeing the fox I began a poem called ‘Fox in Suburban Garden’, which I still haven’t done anything with. These are the first few stanzas, which are really notes towards a poem:

From the (bedroom) window, a double-take
Hunched comfortably on the lawn
Like a ginger sphinx, a fox

Never seen a fox before
Run downstairs and open the door
Leading on to the garden

He does not run or flinch
But looks up almost sniffily
And then away. Sauce-fox

‘Sauce-fox’ is very much a homage to Ted Hughes’ ‘Thought-Fox’!

I step outside. Imagining perhaps
He had chosen this garden
This particular garden because

Of me. Of us, the family
Who would wish him no harm.
Who would give him food, a place

Some time later, as I was reading the brochures on the Cats’ Protection League I’d been sent, I started making notes as ideas for a poem came to me, ideas which I didn’t use eventually:

I have a cat called
Katmandu

Do you know what my
cat can do?

This was 25 October 1996. I always date all of my poems. Next I remembered the fox poem, and I thought I’d change the subject of the poem to cats – so that some cats are now coming to visit me, not a fox. So that’s where the idea for the first line of the poem came from, with the cats at the door. As you can see, the original draft of the first stanza was quite different:
I have a cat called
Karma

Drum... Drum... What's that my cat can do?

The Cats Protection League

They are at the door,

Shall we open it? Better lock.

Five heavy cute, mean and bed.

They often protection I say, But gyps,

I live in a nice neighborhood

Our doors locked and double good,

If you don't pay up you know that will happen.

Midnight, a knock on the door

I open it? Better lock.

Five heavy cute, mean and bed.

They are protection. I ask what for?

To come in and see you know be sure.

Listen man, and listen hard,

As you approach the neighborhood.

If you were stay in the neighborhood

Just pay up. They knock once to the door

And will night in your garden with a

If you don't pay up, you walk out or down.

Stop carefully ice you walk out or down

A small mine field awaits you at dawn.

And in I step...

I paint

As I paint

I paint

I paint

I paint
They are at the door
Shall we open it? Better had.
Five heavy cats, mean and bad.
They offer protection. I say ‘But guys,
I live in a nice neighbourhood.’
One says, ‘Listen, and listen good,
If you don’t pay up it will end in tears.’

So I’d got the rhyming scheme for the first couple of lines, but not for the others yet. Then I rewrote the first three lines again:

Midnight. A knock at the door
Open it? Better had.
Five heavy cats, mean and bad.

By this point I’d thought of the main joke of the poem, which is vital to the whole thing, which is the wordplay on ‘protection’. In this poem, it’s a reference to the Mafia – gangsters that run extortion rackets. They force people to pay them money, and in return they offer security and protection from others. Once I had that idea, I knew exactly what the poem would be like. In my poem, instead of calling them the Mafia, I decided to call the cats the CPL. I made notes in the margin as I was thinking about what to call them (see p. 35):

The Mob, The Mafia, The CPL
The Feline Mafia, The CPL

I went back to the poem the following day and I almost completed it. Over the different versions, I went from having five cats down to four and finally down to three. I made other changes too. The line ‘Mangle the flowers’ was originally ‘Trample the flowers’ and then it became ‘Top the flowers’ but I settled on ‘Mangle the flowers’ as I didn’t feel that the others were quite as clear or direct. Another change I made was to the three cans of tuna, which were originally three cans of Kattomeat. I’m constantly trying to improve the language in my poems in this way. I’m always looking for the best way to express my ideas. I’d say that the evolution of ‘The Cats’ Protection League’ is fairly typical of most of my poems, in that it went through about two or three drafts.

In the Bad, Bad Cats collection there are a few poems that could easily have gone into a collection for adult readers, such as ‘The Going Pains’. I often do ‘The Cats’ Protection League’ at performances for adults. In a sense, it’s more of an adult poem as adults will appreciate the subtleties of the joke – and the wordplay on ‘protection’ – which might be beyond the frame of reference of some children.

The whole collection came about once I’d written ‘The Cats’ Protection League’ and also the ‘Carnival of the Animals’ series of poems, which was commissioned for a performance at the Barbican Centre in London. Once I’d written ‘The Cats’ Protection League’ I decided to pursue the cat theme a little further and I then wrote all the other cat poems that appear in the book. The title Bad, Bad Cats was one of a number of options. Other choices included Carnival of the Animals and Over to You and Waxing Lyrical. The editors at Puffin wanted to call it Big, Bad Cats, but we finally decided upon Bad, Bad Cats. And the title of the poem ‘The Cats’ Protection League’ was always just that, because of the wordplay on the Mafia connection. Of all my collections for children, I probably prefer Bad, Bad Cats and An Imaginary Menagerie. I do like pursuing a theme across a whole collection as I did in An Imaginary Menagerie.
Based around Roger McGough’s ‘The Cats’ Protection League’

Animal visitor
Imagine an animal visits your school playground (or even somewhere near where you live). You could choose a domestic creature like a dog, a cat or a rabbit – or even a wild animal such as a fox, a badger, a weasel or a hedgehog – or perhaps something even more out of the ordinary. When would it come – early morning or at night or late in the afternoon? What would it be after? Think of some unusual and interesting ways of describing the creature. Perhaps you could make a list of descriptive words and phrases before you begin the poem. (For an animal description, see ‘Non-fiction’ workshop ‘Painting animals with words’, p. 164.)

Animals as humans
In ‘The Cats’ Protection League’, Roger McGough gives human qualities to animals. The term for this is ‘personification’. Write your own personification poem. For example, you could imagine your school run by animals – would the staff be all one creature, or different types? Don’t be too unkind in your choices! Or, how about an animal football team, pop group, team of astronauts – anything you can think of. Or, imagine your friends or family as animals. What would they be? Your poem does not have to rhyme, it could be written as free verse.

Animal narrator
Write a poem in which an animal is telling a story. It could be a cat talking to its kittens, a dog talking to the other dogs in the neighbourhood, or a bear talking to the other animals in the forest. Write your poem in free verse.

Fresh start
Take just the first one or two opening lines to Roger McGough’s poem and write a new poem of your own.
Just on the edge of a deep, dark wood
lived a girl called Little Red Riding
Hood.
Her grandmother lived not far away,
so Red went to pay her a visit one day.

She took some cake and she took some
wine
packed up in a basket nice and fine.
And her ma said, ‘Red, now just watch
out,
for they say Big Bad Wolf’s about.’

But Red went off with a hop and a skip.
She was feeling good, she was feeling
hip.
So she took her time, she picked some
flowers,
and soon the minutes had grown to
hours.

And the Big Bad Wolf who knew her
plan,
he turned his nose and he ran and ran.
He ran till he came to her
grandmother’s door.
Then he locked her up with a great big
roar.

He took her place in her nice warm
bed,
And he waited there for Little Miss Red.
So when Little Red she stepped inside,
that wolf, his eyes went open wide.

Says Red, ‘Why, Gran,
what great big eyes!’
Says Wolf, ‘I’m trying
You out for size.’

Says Red, ‘Why, Gran,
You’re covered in hair!’
Says Wolf, ‘Now, dear,
it’s rude to stare.’

Says Red, ‘Why, Gran,
what great big claws,
what great big teeth,
what great big jaws!

And goodness, Gran,
what a great big grin!’
Says Wolf, ‘All the better
to fit you in!’

But Little Miss Red says, ‘Not so
fast . . .’
And she calls to a woodcutter strolling
past.
‘Hey, you there, John! Can I borrow
your axe?’
And she gave that Wolfie three good
whacks.

‘That’s one from Gran and one from
me
and one delivered entirely free.’
That wolf ran off with a holler and a
shout
and Little Miss Red let Grandma out.

They called the woodcutter in to
dine
And they all sat down to the cake and
the wine.
And that’s how the story ends . . .
Just fine!

Tony Mitton
‘Little Red Rap’ by Tony Mitton

‘Little Red Rap’ (see facing page) is a rap poem. Here, Tony Mitton talks about writing the poem and discusses alliteration, assonance, colloquial words, couplets, genre, narrative, quatrains, refrain, rhyme, rhythm and stanzas.

TONY MITTON: When I was working as a part-time special needs teacher at Kings Hedges School in Cambridge, I used to visit an Infants class. I’d go and do poetry with this class during the breaktimes, just for the pleasure of it. The teacher, Edna Blake, and the children really embraced that. I used to read them my poems. In a sense – like Shakespeare at the Globe! – I had an immediate audience that I was writing for. This wasn’t writing for the idea of being published, it was writing for an event, for a reading. The class even asked me to write them poems about various topics they were doing.

At that time I had a tape of a young Irish storyteller doing something called ‘The Goldilocks Rap’. It was the story of Goldilocks told in a chanty, rappy way. I used to play it in class and the children used to join in with the choruses. They loved that tape. One project this teacher did with her class was looking at different versions of fairy tales such as Little Red Riding Hood. The class asked me – and it was a direct request – if I’d do a Little Red Riding Hood rap. I was working mornings only at that point and I went home one day and I sat down and wrote the rap in one sitting, in about one hour. It wasn’t quick to do because of being a rap, but sometimes a poem such as this does come very fast and very right and very quickly. I just instinctively knew how to do it, I instinctively knew the rhythm I was going to use.

There are very few changes from the original version to the published one of ‘Little Red Rap’ – only a few little tweaks to the odd word or phrase. For example, the original had the word ‘granny’, and I changed it to ‘grandmother’, and I changed the word ‘call’ to ‘visit’. What I did with ‘Little Red Rap’ – and with all the other raps I’ve written since – was to compose the rap orally in my head, and I’d get it to the point where it was working well and then I’d write it down (see p. 41). I don’t say my poems out loud as I’m writing them as a rule – I tend to do them in my mind’s ear.

Back in the early 1980s, I used to watch a programme called The Kenny Everett Video Show. Kenny Everett was a comedian and he used to have various characters he would do, Sid Snot – a punk rocker, and another who was a teddy boy. In character, he’d do these raps – and they were humorous, comic raps. I can’t remember the content of them. I could almost swear that I took my rhythm for raps – for all the raps I’ve done – from Kenny Everett!

My raps are comic rap converted into humorous verse, but still keeping that rap idiom. Wherever possible I lace my raps with humour, using everyday, colloquial catchwords like ‘gimme five’ and ‘cool dude’ and ‘wicked’. Occasionally I might quote a pop song. For example, in ‘Hairy Rap’, the werewolf rap, when the character becomes a werewolf he says ‘I’m bad’ – quoting Michael Jackson.

In the books themselves, the raps are written as quatrains, verses with four lines. But it would be better – in terms of showing how a rap works – to lay a rap out in couplets, a verse with two lines. (I’ve used that pattern – that very simple recipe of ABCB rhyming in four line stanzas – for all my raps in the rap series for Orchard I’ve done now.)

I’m using rap to tell stories, so in a sense I’m rubbing two genres together. In the first two books I’m interweaving the fairy tale genre with the music of rap. And I’m sure it’s been done by people in the past – I’m sure there are versions of fairy tales told in
Chicago gangster language by an American author back in the 1920s. The two rap books after *Big Bad Raps* were in the horror genre, with characters such as Dracula and Frankenstein. And as the series went on, the books went up the age range, and they became more sophisticated.

I tried to be quite true to the original stories, but in my version, Red is given a kind of feminist power – she’s the one who drives the wolf away at the end, not the woodcutter as in most versions of the tale. With all the fairy tale raps I was quite careful not to alter the actual storylines too much, as other writers had done that kind of reworking of fairy tales before. I do like to keep the stories intact. For some of the raps I actually went back to the original fairy tales to reread them, to check them out – such as *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *The Three Little Pigs*, *Little Red Riding Hood* and *The Billy Goats Gruff*, but I knew most of them well anyway.

At the beginning, they were great fun to do, when I was taking them into school and reading them. Later, they were harder to do, harder to keep fresh. I really did enjoy the process of turning rap into what I call comic lyric verse – that of writing rap tightly and rhythmically. And because it’s comic verse for children I’m frequently working with – but often unconsciously – alliteration and rhyme. I like the alliteration in the line:

> And goodness, Gran,
> what a great big grin!

And with the stanza:

> That’s one from Gran and one from me
> and one delivered entirely free.

I’m using the sort of chanty refrain or chorus that you get in some folk tales, such as ‘Fe fi fo fum I smell the blood of an English man’ in *Jack and the Beanstalk*.

I use a very regular beat for my raps – four beats to each line – with a very tight, exact rhyme scheme. Occasionally I’ll allow myself an extra line, such as:

> You can rap about a robber
> You can rap about a king
> You can rap about a chewed up piece of string
> Or you can rap about almost anything

When I perform these raps I do them quite dramatically, so they’re very much performance pieces. I sometimes find that those children who find listening to poetry difficult will wake up and listen. One of the reasons I’m glad I’ve written the raps is that if I can’t catch children in the audience with poems from my collection *Plum*, I’ll often inspire them with the raps. It tends to be – if I can be stereotypical about it – the non-reading boys who will switch on to my performance at that point. I get ‘cred’ by doing rap! A lot of libraries have said they like the raps because they can turn the less literary boys or girls on to them because they’ve got that popular music form and association that children can identify with. At my readings I win certain children with the raps, and having caught them I’ll try and get them to listen to something like ‘The Selky Bride’, warning them in advance that it’s a slower and sadder piece, and that like the raps, it tells a story, but in a slightly different way.
Little Red Rap

and in the edge
of a deep dark wood
lived a girl called
Little Red Riding Hood

Grandmother
her having lived
out for away,
So Red wanted to pay
her a call one day.

She took some cake
she took some wine
packed
in a basket
nice & fine.

Another Man said, "Red,
hers just in the wood
for they say that
Pinky hadWolfis about."

But Red went off
with a leap & a skip
she was feeling good
she was feeling

He took her place
her mouth was warned
he called her up
with a great big roar.

So when Little Red
came dawing in
that Wolf he limped
with a great big grin.
Based on Tony Mitton’s ‘Little Red Rap’

Think of all the fairy tales you’ve ever heard. Think of one that you could rewrite as a rap. It could even be a folk tale, perhaps one from another country. Write down a summary of the plot to remind yourself of the story – just a few phrases or sentences.

The first line of your rap poem could be ‘Once upon a time . . .’ or ‘Once there lived . . .’ or ‘Once there was . . .’ or maybe ‘Hey, everybody, listen, yo! / Here’s a tale you might just know / It’s all about . . .’. Find the one that works best for you. Rather than worrying about getting your ideas down on paper first, work on the first few lines in your head, or even say them out loud.

You do not have to stick to all the details of the original tale. Also, you might only want to tell part of the story, and perhaps start half way through. Another way would be to tell the tale from a certain character’s point of view – such as Cinderella from the Fairy Godmother’s point of view. Try and see if you can inject some humour into your rap too.

As Tony Mitton says, you don’t have to worry about getting a perfect rhyme at the end of the line, half-rhymes will do. And try and avoid ‘lazy’ rhymes – rather than ‘Here’s the tale of Cinderella / the girl with the lovely green umbrella’ go for a rhyme that makes sense in the context of the story – ‘Here’s the tale of Cinderella / the girl who met a hunky fella!’ Have a go at making it fun and funny – in Cinderella, for instance, you could put in a catchy, jokey chorus: ‘Cinderella, dressed in bling / went to meet the future king / BLING BLING BLING!’

Use colloquial language in your rap, with words such as ‘yo’, ‘dude’, ‘man’, ‘wossup’, ‘wicked’, ‘innit’ and many others.

A common mistake is to use percussion instruments while writing raps. This rarely works, as you can’t focus on the words when playing or listening to an instrument. When the words are done – percussion, beat boxing, rhythm tracks – are all great for performing raps.

Another way of approaching this activity is to work in pairs, and you could each write a rhyming chunk each as you go along. And why not check out Roald Dahl’s wonderful Revolting Rhymes and Dirty Beasts (Puffin) – these too are traditional tales retold in rhyming couplets, with just as much rhythm, rhyme and attitude as rap poetry! (A school topic rap workshop is on p. 57.)
**Abstractions**

Think of some abstract nouns, some that you have experienced yourself – such as joy, jealousy, excitement, confusion, greed, compassion, tiredness, surprise, love, worry, hate, contentment or hope. Make a list and decide which one interests you most. Think about your abstraction imaginatively and put it into real terms by answering the following questions, which have been answered for the abstraction ‘boredom’:

1. What does it look like? Grey as the day that never quite rains.
2. What does it sound like? Musak in a shopping centre.
3. What does it taste like? White bread – no butter or jam.
4. What does it feel like? So itchy you want to scratch it all the time.
5. Where does it live? In a cupboard and falls out every time you open it.
7. What would it say if it could speak? Anything – but it would go on and on and on!

Matthew Sweeney stresses that the responses to each question must remain concrete, and no further abstractions – apart from the theme itself – are allowed. Bring your own responses together and develop them into a free verse poem. Each answer could be expanded into a whole stanza. You could even present the poem in the form of a riddle – with a title such as ‘What Is It? – It’s grey as the day / that never quite rains / Sounds like . . .’.

*This activity has been adapted from one of Matthew Sweeney’s popular poetry workshops, which he in turn borrowed from Carol Ann Duffy.*
Acrostics

This workshop greatly benefits from a brainstorm session at the start. Teachers can write out the structure on the board and encourage children to contribute ideas to each line. A good, credible name for the being is important. Encourage the children to invent their own – names with the letters ‘k’ ‘z’ and ‘q’ often have an authentic ring to them. Letters can even be doubled up – e.g. Ziqquiel or Rakkon. The name of the mythical being can then become the title of the poem.

Acrostics are great fun, and can be a creative way of exploring a class topic. The hardest part is finding words that fit – but try not to force or fudge it! You can even do mid-line or end-line acrostics if you are feeling adventurous.

**Seriously**

**Cool**

**Inventions**

**Experiments and exhibits:**

**Nerves, neutrons and nuclear stuff!**

**Climate, chemistry and cures!**

**Energy, elements and electronics!**

**M**edicine and molecules and microscopes!

**U**niverses, ultrasounds and UFOs!

**S**ound, spectrums and space!

**E**volution, eclipses and environments!

**U**tterly and undeniably and unbelievably

**M**ind blowing!!
Boasts and lies

The workshop ‘Boasts and lies’ has two sources – an American Anon poem – ‘I Was Born About 10,000 Years Ago’ and a thirteenth century Welsh legend poem. It provides a great template structure (see p. 47), and encourages children to be highly imaginative and inventive – to really ‘think outside the box’. The workshop can begin by informing the class:

Imagine you are an ancient mythic being, older than time itself. Inside your head is the entire universe. You have observed, lived and experienced all of space and time. You know everywhere and everything – all of history – as well as the present and the future. You know everything that has and could have happened. You have visited every nation, world, every galaxy. In this poem, the voice of the mythic being is travelling, echoing through the ether.

Not all of the lines in the template have to be included, and classes can include their own or even move these lines around. At times children need to be encouraged to be more adventurous in their thinking so a line such as ‘I was there when so-and-so scored the winning goal / when team X won the FA cup’, which is quite mundane – could become something more adventurous like ‘I was there when the pyramids were built / and the first Ice Age began to melt.’

Although the opening stanza rhymes, the rest of the piece benefits from being free verse, as rhyme would greatly restrict the concepts and ideas. Ideas for a poem such as this will commonly come during a number of sittings, so children could be asked to do a number of drafts. Use the template on the facing page to complete this workshop.
Boasts and lies

My name is Qu’marra
I am clever, strong and wise
and these are neither boasts nor lies
When I say . . .
I am older than
the idea of time
I was there when
the Big Bang blew
evolution began
and Moses split the waves
I taught
Shakespeare to write
Columbus to sail
and Albert Einstein to think
I know how many
stars fill the darkness
leaves fall in the forest
lives were lost to the
pyramids
I know why
the moon was made
Atlantis sank
and why the white wolves howl
In my other lives
I have been
a Viking lord
a Saxon slave
and even a Persian Princess
And once I was
an angel’s tear
that fell to earth
and filled the waters of the world
These are neither boasts nor lies –
My name is Qu’marra
Boasts and lies

My name is
I am clever, strong and wise
and these are neither boasts nor lies
When I say
I am older than

I was there when

I taught

I know how many

I know why

In my other lives
   I have been

And once I was

These are neither boasts nor lies
My name is . . .
Cinquains

What Is It?

A coin.
A cracked old face.
A giant silver slither.
A silent witness to the skies.
The moon.

James Carter

Cinquains are syllabic poems invented by the American poet Adelaide Crapsey, and follow this five-line pattern:
Line 1 – 2 syllables
Line 2 – 4 syllables
Line 3 – 6 syllables
Line 4 – 8 syllables
Line 5 – 2 syllables.
(See also Haiku workshops on p. 52.)

Pick anything from the Sun to a cloud to the sea. List four things that your object is like, and reveal it in the last line – as with the poem above.

Conversation poem

‘Empty Bucket’ (p. 62) is a free verse told almost entirely in speech. Write your own short conversation poem, either retelling a real event (as with ‘Empty Bucket’) or make up a fictional scenario – say a conversation between a teacher/pupil, policeman/old woman, shopkeeper/thief – or something more fantastical, say a goblin/dragon or wizard/cat. Aim to write no more than a page and do not be afraid to shorten the piece, taking out lines that are not needed. Less is always more! When you finish, you could read out your poem with a friend to the class.

Close observations

Go outside and collect something from the natural world – perhaps an empty bird’s egg, a feather or leaf or stone; or, you could choose a picture of an animal. Take a sheet of paper and draw a vertical line down the middle. Label one column ‘subjective’ and the other ‘objective’. In the ‘subjective’ column write about your own personal feelings and responses to your find – any words or phrases that come to mind. In the ‘objective’ column write only comments that are factual and descriptive, such as the size, shape and colour of the object/animal. Use all the senses – sight, smell, feel and so on – and include any similes or metaphors that you wish. Be as original as you can. Now write a free verse poem in which you interweave both subjective and objective responses.
Dreams

Do a list-style poem about what various things in the world might dream. You could open with the stanza ‘When day is done . . .’ and open each verse with ‘A . . . dreams . . .’.

Dreamers’ Dreams

When day is done
and night has come
that’s when dreamers dream . . .

A tree dreams
    of its future life
    as a dusty desk
    as a pad of paper
    or even a poet’s pencil

A seed dreams
    when it grows to corn
    when harvest comes
    when the baker opens the oven

A bear dreams
    of a cosy cave
    and salmon splashing
    in the stream

When day is done
and night has come
that’s when dreamers dream . . .
Free verse/memories

Read through the poem ‘Empty Bucket’ (p. 62). This is a free verse poem. Free verse is the perfect medium for writing about your own memories and experiences. Rhyming poetry never serves this kind of subject matter so well. Free verse allows you to write about an event with the actual words and language you want to use – and it allows you to include dialogue, so you don’t have to force a rhythm or a rhyme. Think of an event that you could write about. Try not to cram too much detail in – hone in on one aspect of the event. Aim to write not more than a page, as with this poem. If you wish, you could try writing it in the present tense (as with ‘Empty Bucket!’) to make it seem as if the event is taking place right now. Here are some possible topics to help you think of a suitable memory:

- A misunderstanding, a row, an unusual conversation.
- A favourite or amusing moment on holiday.
- Something that once annoyed you that you now think is funny.
- Something that you used to be afraid of.
- An embarrassing moment from when you were much younger.
- An unexpected event.

Free verse/calligrams

Look at the poem ‘Amazing Inventions’ on p. 61. Look at the way that many of the words are represented in specific fonts. These are called calligrams. A calligram is when you make a word look like what it means:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{TALL} & \quad \text{curly} \\
\text{TINY} & 
\end{align*}
\]

Write your own calligram poem. You could pick a topic – say sports or types of animals, or do your own poem about the future. You could pick a simple list-style structure as the start to each verse, for example: ‘In the future there will be . . .’. 
Free verse/improvising to music

Teacher-led activity. Pick an instrumental piece of music that lasts about three or four minutes. School halls often have a good supply of CDs with instrumental music. Alternatively, for a CD that contains music composed for this purpose, try James Carter’s Just Imagine book/CD (Routledge 2002).

Before you play the pieces, instruct the class to listen to the music very carefully and to find what images the music paints in the mind’s eye. As soon as they have that first image they are to improvise an unstructured piece of free verse. If possible, they should write non-stop for the duration of each piece, writing as many ideas and descriptions of that image – or series of images – as they can. Some children may even choose to doodle or draw the images. You might choose to play the piece of music twice. The unstructured piece of writing can then be developed further. It would be beneficial to examine a few free verse poems beforehand to remind the pupils of this particular form. Or alternatively, classes could be given the choice to write in any form they choose.

Group poems

Teacher-led activity. Pick a title/first line from those given below and copy them on to the board. Ask the class to copy these on to the top of a sheet of blank paper. Invite the group to think of a few lines of their own in free verse. After five minutes ask a few volunteers to read out one favourite line that they have written. Write these lines on the board and then ask the class to copy these down and to use them as the basis for a free verse poem. The group can add, delete or re-order lines to create their own individual poems.

- Moon Gazing – The Moon looks very different . . .
- Moonlit Midnight – Deep in the forest / there’s MAGIC . . .
- Sleepwalker – While the city sleeps . . .
- White Wolf – Here comes white wolf / padding through the snowy forest . . .
**Haiku: animals**

A haiku is a traditional Japanese form that aims to conjure up a specific time and place in a mini snapshot. It is a three-line poem in which the first line is made up of five syllables, the second line has seven syllables, and the third line has five syllables. Before reading this haiku poem, work out how many syllables there are in your name. Haiku, for example, has two: Hai/ku.

**Tiger Haiku**

Through moonlit jungle
strolling stalking then striking
time to feast on flesh

*James Carter*

Choose an animal. Now think about where that animal is and what it is doing. You could try a brainstorm approach – by actively asking What? Where? When? Why? How? Get down as many details as you can. Now consider the five senses – sight, taste, sound, touch, smell – and see if these give you more details to put into your poem. Freeze an image in your mind’s eye and word it as closely as you can in those three lines.

**Haiku: Utopia and Dystopia**

What would your Utopia –
your perfect world – be like?
And what would your Dystopia
– your worst possible world –
be like? For some, a Utopia
might be a beach in a warm
country or an endless supply
of chocolate or a world without
suffering. For some, a Dystopia
might be a world where there
are no school holidays or a
world without music.
Brainstorm ideas separately for
the two worlds. Write one
haiku for your Utopia, and
another for your Dystopia.
Kennings: animals and class topics

Read through the kenning poem WhAT on EaRth . . .? on p. 60. Kennings are such great fun. The principle couldn’t be simpler – each line has two words (occasionally one or three) and the second word ends in the -er sound (can be spelt a number of ways – a/er/or/ar/or).

Write your own animal kenning. Perhaps you could use the template structure below as a starting point. You do not have to use all of these necessarily, and you can add words/lines of your own.

-giver -maker Of all the . . .
-taker -creature I’m the best!
-lover -dweller I’m a . . .
-hater -fella Had you guessed?
-eater

If you were to do a dog, it could be a ‘paw-giver / toy-taker / owner-lover / bath-hater’ and so on. A kenning is a riddle, so don’t mention what the animal is during the poem – until that final rhyme! Kennings are perfect for class topics, as they act as a summation of everything learned in a topic. They are ideal for historical figures (Henry VIII or Queen Victoria), long-gone nations (Ancient Egyptians, Celts, Vikings, Victorians). Here is a fantastic Egyptians kenning display by Jenny Herbert’s Year 3 class at Wateringbury CEP School in Kent.
Let’s begin

See the worksheet ‘Poetry beginnings’ on p. 65 for a selection of opening lines for poems from a range of contemporary children’s poets.

List poems

BRIAN MOSES: Pick one of the phrases below and use it as a starting point for a list poem. Start every line or every stanza with the same word or phrase.

I wish I was . . .
It’s a secret but . . .
I dreamt I . . .
Don’t . . .
I’d rather be . . .
I like . . .
If only . . .

Metaphors in the outside world

COLIN MACFARLANE: Go outside with a pen and notepad and describe anything at all – a tree, the weather, the sky, but without any clichés. Personify whatever you are describing. If it’s a tree, think: is it male or female? Old or young? What emotions does it feel? What would it say if it were human? What would it do? What would it enjoy or complain about? Write down anything you come up with and later work some of your ideas into a poem.
Metaphors for people (aka ‘The Furniture Game’)

Mum

Mum is a zing of yellow.
The fizz in the lemonade.
Mum is the path that keeps us safe.
She’s our shelter and our shade.

She’s springtime’s hope, she’s autumn’s gold,
she’s summer’s coat for winter’s cold.
Our evening star, our morning sun.
She’s our world and more: our Mum.

James Carter

This very simple metaphor poem is based on a workshop called ‘The Furniture Game’ that derives from Sandy Brownjohn’s excellent book To Rhyme or Not to Rhyme (Hodder 1997). Effectively a list poem, it focuses on a different metaphor/image for each line. Write your own metaphor poem based on someone you know – or a famous person if you prefer. Try and use simple but expressive language, and you don’t have to make it rhyme – these poems work equally well as list-style free verse. Be adventurous in your thinking. Below are some subjects you could use – or you could or even incorporate some of your own (in any order that works best for you). You could even avoid using the person’s name, so that it works as a riddle! Try some of these:

- a colour
- an object (or number or group of objects)
- a sound
- a food
- an animal
- a season/a type of weather
- a place
- a piece of clothing.
Metaphors/space

The poem ‘Northern Lights’ on p. 60 serves as a useful model for workshops, and was the inspiration behind this class poem:

The Sun

is not
what
it seems . . .

Not an orb of molten amber.
Not Zeus’s mighty torch.
Not even a Phoenix
nor a dragon’s fiery temper.

No. The sun
is
the sun.

A spark of life.
Our brightest star.
A mass of gas:
hydrogen
and
helium
and
heat
heat
heat.

by James Carter, with Year 6 class,
Queensway Primary School, Banbury

The structure is simple – the first half focuses on ‘poetic’ imagery (listing three or four things that the subject is not) then the second half explains what the subject actually is, and in ‘scientific’ terms. Do your own version on your own subject, say the stars, clouds, or the Milky Way – or even more earth-bound things such as clouds, sky, the oceans. You could, if you choose, open with ‘[The stars] / are not / what / they seem . . .’.

The point of this poem is to encourage adventurous and fresh language and imagery. So, try and avoid clichés like ‘The Moon is not made of cheese’ or ‘Clouds are not fluffy white pillows’ – we’ve heard those before! If you are stuck, move on to another topic.
Raps for school topics

Teacher-led activity. Raps are great for writing about all kinds of school topics – from space to history to science. Skeletons and the human body are popular topics at Key Stage 2 – and the rap poem below shows how a rap can be a fun way to creatively explore a subject matter. First of all, brainstorm your subject knowledge. Think of lots of key words you have been using. List as many as you can. You may find there are words that naturally rhyme and work well together. Get children to work in pairs doing rhyming couplets on specific parts of the class topic, and then simply put them all together. As a class, you could write a fun, catchy chorus to put actions with. For an opener, you could try something like – ‘Check this out, listen, yo! Here’s some stuff you need to know . . .’

Wrapped In Skin: A Body Rap
(extract)

Now check this out
this thing I’m in
this chunk of life
all wrapped in skin

Chorus
(after ever other verse) –

Yeah, wrapped in skin
from head to toe
need all this stuff
to make me go

These two big lungs
go out an’ in
to feed my blood
with oxygen

A skeletal frame
that creaks and groans
them joints, them ribs
them knees, them bones

These kidneys too
I need them, see
to take my drink
and make my wee!

Your hear my heart?
Your hear that thump?
It’s for my blood
it’s like a pump

Got all this stuff
and more besides
and you have too –
they’re your insides!

James Carter
Shape poems/rivers

Teacher-led activity. Rivers, oceans and coastlines are very popular topics at Key Stage 2. The poem ‘The River’ on the facing page serves as a useful writing model for classes. This is best done initially as a class brainstorm on a white board. The teacher will draw a long spindly river flowing from clouds/mountains at the top to the sea at the bottom. The river can be divided into five or so stages.

Stage 1  Words/phrases associated with the origins of the river:
‘From up in the clouds / from high in the mountains / as a trickling stream the river began . . .’

Stage 2  Gerunds – alliterating -ing words: brainstorm phrases such as – ‘turning/twirling, rushing/gushing, wandering/meandering’

Stage 3  Similes/metaphors – ‘like a silver string, as curved as a twisting vine’

Stage 4  Various things the river passes – e.g. ‘and on and on past forests and farms, towers and towns, traffic and trains . . .’

Stage 5  Then finally the arrival at the sea – ‘until it reaches the sea . . .’ and then children can repeat various phrases such as ‘the salty sea’, ‘the wild waves’ and so on.

Children can then take parts of the brainstorm and add words and phrases of their own. They can draw their own river outlines and put the words along the river line. A final version could be done on white A3 card with colour washes, pastels and crayons and would make a fantastic display!

Shape poems

Generally, rule number 1 with a shape poem is NEVER start with the shape – otherwise children can become more absorbed in drawing and the words become secondary. Even in shape poems, the words must come first. It is always a good idea to get the words of the poem finished first and then convert them into a shape later, either on a PC or laptop, or by hand. Children often like to draw the outline of the shape and then put the words in after. This may take a few different attempts, to get the shape the right size for the words. If done on a PC or a laptop, put the cursor in the middle of the screen. Then, type a word or two, then press return to take you down to the next line – and so on. This may take a lot of trial and error. It’s best to keep the shape as simple as possible.
The River

from a tiny spring the river came and wound its way
for days and days first east then west but always south always down
even when it curled itself around a bend but then one day something changed as it ran so slow but free
for the river grew and the river knew that now it was THE SEA THE SEA THE SEA THE SEA THE SEA THE SEA THE SEA THE SEA

James Carter
**Poetry**

**Song titles**

Have a look at the titles of songs in the charts, on CDs or on MP3s. Write out a list of titles that you like. Can you put some of these together to form a poem or a new song?

You do not need to stick to titles – you could cut and paste lines from lyrics and also add some lines of your own. Make it a real word collage!

**The Northern Lights**

are not what they seem.
Not fireworks from another realm.
Not portals into mystic dreams.
Not cosmic curtains, even swarms of magic dust.
No. They’re simply solar particles brought to us on wild winds bursting forth in winter skies like gifts to soothe our tired eyes.

*James Carter*

**WhAT on EaRth . . . ?**

shapeshifter
ship lifter
beach crasher
cliff basher
sin washer
loo flusher
world-wider
firefighter
life taker
life saver
make-a-cuppa
washer-upper
store-in-tower
hydro-power
April shower
feed-a-flower
I can be ice or steam or snow but just for now
I’m. . .H₂O

*James Carter*
Amazing Inventions

When I was 10
I really believed
that in the future
there’d be
such AMAZING INVENTIONS as

FLYING CARS
UNDERWATER CARS
MACHINES that could make any flavour crisp you asked for
day trips to the moon
video phones
and robot dogs & cats
in every home

and

MOST IMPORTANTLY
bubble gum
that can make you

INVISIBLE

So you can imagine
just how disappointed I was
when I got to 20
and none of them
had come true

So you can also imagine
how extremely miffed I was
when I got to 40
and still none of them
had come true

Until they do
I’d like to say
do you know what

I reckon

is THE MOST AMAZING INVENTION
us humans
have come up with so far?

Have a think:
Our brains
come up with them

Our mouths
get rid of them

This poem
is made of them

James Carter
Empty Bucket

It was late afternoon
and I’d been peering
into the rockpools
for absolutely ages
when this boy comes over
points at his bucket
and says ‘14 shrimps
  5 crabs
  2 dogfish.’

‘Wow!’ I say.
‘What’ve you got?’ he says.
‘Nothing,’ I say.
‘Nothing?’ he says. ‘Nothing?’
‘No,’ I say.

Then his little brother
comes over
points at his bucket
and says ‘3 crabs
  4 shrimps.’

‘Fantastic!’ I say.
‘What’ve you got?’ he says.
‘Nothing,’ I say.
‘Nothing?’ he says. ‘Nothing at all?’
‘No,’ I say.

Then their little sister
comes over
points at her bucket
and says ‘1 starfish.’

‘Brilliant!’ I say.
She looks into my bucket
and says ‘What’s in there then?’
‘Nothing,’ I say.
‘Nothing?’ she says. ‘Nothing at all?
How old are you?’

‘44,’ I say.

James Carter
**Forms of poetry: other poetry workshops**

This book does not feature all of the different forms of poetry, so you may wish to explore some of the forms listed below, which are covered by these texts: Sandy Brownjohn’s *To Rhyme or Not to Rhyme?* (Hodder & Stoughton 1997), Pie Corbett and Brian Moses’ *Catapults and Kingfishers* (Oxford University Press 1986) and Peter Abbs and John Richardson’s *The Forms of Poetry* (Cambridge University Press 1990):

- ballad
- diamond
- limerick
- lyric
- riddle
- sonnet
- tanka
- tongue twisters
- villanelle.

**Poetry word wheel**

Make photocopies of the poetry word wheel on p. 64, giving one sheet to each member of the class. Children can cut out the three wheels and join them together with a paper fastener. They then choose a combination of three or two words as a starting point for a poem.

**Poetry beginnings**

On p. 65 are some beginnings to poems that have never been written. Find one that you like. Copy it on to the top of the other side of the page and then carry on with the poem. Before you begin, think – do you want to just start writing or do you want to brainstorm your ideas first? And what clues are there in the beginning you have chosen to help you find some way of growing it into a poem? Say the line out loud a few times to feel its rhythm.
Poetry word wheel
Poetry beginnings

VALERIE BLOOM
   Underneath the bridge at midnight
   Or
   Last night I had soup for breakfast
   Or
   My monster is quite useless

JAMES CARTER
   Deep in the forest there’s MAGIC
   Or
   Deep in the cave there’s DANGER

JAN DEAN
   Behind the dust, behind the cobweb
   Behind the crack in the wall
   Or
   When they find out it was me

BERLIE DOHERTY
   The Earth is angry

JOHN FOSTER
   In the corner of the cellar

TONY MITTON
   The door came crashing open

NORMAN SILVER
   When the last whale dies

MATTHEW SWEENEY
   There are places in the forest
   You must never visit
   Or
   The polar bear looked into the water,
   Saw something he liked there

BENJAMIN ZEPHANIAH
   Poems like this can cause
Poetry checklist

When you are reading through a draft there are many things to think about. The questions below may help you to develop your poem.

Language
- Do you repeat some words too often?
- Is any of the phrasing awkward?
- Are there too many adjectives or adverbs?
- Could you take some words out? Remember – less is more.
- Are there too many overused adjectives (nice, beautiful, lovely, spooky, etc.)?
- Are you using clichés (unoriginal phrases) that could be changed?
- Do your rhymes work well? Are you using words just for the sake of a rhyme?

Image
- Are you painting a full picture for your reader?
- Are your descriptions too vague or unclear?
- Could you use similes or metaphors?
- Could you use the five senses to bring your writing to life?

Structure
- Do you have a good beginning, middle and end?
- Does the opening grab your attention and make you want to go on?
- Have you got the best possible opening line or stanza?

Rhythm
- Do the words, phrases and lines flow?
- How well does it read out loud? Try it!
- Is the rhythm working well overall?
- Do you keep to the same rhythm throughout?

General
- Is the title right?
- Is the poem original in any way?
- Is there anything in the poem that you don’t need?
- Does the poem do what you want it to do?
- Will the poem make sense to a reader?
- How will a reader respond to this?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the poem?
- Could your poem be simpler? As before: less is more!

The next step
- How could it be improved? What needs to be done next?
- If you have gone through the checklist and you are not sure what needs to be done next, leave your poem for a while and come back to it later.
Poetry glossary

alliteration and assonance  Alliteration is where words begin with the same letters or sounds: ‘table top’, ‘car keys’, ‘green grass’. Assonance is where words have the same sounds inside: ‘greed/bean’, ‘food/soon’.

anthology  A book of poems by different poets often on the same theme, for example space poems, shape poems, animal poems.

calligram  When a word looks like what it means: TALL curly TINY.

cliché  An overused and unoriginal phrase or description: ‘as black as night’, ‘as cold as ice’.

colloquial language  Everyday speech.

drafting and editing  Drafting is doing different versions to improve and develop a piece of writing. Editing is checking a piece for spelling, grammar and punctuation, or adding/removing parts of the poem.

form  The type of poem, for example kenning, free verse, acrostic or haiku.

free verse  Poetry that does not have end rhymes or follow a set rhythm.

imagery  The pictures painted by the words of a poem.

metaphor and simile  Simile is when you say one thing is like something else: ‘as cunning as a fox’, ‘she felt trapped like a bird in a cage’. Metaphor is when you say one thing actually is something else: ‘it’s raining nails’, ‘the city is a jungle tonight’.

narrative  The story that a poem tells.

personification  A metaphor that gives something human characteristics: ‘the wind laughed’, ‘the Moon stared’.

point of view  Some poems are told in the voice of a person or show the world as it is seen through one person’s eyes; this is the ‘point of view’ of the poem. A conversation poem will have two voices and therefore two points of view.

refrain  The repeated chorus of a poem or song.

repetition  The basic ingredient of all poetry – in which sounds, words, phrases, lines, verses (including rhymes, alliteration, and so on) are repeated to give a poem its structure and rhythm.

rhyme  When the sounds at the ends of lines agree with each other: ‘Why are we so afraid of the dark? / It doesn’t bite and doesn’t bark.’ Internal rhyme is where words rhyme within the line: ‘The growing and turning of shadows on land / The falling of sand, that watch on your hand.’ A half or near rhyme is when words do not fully rhyme: ‘Do I love you to the Moon and back? / No, I love you more than that.’

rhyming couplets  Two lines together in a poem that rhyme: ‘A shark was cruising for a bite / When suddenly there came in sight’.

rhythm  The rhythm is the feel of a poem, and will depend on the words and combination of words, as well as the length of each line.

shape poem  A poem in which the words form a specific shape.

stanza  The grouping of lines in a poem – also known as a ‘verse’.

structure  How the poem is laid out, with a beginning, middle and an end.

syllable  A single unit of sound in a word: ‘Po/em’ has two syllables. ‘Po/et/ry’ has three syllables. How many are there in your name?

syllabic verse  Specific forms of poetry (haiku, tanka, cinquain, etc.) that have a set numbers of syllables per line.

theme  The main subject(s) of a poem.
BERLIE DOHERTY: Fiction is the combination of I remember and let’s pretend.

Facts behind fictions: initial discussion points on writing fiction

As Berlie Doherty explains a story is the coming together of ‘I remember’ and ‘let’s pretend’. In other words, it is the merging of fact and fantasy, our memories and our imagination. Morris Gleitzman explores this idea:

MORRIS GLEITZMAN: Where do ideas come from? This is what everyone wants to know, including me. The closest I’ve come to figuring it out is this. I reckon we all have a compost bin in our head. All our life’s experiences – all the people we know, all the places we’ve been, all the books we’ve read, all the ants we’ve trained to juggle jelly babies, everything goes into the bin and mulches down into something rich and pongy and fertile. Our imagination grows seeds and ideas spring up in that compost between our ears. How do we get our imagination to sow the seeds? Lots of different ways. I sit in my writing room with the curtains drawn and I stare at the wall and I daydream. I spend a lot of my time daydreaming. It’s one of the ways I get ideas and it’s one of the reasons I like being a writer. As I daydream I try to forget who I am, where I am, what I’m doing, and most importantly, I try to forget the fact that I’m looking for ideas. When I do finally forget, that’s when my imagination starts to take over and the characters’ voices come into my head.

I also like being a writer because it’s one of the few jobs you can do at home in your pyjamas. As a writer, you’re indoors a lot, but it’s never boring because you get out a lot in your imagination. I’ve spent days breaking into Buckingham Palace (Two Weeks with the Queen), giving a guinea pig a Viking funeral (Water Wings), shaving all my hair off (The Other Facts of Life), stealing a stuffed horse (Second Childhood) and carrying out a pirate raid on a school (Bumface) – all without leaving my chair. I can’t wait to see where I go next.

A good starting point for writing any form of fiction is to consider your own life, your own experiences. A method that many teachers and workshop leaders use is to encourage their pupils and classes to tell each other stories from their own lives, perhaps
significant experiences – events which are meaningful to them, or simply some amusing anecdotes. These oral stories can be shared with a partner or in small groups. Another way of doing this is for classes to record their stories, to transcribe them later and then rework the material into a piece of prose. (Please refer to Chapter 4 for workshop activities on writing autobiographical pieces as well as the ‘Early memory’ workshop in the ‘Narration’ section of this chapter, p. 109.)

So many published plays, short stories, poems and novels have begun as a result of actual events in their authors’ lives. If you ever find, as you are writing about your own experiences, that the piece evolves into fiction, then that’s fine – develop the idea and see where it takes you. Alan Durant addresses this very situation. He talks about the time he took a real event and turned it into a short story entitled ‘The Star’ (published in his teenage collection A Short Stay in Purgatory, Random House):

ALAN DURANT: The original version of the story was quite wordy and caught up in real events – it wasn’t fictional enough. Originally, I was the narrator, telling the experiences that happened to me. I was too close to it. And this is a problem when you write fiction based upon your own autobiography. You have to push aside the real events and let the fiction in. The fiction should live and breathe and take over, so it’s a story. The original version – which was called ‘Following the Star’ – was more of a chronicle.

Because the various elements of fiction – such as plot, dialogue, character, setting and so on – are so interlinked, it can be very difficult to talk about each one separately. For, when you discuss your characters, invariably you will talk about what your characters do, and therefore you will be discussing plot. When you talk about what your characters are saying, you will be discussing dialogue. So, to deal with these aspects of fiction in isolation is quite artificial, as they all exist and function together. Yet it is necessary for pupils to consider each of these elements individually in order that they can see how fiction works as a whole.

In the following quotes authors talk about stories and fiction writing and the processes of writing. These could serve as useful discussion points in a workshop environment.

DAVID ALMOND: I feel strongly that stories are the thing that holds us together. They’re the way we pass on information, the way we educate children. Without stories, the world becomes just information – fragmented information. Narratives hold people together because you have to have a narrator and a listener or, put another way, a writer and a reader. This process attaches people to each other. There’s also the idea that the world is a book, a book that has been written by someone or something else and we are acting that story out. So the whole notion of story seems to me such a hugely powerful metaphor for human life.

ANONYMOUS CHILD: I don’t know what I think until I’ve written it.

TERRY DEARY: Writers learn how to write in the same way they learn how to speak. They imitate. And in the same way you develop your own way of speaking and conversing, you develop your own way of writing. But initially, if you want to be a writer, you imitate, like a parrot.
BERLIE DOHERTY: Every book should have elements that make us laugh and cry . . . I think we have a spiritual dreaming life which co-exists with our rational, ordinary life. We nourish it deliberately – by reading books, by listening to music. But it would exist anyway. It’s our storytelling side, the daydreaming, the night dreaming – and it’s an essential part of us that just goes on all the time. We can gather it, nurture it consciously by writing stories, but it happens anyway. The storytellers and story writers consciously put these dreams into some kind of shape and form.

ANNE FINE: The best practice for being a writer is not writing, but reading. When you read, it is as if painlessly, effortlessly, without even thinking about it, you’re absorbing how prose works.

ALAN GARNER: We have to find parables. We have to tell stories to unriddle the world.

MORRIS GLEITZMAN: Sometimes I think dreams are stories trying to come out . . . I also think stories are a bit like X-rays. They show us what’s happening inside people. Not to their blood and bones and spleens. To their hopes and fears and dreams and feelings.

RUSSELL HOBAN: Burn all the books and still there will be stories.

MICHAEL MORPURGO: Novels are good for exploring issues and feelings – feelings which I sometimes find difficult to deal with as a person myself, so I explore them imaginatively. It’s very instinctive. I don’t sit down and think to myself ‘well, I’m very worried about this, therefore I’m going to write a book about it.’ I just do it.

PHILIP PULLMAN: Writing a story is going on a journey without a map. Advice to young fiction writers: take an interest in the craft. Learn to punctuate. Buy several dictionaries and use them. If you’re not sure about a point of grammar, look it up. Take a pride in the tools. Keep them sharp and bright and well oiled. No one else is going to look after the language if you don’t.

Educationalist and poet Pie Corbett views Story as fundamental:

PIE CORBETT: Look at any culture in the world. They all have stories. Without stories we are cultureless. It is Story which gives us our humanity. Like I say about poetry, Story explains the world to ourselves and ourselves to the world. If we don’t know the stories of the culture within – the Cinderellas, the Snow Whites or whatever – we’re not part of that culture.

Young children all around the world – will ask for the same story every night. What this tells us is that the architecture of Story is important. The archetypes – all the characters, events, situations – within the structure of Story are vital too. Traditional tales give us a framework that is crucial to our cognitive, linguistic and also moral development as human beings. A good story – in oral or literary form – will expand your mind.

Story, at its most fundamental level, is about going out into the world and facing the monster. It’s about going out, overcoming hurdles and growing as a person. It’s in everything from Where The Wild Things Are to Little Red Riding Hood to Philip Pullman’s trilogy. And every story is a patchwork of other stories. Shakespeare wrote thirty-nine or so plays. Only three of these were totally original. Stories are made of stories.
Here are some further thoughts for discussion:

• What is fiction? Give examples.
• Why do we tell, read and write stories?
• Are stories important – and if so, why?
• Has the role of storytelling changed over the past 200 years?
• What are the similarities/differences between (a) oral stories, (b) stories in text form, (c) stories in picture books and (d) stories in the form of films and TV dramas?
• An adapted Picasso quote: ‘[Fiction] is a lie that tells the truth’.
• Stories help us to question, reflect upon and make sense of our lives and the world around us.
• Fiction gives shape and meaning to the chaos of our lives.
• Fiction helps us to see the world from other people’s points of view.

Planning for fiction: ideas on brainstorming and planning for writing

Even if you do not want to do a full plan of the piece you are going to write – be it a story, drama or whatever – it is always useful if you can jot down a few initial ideas. As a result, you will have something to refer back to when you have begun writing. You can often have many ideas in your head at one time, so putting ideas down on to paper will prevent you from forgetting them. It is always a good idea to do some planning before you write a story, even if you don’t stick to your plan. These two authors very much encourage pre-planning:

**ALAN DURANT:** I advise children to do some preparation. I do think this is useful – just spending a few minutes to think about where your story is going to go. So many children start and they’ll be writing away and then get stuck. I don’t encourage anything as formal as a detailed plan, but I’ll get them to think how the story will start, roughly what will happen and how it will end. Endings are often where children get stuck. Too often you get, ‘I woke up and it was a dream’, because there hasn’t been enough planning beforehand. I don’t tell them to stick rigidly to their initial ideas – all I’ll say is that they should know roughly where they’re going with the story. You can know what the ending is going to be, but it can be left open as to how you will get there and how it will be presented.

**MALORIE BLACKMAN:** If it’s a novel, I plan a chapter breakdown so that I know what will happen at each stage of the book. This gives me a framework for my story, therefore when I start a novel I know where it’s going! That’s not to say that I always stick to the chapter breakdowns. Sometimes, midway through the book, the characters may take me in another direction, but by then I trust them to know where they’re going.

Morris Gleitzman will not begin writing a novel until his plan is ready:

**MORRIS GLEITZMAN:** I plan my books out on the computer and I write notes about each chapter of the novel. I do many drafts of that chapter plan. When I start writing the book, I’ll have what might be draft six, seven or eight next to me printed out, but then as I’m working on the text I’ll add to that plan as I go along.
Philip Pullman believes in not doing too much preparation:

**PHILIP PULLMAN:** I find that when I do plan a story it goes dead on me, so I have to keep some of it unknown. Otherwise I lose the curiosity that pulls me through.

David Almond’s method of brainstorming ideas takes the form of story mapping (see p. 74):

**DAVID ALMOND:** If I’m working on a new book or a new story I’ll do some story mapping. When I do a story map I might have just one idea to start off with. That idea might be that there is someone on a train going over a bridge. So I might write down ‘train’. Then I’ll give him a name. Frank. And I’ll write ‘Frank’ down. And I’ll ask myself questions about him, such as ‘What’s he wearing?’ A t-shirt. A Nike t-shirt. I’ll write that down. And Frank has got a bike with him. What kind of bike is it? A Raleigh. Where’s he going? He’s going to see his aunty – his Aunty Doreen. Where does she live? 17, Clacton Gardens. What’s he got in his pocket? A letter.

Stories come from details like these. I find it very hard to look for plotlines. I explore these different details and these will give me my plot. You have to look hard and question everything you put down in your story map. And the more you look, the more you find. Every detail you find allows your story to grow in richness. So the story takes on a body organically. And rather than seek out a plot with a beginning, middle and end – you have a scenario from which you can work. You will eventually have a linear plot, but you achieve it in a very different way.

The ‘Brainstorming’ worksheet will help you to give shape and **structure** to your ideas. There is no reason why this sheet cannot be modified for non-fiction and poetry too. You could even change or adapt it to suit your own way of working. The ‘Story mapping’ worksheet on p. 74 adopts David Almond’s story mapping idea and can be used for finding an outline for a story.

When doing story mapping of your own, consider the questions: Who? How? Where? Why? What? When? See if a story or scenario emerges. You might also want to write out aspects of your story in boxes, like a flow chart. Alternatively, you could try Philip Pullman’s method, which is to write out various scenes for a story on to small yellow Post-it notes and to move them around on a big sheet of paper to find the best sequence for those scenes. But what is important is that you discover a system that works best for you.

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Story mapping notes made by David Almond
Brainstorming

It is always a good idea to do some planning before you start writing a story, even if it is only a rough outline – for example, the characters’ names and how the story will start. This sheet will give you a chance to plan more fully if you choose to do so.

Brainstorming

Write down your first ideas around this spider diagram:

Now develop your ideas further:

- **Character(s):** Name, age, likes, dislikes, personality traits and background.
  
  ______________________________________________________________________
  ______________________________________________________________________
  ______________________________________________________________________
  ______________________________________________________________________

- **Setting(s):** Where will the story take place?
  
  ______________________________________________________________________
  ______________________________________________________________________
  ______________________________________________________________________
  ______________________________________________________________________

- Now try to write out a **structure** for your story. You don’t have to keep to your plan as you write.
  
  - **Beginning:** ______________________________
    
    ______________________________________________________________________
  
  - **Middle:** ______________________________
    
    ______________________________________________________________________
  
  - **End:** ______________________________
    
    ______________________________________________________________________
Story mapping

Use these questions as the basis for a story. If other ideas come to mind as you respond, write those ideas down too. Don’t worry if you don’t have answers for every question.

Someone is going somewhere . . .

Who is it?

Where are they going?

What is s/he wearing?

What is s/he carrying?

What is s/he thinking about?

What have they got in their pocket?

Is s/he worried about something?

How do they feel about where they are going?

What does the person plan to do when they get there?
Growing fiction: David Almond’s *Skellig*

In this section, David Almond talks about the writing of his multi-award winning novel – the modern classic *Skellig* – and discusses such areas as plotting, characterisation, character names, titles, drafting, rhythms of prose and themes.

**DAVID ALMOND:** *Skellig* happened immediately after I’d finished a collection of short stories about my childhood, which were later published as *Counting Stars*. I’d put the stories in an envelope and sent them off to my agent. Literally, as I turned away from the post box and walked down the street the first sentence of *Skellig* came into my head:

I found him in the garage on a Sunday afternoon. It was the day after we moved into Falconer Road. The winter was ending. Mum had said we’d be moving just in time for the spring. Nobody else was there. Just me. The others were inside the house with Doctor Death, worrying about the baby.

I just knew that this would be the start of a new story and that it would be a longer piece than any of the stories I’d just finished. As soon as I sat down that day and started writing I knew it would be a children’s book. I’d always wanted to write one, but until that point I hadn’t found the right story and the right style. With *Skellig*, the whole thing came together. So I hadn’t planned to write a children’s book at that point – it came and got me!

With that one opening sentence came a huge freight of possibilities. I went back home and began writing. I didn’t plan out the book in the way I carefully plan out novels now. I do a lot of work on the shape and structure of a novel before I begin. With *Skellig* I just took a deep breath and took it as it came. The story happened as a series of short scenes which came out like quick bursts of energy. The book took about six months, which is pretty quick for me. It was written in just one draft, really. I did a few tweaks and occasional changes to the odd scene, but very little. I’m amazed at how little I did. I think *Skellig* will be the only book that will be that straightforward to write as everything else is usually really hard work. The whole time I was writing it I was aware that it was something new for me, something good.

Unlike the following novel, *Kit’s Wilderness*, the plot to *Skellig* didn’t really take any false turns. Usually I find that a story can take many false turns and I’ll have to stop and go back and change or delete some of what I’ve written. With *Skellig* it sort of felt as if I wasn’t writing the story but more that the story had found me, and it was coming through me onto the page. When the writing was going well, there were moments when it seemed that I was just transcribing the words as they came so quickly and easily. I learnt a lot from that process. Nowadays, I actually strive to get to those moments when the story begins to take on that kind of energy where the writing flows so freely. It’s this selfless condition where you stop struggling with it and you and the story become as one as...
I found Mr Wilson on the afternoon of Sunday 3 May. I knew it was then, because it was two days after we moved into 15 Pelham Road, and the day we moved was Friday 1 May. Nobody else was there. Just me. The others were inside the house with Doctor Death, worrying about the baby.

I found him in the garage, behind the tea chests, and at first I thought he was dead, but he wasn’t.

We called it a garage because that’s what the estate agent showed us round called it. It was more like a demolition site or a rubbish dump or like one of those ancient warehouses they keep pulling down at the quay. The estate agent led us down the garden, tugged the door open and shone his pathetic little torch into the gloom.

We shoved our heads in at the doorway with him.

“You have to see it with your mind’s eye,” he said. “See it cleaned, with new doors and the roof repaired. See it as a wonderful two-car garage.”

He looked at the paint and clay spattered on Mam’s jeans.

“Or as a studio,” he said.

She touched her big belly and went all soft and girly.

“No for a while,” she said. “Not with this one on the way.”

“Of course,” he said. “Then something for the lad - a den, a secret hideaway for you and your mates. What about that, eh?”

I looked away. I didn’t want anything to do with him, with his clipboard and his suit and his business cards and his stupid smile. All the way round the house it had been the same. Just see it in your
you are writing. With *Skellig* that happened all the way through. It's very much like that moment when you’re reading and you get so engrossed and engulfed and you’re not aware of reading the words anymore.

Originally the book was going to be called ‘Mr Wilson’. I knew it was wrong, but I just needed a title. Unless a story has a title at the top of the page, it doesn’t exist for me. It has to have a name from the start – so I just put something at the top, even if it’s just ‘Mr Wilson’! You see, that was *Skellig’s* original name. The name ‘Skellig’ comes from the Skellig Islands, off the south west coast of Ireland.

I didn’t know Skellig was going to turn out to have wings until I got to the point where Michael puts his hand across Skellig’s back. And I thought, ‘Oh no! He’s an angel!’ I remember thinking, ‘Do I really want to have an angel in this story?’ There’s so much nonsense written about angels – glossy coffee table books. Yet there are also some very good books about angels that I’ve read. I was worried about getting into a schmaltzy area, I suppose. Skellig may have angelic characteristics but he does have worldly credentials too – he’s dirty and dusty and grimy and he eats bluebottles. So because of this, I thought it was okay, and I’d let him have his wings!

Children in schools always ask me about him. They ask me what he is, and I tell them that I don’t know. Some children find this situation strange. They’ll say ‘You don’t know? But you wrote the book!’ But they do accept it. There’s so much that kids don’t understand about the world yet they accept this situation. I see children as being in a condition of not knowing so many things. But when you get older you imagine you’re in a condition of knowing, though I believe we’re all in a condition of knowing very little.

Mina is the most important character in the book for me. I think she gives it the sternness that the book needed. She keeps things under control and she gets Skellig out of the garage and into the empty house. Mina’s the one that causes the other characters to act, and so keeps the story moving forward. She also brings in the powerful off-beat themes – such as Blake and home education.

And why are there references to Blake and Darwin? Though I knew it was more of a children’s book, I was thinking only of openness and it didn’t seem to matter if I made references to Blake and Darwin. As I said, the story took on its own life and energy, anyway. With Darwinism I was speculating where evolution is going now and with Mina being a girl schooled at home it seemed appropriate to the story. I didn’t censor these things at all. The only moments I remember thinking that I can’t do such-and-such was when I would be writing something and think that everybody had heard it before. Then I realised that children wouldn’t have heard it before. That’s one of the many exciting things for children, that their minds are fresh and their minds are fluid. There’s a moment in the novel where Mina says to Michael something like ‘Maybe we’re just dreaming this.’ And Michael replies, ‘If we are dreaming, how would we know?’ I thought that adult readers might not accept that – but it might actually excite some children’s minds.

It was very instinctive for me to include Blake and Darwin. It’s all to do with the possibilities of being human. It goes back to what Skellig is. What is he? Well, he’s human because he’s got the full range of human experience. We’re all potentially angelic like him, and we’re all potentially bestial like him too. So these two references expand upon these ideas. Darwin said ‘Look, we were once that but now we’re this’ – and there’s a thread between us and the beasts. And Blake believed we are more than what we seem to be, that there is a spiritual aspect to all of us.

There’s another moment in the book that when I was writing it I originally thought, ‘I can’t do that.’ It’s the moment where Michael and Mina fly around the room with Skellig.
You’ve got this guy with wings in this room upstairs. He’s being very beastly – he’s eating owl pellets and dead animals brought in by the owls. The children are searching around in the darkness downstairs. I felt great excitement as this whole scene came about, but I also felt a great technical thrill. As I was writing this part I felt as if I was writing it really well. At the moment when the three of them start flying, and actually step off the ground, I felt I was using exactly the right words, the right prose to portray that scene. I was excited that they were flying and that Michael could see ghostly wings coming out of Mina’s back. Even though I wrote it, I think it’s a lovely moment. To write that scene was wonderful.

We met him in the middle of the room. He stood erect. He seemed stronger than he’d ever been. He took my hand and Mina’s hand, and we stood there, the three of us, linked in the moonlight on the old bare floorboards. He squeezed my hand as if to reassure me. When he smiled at me I caught the stench of his breath, the stench of the things the owls had given him to eat. I gagged. His breath was the breath of an animal that lives on the meat of other living things: a dog, a fox, a blackbird, an owl. He squeezed me again and smiled again. He stepped sideways and we turned together, kept slowly turning, as if we were carefully, nervously beginning to dance. The moonlight shone on our faces in turn. Each face spun from shadow to light, from shadow to light, from shadow to light, and each time the faces of Mina and Skellig came into the light they were more silvery, more expressionless. Their eyes were darker, more empty, more penetrating. For a moment I wanted to pull away from them, to break the circle, but Skellig’s hand tightened on mine.

‘Don’t stop, Michael,’ he whispered.

‘His eyes and Mina’s stared far into me.

‘No, Michael,’ said Mina. ‘Don’t stop.’

I didn’t stop. I found that I was smiling, that Skellig and Mina were smiling too. My heart raced and thundered and then it settled to a steady rolling rhythm. I felt Skellig’s and Mina’s hearts beating along with my own. I felt their breath in rhythm with mine. It was like we had moved into each other, as if we had become one thing. Our heads were dark, then were as huge and moonlit as the night. I couldn’t feel the bare floorboards against my feet. All I knew were the hands in mine, the faces turning through the light and the dark, and for a moment I saw ghostly wings at Mina’s back. I felt the feathers and delicate bones rising from my own shoulders, and I was lifted from the floor with Skellig and Mina. We turned circles together through the empty air of that empty room high in an old house in Crow Road.

Teachers often say to me, ‘What’s the message to the book?’ And I say, ‘I haven’t got a message.’ But really, perhaps what I am trying to do is to get people to look at the world a bit more closely and to look beyond what we can actually see and consider other possibilities.

People also ask me about Skellig’s name. The Skelligs are a pair of islands off the south west Ireland coast – rocky, barren, apparently uninhabitable places – but they were occupied by a community of monks during the ‘dark ages’ and played a crucial part in the history of Western Christianity. One of the islands is called Skellig Michael. The other
is Small Skellig. I didn’t realise that the book and the character should be called Skellig until I was halfway through writing it. Once I realised, it was obvious. I’d tried to travel to the Skelligs a year before I started writing the story, but the sea was too rough for ferries. They clearly continued working in my imagination/subconscious...

Death as a theme does recur in my books, for as I was growing up, both my baby sister and father died, but I also felt great happiness in my life too. Mine was a very happy Catholic family despite the losses we experienced. This is very much an issue I’m interested in – that mixture of joy and tragedy present in people’s lives. Because I experienced this as a child, I now find it interesting to write about those kinds of areas for children. And so many children do face them. As a writer I’m very interested in the whole range of emotions that children experience.

I did no plotting for *Skellig*. I was never quite sure what would happen next. It was a matter of keeping alert, writing as accurately as I could, and allowing the book to grow organically. With other books, I do lots of brainstorming/mindmapping. I have an idea of the framework of the story, but the story usually outgrows it. And all the books have large sections where the story just starts to run and I have to keep up, as I did with *Skellig*. There are other times, of course, when nothing moves and it’s a big struggle. But it’s all about persisting/believing, and writing with the expectation/hope that the story will keep on coming to life.

The characters of Michael and Mina just ‘came to me’ and I got to know them as the book developed. I discovered Skellig through the medium of Michael. Mina jumped into the book ready-formed. I had to reread Blake and find out lots about birds in order to keep up with her. She was in many ways a kind of muse. Without her, the book would not have come to life.

When I wrote *Skellig* I hadn’t read any children’s books for years. Even when it was in manuscript form people were making a fuss about *Skellig*. And I thought well, if this book is as different as everyone is making it out to be, then I want to make sure I don’t get influenced by the current scene. Also, if I’d gone to a publisher three years ago and said ‘I’ve got a great idea for a children’s book. It’s got William Blake, Darwin, a tramp that’s maybe an angel and a poorly baby’ – it wouldn’t have stood a chance! At that point there only seemed to be a demand for things such as issues books and books for reluctant boy readers. But now I do read and enjoy children’s writers as much as adult authors, including Philip Pullman, Jacqueline Wilson, Tim Bowler and Melvin Burgess.

When I was writing for adults I couldn’t come to terms with the fact that the things I wanted to write about weren’t going to really affect or interest people. I think writing for children gives me the opportunity to write exactly what I want to write about. I feel liberated and I don’t feel categorised. There are a few parameters in writing for children, boundaries to what you can and can’t write about – but there’s not the same kind of categorisation that you can have in the adult publishing world. If I’d gone to an adult publisher and said ‘I’m from the North of England and I want to write a book about the pits’ – which is what *Kit’s Wilderness* is – they wouldn’t be interested. Adult publishers all seem to want the new Will Self! With children’s publishing you can write about all kinds of different areas. Children don’t have categories and they don’t classify writers. They just want a good story, and that enables me to write as I want to.

I write for sound, rhythm, beat. I speak it out – tap it out – as I write. I talk to kids about this. Some think I’m crackers, but others – well it’s what children do, respond to sounds and rhythms. The playfulness of language, children’s games – I love all that.
And I've learnt so much from being a children's writer. The audience is so close. Writing for children got rid of the burden of trying to find someone. Kids write to me and say 'I really felt I was in your book.' Children still read through their senses. I try to write through the senses.

I feel strongly that stories are the thing that holds us together. They’re the way we pass on information, the way we educate children. Without stories, the world becomes just information – fragmented information. Narratives hold people together because you have to have a narrator and a listener or, put another way, a writer and a reader. This process attaches people to each other. There’s also the idea that the world is a book, a book that has been written by someone or something else and we are acting that story out. So the whole notion of story seems to me such a hugely powerful metaphor for human life. My partner and I have got a little girl. She’s 16 months old. It’s almost genetic that we sit down and tell her stories, even if it’s ‘Do you remember yesterday, when we went to the beach?’ It’s the fabric of our lives. And the telling of the tale is the thing that makes it real, in a sense.

And this goes back to the horror that people felt in the 1980s when Margaret Thatcher said that there’s no such thing as society, we’re all individuals. I think stories stop us from being individuals. They make us a community, they hold us together.

How do I feel about the book becoming a ‘modern classic’? The book just keeps on going, touching people’s heart and minds. It has a weird power that sometimes seems to have nothing to do with me. Yes, it’s spoken of as a ‘classic’ and it’s ‘done’ in lots of schools etc., but it hasn’t been killed off by that. It became an opera in 2008, the film came out in 2009, there will be a national tour of the play in 2009, too, and the book continues to sell, to get new and very enthusiastic readers. So, all in all, it’s great. I must say, though, that as a writer, I’m much prouder of some of my other books – Kit’s Wilderness, The Fire-Eaters, Clay, Jackdaw Summer... Sometimes I look at Skellig and I wonder, ‘How on earth did I do that?’ With some of the others, I know how I did it.

**Moving home**

The events of *Skellig* come about as a family of four move house. Write about a fictional family and what happens to them in their new home. As with *Skellig*, you could weave together realistic and fantastic events. Perhaps one of the children finds something unusual in the attic/garage/cellar/spare bedroom/shed. What will happen as a result of this? How will everyone react?

**Neighbours**

In the novel, Michael’s new neighbour Mina begins to play an important role in his life, yet they have very different personalities. Write a story in which two children – that are also very different, and perhaps do not get on at first – become very important to each other. Do character breakdowns first, using the ‘Invent your own character’ worksheet (see p. 92).
Short stories

Most of the text examples discussed in this chapter are taken from novels. But you will only ever have time to produce short stories or pieces during the workshops. Yet the ingredients of fiction – such as plot, character, dialogue and place – are the same whether you are writing a short story or a novel.

David Almond's advice on writing shorter narratives

David Almond has the following useful advice for writing short stories:

DAVID ALMOND:

• Scribble down lots of ideas first of all, but don’t do too much planning.
• Have two or three main characters at the most.
• Keep to a short timescale. Keep the story within a few days, a week or a month at the very most.
• Think in cinematic terms. Write your story as a series of scenes.
• Try not to report or comment on action, show the action happening. If you had a sentence like, ‘Sam was sitting by the river. He was wondering about what Donald had said last night’, that’s just reporting something. Instead, you could say, ‘What on earth was Donald on about last night?’ You put it in the form of a question and it becomes more active, and involves the reader more. It doesn’t refer inward to what Sam was thinking, but puts his wondering out loud directly on to the page. If you show things outwardly more in this way, it becomes more cinematic and more fast-moving. A short story needs to move fairly quickly and this helps you to keep it short. If you flounder about trying to explain everything then your story will become too long. The American author Raymond Carver had great advice for writing short stories: ‘Get in, get out and move on!’ So – show a scene, then move on. Show another scene, and move on again – and so on.
• Don’t be frightened to leave a space on the page between your scenes. The best thing you can do in a short story is to leave a gap on the page so the reader just moves naturally on to the next scene.
• Try not to put in too much padding, anything that you don’t need in your story. You don’t need to include details of how your characters are feeling the whole time. We should know how your character is feeling by what they are doing and what they are saying. Show your characters acting and speaking.

Further guidelines for writing shorter fiction

• Have an introduction that is brief and get into the main part of the story as soon as you can.
• Use dialogue to help bring your story and your characters to life.

Like David Almond, Celia Rees advises writers to keep the scale of the story small:

CELIA REES: Pick one small experience or event and explore that in a story rather than trying to achieve something more ambitious. Think small – perhaps just simply a description of someone walking into a house, just a small moment in time. You don’t even need a real plot necessarily, but it does need some kind of structure – a beginning, middle and end.
Beginnings and endings

Ways of opening a story

What are the different ways of beginning a fictional story?

**PHILIP PULLMAN**: Stories must begin somewhere. Out of the welter of events and ideas and pictures and characters and voices that you experience in your head, you the storyteller must choose one moment, the best moment, and make that the start. You could begin anywhere in the chronology, of course; you could begin in the middle, in media res, or you could begin at the end of it if you wanted to.

**MALORIE BLACKMAN**: A good introduction is absolutely vital – to grab and engage the reader. Being a very practical person, my view is that – and as I’ve been told – what sells a book is the picture on the cover, the blurb on the back and the first page. That’s what people go to. So I aim to go straight into a story so that hopefully people will think ‘Oh, what’s this about?’ and it will grab them. You can bring in characterisation and everything else once you’ve grabbed the reader. You have to get on with the plot on the very first page.

Further to the examples given above, stories can also begin with a description of a character, atmosphere or location. Find a few novels you have read and enjoyed. Reread the introductions. What do you think of them? Do they make you want to read on – and if so, why? How do you respond to them?

These authors emphasise the need to make an early impact upon the reader:

**CELIA REES**: Most of all, you’ve got to suggest to the reader that something is about to happen or has happened and is disrupting your fictional world. And that event could be frightening, upsetting, all kinds of things – that will depend on the style of your story. Something significant has to occur early on. On top of that, you’ve also got to establish the place and the characters in your introduction so as to make the maximum impact upon your reader.

Now look at these three opening sequences and see how they aim to arrest and keep a reader’s attention:

I found him in the garage on a Sunday afternoon. It was the day after we moved into Falconer Road. The winter was ending. Mum had said we’d be moving just in time for the spring. Nobody else was there. Just me. The others were inside the house with Doctor Death, worrying about the baby.

(David Almond – *Skellig*, Hodder 1999)

This introduction makes you ask yourself – who is the ‘I’ that is telling the story? And who is the ‘him’ in the first sentence, and what was he doing in the garage? And who is ‘Doctor Death’, and what is the matter with the baby? David Almond gives the reader little snippets of information, but only so much – just enough to arouse our curiosity and to make us ask questions and want to find out more.
He came in the early morning, at about half past two. His feet padded along the balcony, slinking silently past the closed doors of the other flats. No one glimpsed his shadow flickering across the curtain or noticed the uneven rhythm of his steps.

(Gillian Cross – Wolf, Puffin 1992)

This opening sequence may be very different in style from Skellig, but again it stirs our interest. We want to know: who is this character? What is he up to? Why is he sneaking about at this time? What it also does is to create an atmosphere. We are told that it takes place ‘in the early morning’, and the author uses sound to describe how the character is walking – ‘his feet padded’, ‘slinking silently’ and ‘uneven rhythm’, but she also gives us images – ‘balcony’, ‘closed doors’ and ‘his shadow flickering across the curtain’. So not only does the author encourage us to ask questions, but also she allows us to know exactly how it feels to be there. Right from this first paragraph the reader is very much involved with the story.

With Helen Cresswell’s bold and inviting introduction, who could resist reading on?

Listen, I have a story to tell. It’s mad and sad in parts and beautiful as well. Most stories have a time and a place. They happen because a particular person was in a particular place at a particular time. Think about it. If Wendy Darling had not lived in a certain tall house in a certain street in London, we should never have known the story of Peter Pan.

(Helen Cresswell – Snatchers, Hodder 1998)

Now imagine someone in a bookshop. They have just picked up a copy of your book. They open your book at the first page and begin at the first paragraph. What are you going to do to keep that person interested and entertained and to stop them from putting it down and picking up another book? This is certainly something worth thinking about when you are reading through drafts of your stories. The next time you are in a bookshop or a library select a few books and compare how they start. Also, consider what makes you decide if you’re going to read a certain book or not. The cover? The title? The blurb on the back? For many people it’s a combination of these, but in the main, it’s the beginning – the first few paragraphs of the story.

When writing a novel, Norman Silver dedicates much time to the introduction:

**NORMAN SILVER:** More time is spent on the beginning of a story than anything else. I just keep working on those first couple of pages. Until I get the tone of my work, it doesn’t move any further. So, the usual order of production is first to gestate the idea, then second, to go for those opening couple of pages to see what it’s going to sound like. Then, once I’ve wrestled with it and got it nearly right – the train leaves the station! – and I’ll begin the story proper. And now I’ll work on it non-stop until I get to the end. This writing phase is pretty intense. Once I’ve finished, I might leave it for a bit, work on other things and then return to the polishing stage later.

**Ways of concluding a story**

With regard to endings to stories, Morris Gleitzman and Celia Rees both stress the need to have credible conclusions:
MORRIS GLEITZMAN: I like to write books in which the characters’ problems are not totally solved or wrapped up at the end of the book because so often in life problems aren’t fully solved. I think it can be disappointing to read stories in which they are. It’s unrealistic.

CELIA REES: Endings have to round off the story satisfactorily. Readers can feel cheated if a book doesn’t end properly. An ending needs to have a sense of completion, but should also point forward to the future. Life is a continuum and carries on, and a book should reflect that. In a book you have to convince your reader that your characters are real, that they live in a real world and that real things are happening to them. In fiction, everything has to stop at the end of the story – so you need to put across the sense that ‘This might be the end of this story, but another is just beginning’.

Endings

Write a story for one of these endings:

• And she/he/it was never seen again.
• And the three of them lived fairly happily ever after.
• S/he ran up the steps, and didn’t look back once.
• S/he jumped out of the boat and ran up the beach.
• ‘Never again!’ s/he said.
• And once again, they were the best of friends.

Jan Dean reflects upon the different forms of endings in fiction:

JAN DEAN: There are a number of different types of endings. There’s the open ending in which certain events have come to an end but the reader is left to imagine what may happen next. There’s also the twist ending in which either the unexpected happens or things are not quite as they seemed to be throughout the story. I don’t like endings to be too neat, but it can be unsatisfying if there are lots of unanswered questions at the end of a story – such as what happened to so-and-so and what happened about such-and-such.

As Alan Durant has suggested earlier in this chapter, it is not essential that you know the ending of your story before you start, but it is good to have some idea as to how the story might finish or otherwise you might get stuck and have to go back and change aspects of your story. Above all, try not to think too hard about how your piece of fiction should begin or end as you write. You can make decisions about those details when you are doing a second draft. Also, an ending does not necessarily have to be happy and positive, but you will find that most readers will at least want the conclusion to the story to bring some sense of hope. And as a rule, it is good to have a fairly short, sharp sentence or phrase to finish off with.

(See the worksheet ‘Story openings’ on p. 85 as well as the ‘Genres: openings’ workshop on p. 133.)
Story openings

David Almond
Alan took the postcard out of his pocket again.

Ian Beck
He woke suddenly into darkness and the sound of wolves howling. His old nurse stood by the bed with a dark lantern. He could see the tears on her cheeks, and she was muttering a prayer.

‘Quickly,’ she said, and he scrambled into his clothes. From somewhere deep within the stone walls he heard a muffled explosion.

Malorie Blackman
I crept down the stairs, wincing each time the floorboards groaned under my feet. The house was night-time dark, but I knew the way by heart. Through the hall, through the kitchen, open the door and out into the garden. The Moon was hiding behind a cloud. But at last the clouds drifted out of the way. The garden filled with moonlight, bathing me in its silver glow. And slowly, I turned into a . . .

Melvin Burgess
If I’d known you were my father I’d never have helped you in the first place.

Gillian Cross
When Benjamin was eleven, his parents gave him an island off the coast of Scotland.

Anne Fine
Robbie stood in the doorway. Seven beds. Seven quilts. And seven little bedside tables. A month ago, it would have been Robbie’s mother reading ‘Snow White’. Now, suddenly and horribly, it was a new home.

Philip Pullman
At midnight, the crabs came back.

Celia Rees
She could never be sure whether she hated the house or it hated her.

Jacqueline Wilson
I sat up with a start, absolutely terrified.
**Story openings**

On p. 85 are the beginnings to stories that have never been written or published. Find one that you like. Copy it onto a piece of paper and then carry on with the story. But before you begin, think – do you want to just start writing or do you want to brainstorm your ideas first? Either way, try to think of how your story will finish. ‘I woke up and it was all a dream’ is cheating and it’s not allowed!

**Characters: writing about fictional people**

Writers and readers both agree that, in fiction, one area that is of great importance is good characterisation. But what is it, and how can it be achieved? Answer this question yourself when you have finished reading this section.

One way to describe fictional characters is ‘round’ and ‘flat’. A ‘round’ character has been well crafted and, as a result, is believable and portrayed in detail. Take, for example, Jacqueline Wilson’s *Double Act*. Over the course of the novel the reader gets to know the central characters, twins Garnet and Ruby – and also their immediate family – very well. The reader is informed as to what these characters are like, how they behave, what they think and how they feel about each other. However, the other, more incidental characters – such as the twins’ teachers and friends – are not portrayed in such detail. These are ‘flat’ characters – characters that are more shadowy, ones that a reader does not get to know so well. And it can only be this way – for not every character in every book can be ‘round’ or otherwise every short story you started would turn out to be the size of a telephone directory! There simply isn’t time or space to paint every character fully: it is the central characters that need most attention.

Celia Rees likes to get to know her central characters well, and she ensures that they are fully rounded:

**CELIA REES:** You’ve got to have believable characters that your readers can care about. You’ve got to care about them and you can only do that by developing credible characters within a strong plot. Sometimes your characters jump out at you fully fledged – they’re there, they’re that person, with that name and you’ll know them well immediately. Other characters prove harder to get to know. I may begin by thinking this person is female, aged 16, has blonde hair and blue eyes, wears these clothes – but that character is still anodyne, not fully fledged. Usually I’ll have to find one thing about that character that’s different and then they’ll become real. With my earlier novels I used to write pages of notes about all the characters. Now I do the notes in my head. I give a lot of thought to my characters, just waiting for that one quality or detail that will make them come alive. There’s a science fiction film called *The Invasion of the Bodysnatchers* in which these zombie-type people grew out of pods. If you’re not careful, your own characters will be like that, a pod character that’s not whole or fully formed, and will just sleepwalk through the novel not doing very much.

Rarely do books these days – for children, teenagers or adults – contain lengthy descriptions of characters. Previously, writers would take up many paragraphs – if not whole pages of text – to provide detailed biographies of their characters. Nowadays, short character sketches are more fashionable, as these next two passages demonstrate.
He was tall and thin, and dressed in an immaculate black suit. From his shoulders, a long, black teacher’s gown hung in heavy folds, like wings, giving him the appearance of a huge crow. Only his head was startlingly white. Fair hair, almost as colourless as snow, lay round a face with paper-white skin and pallid lips. His eyes were hidden behind dark glasses, like two black holes in the middle of all the whiteness.

(Gillian Cross – *The Demon Headmaster*, Oxford University Press and Puffin 1982)

The old woman’s hair was grey and white in streaks, tied back in a bun. Her face was as thin and brown as cardboard, with deep lines round her nose and mouth. One leg was stiffly extended in a bandage, her heel resting on a coil of rope. She was wearing a long brown skirt and a tweed jacket with leather patches on the elbows.

(Janni Howker – *Badger on the Barge*, Walker Books 1987)

The descriptions in these two passages are most vivid. The prose is simple and direct and flows with a strong rhythm – and because of this, both pieces work well when read out loud. Note how both of these character portraits focus solely on physical description – for the characters’ personalities come out elsewhere, in the events that occur in these novels.

**ALAN DURANT:** Show rather than tell – that exact phrase is always in my head when I’m writing. And I always tell myself off if I think I’m telling rather than showing.

What Alan Durant means by ‘show rather than tell’ is that he aims to write fiction in which he shows his characters in action, doing things, talking, interacting – rather than simply telling his readers about those characters. Or, put another way, we as readers get to know his characters not so much by what he tells us directly about them, but what he shows his characters to be doing. But how does this work in practice? Well, rather than writing, for example, ‘Joe was a gullible boy’ – that is, directly telling the reader what Joe is like – you could show the character Joe in conversation, being tricked into believing something.

Plot and characterisation in a story are very much intertwined. Plot is the series of events that the characters initiate or are involved in. Clearly, you cannot have a plot without characters of some form – be they human, animal or whatever. Some stories and novels are not plot-driven, but character-centred, and are more concerned with either the personalities of the individuals in the story or the relationships between the characters. That is not to say that there is no plot at all in such books, but the writer is more interested in exploring the characters and their relationships rather than taking the reader through a series of events. Anne Fine is one writer who openly confesses that as she is writing she is more actively concerned with character than plot.

**ANNE FINE:** To be honest, plots don’t interest me nearly as much as people. When I stop to chew the pencil, it’s rarely to wonder what the characters will do now, or where they’ll go. Far more often it’s what are they thinking? Or, how are they feeling?
But this does not mean to say that Anne Fine’s books do not have plots at all, as they do, but when she writes she gives thought to creating interesting characters in interesting situations. Have a look at Anne Fine’s book *Bill’s New Frock* – in which the main character finds himself in a very unusual if not unique situation!

These two authors are very much aware of the relationship between plot and character:

**NORMAN SILVER:** Generally speaking, plot and character work together for me – when an idea comes I have the feeling of a character in a situation or in a crisis. From there, my plotting starts with my main character’s need to get out of his situation. And that will start to generate the plot. I then start to expand the character to make him go for one choice rather than another. I never think of a character in isolation – that wouldn’t work for me. I’m always thinking of a character in a social or personal situation, or whatever, but in some kind of turmoil, usually. That scenario drives the plotting forward. But I’ll also have various other plot ideas – I’ll know that other events will happen down the line – so that will affect how my character starts to be formed, and then the character takes a step forward, and I’ll see that affecting the plot.

**GILLIAN CROSS:** I don’t think of plot and character as separate. My characters express their personalities through the plot, the things that they do. I like to put them in extreme situations which highlight the moral choices they have to make. I think moral choices are important and I think children share that view.

But how do writers get to know their characters?

**JACQUELINE WILSON:** I do think about my characters quite hard before I write about them – particularly when I’m swimming in the mornings! I always know what my characters like best to eat, their favourite television programmes and things like that. I get to know them very well.

**MALORIE BLACKMAN:** Once I’ve organised the plot framework for a book, I work really hard on my characters, getting to know them really well. I work out a full biography for the main characters, answering questions such as: What do they love and hate? What makes them happy or angry? What’s their favourite food or colour? Do they have any annoying habits? What do their friends like or dislike about them? I might not ever use all of that material. Probably 70 per cent of it I won’t actually need, but at least by doing the biography the characters have become real people inside my head. And I hope my characters act like real people in my books. Although some of my characters find themselves in bizarre situations, I try to make the way they behave in those situations realistic. I never base my characters on family and friends, and I do like writing both nice and nasty characters. I think it’s true to say that most people are a mixture of both good and bad qualities. For me, playing about with the proportions of good and evil is the fun part when creating a character. I never start a story until I feel I know a character really well. The characters are all important.

As Malorie Blackman says, doing a character biography is a useful and practical way of getting to know a character, one that can help to make a character become fully rounded. (See the worksheet ‘Invent your own character’ for an example, p. 92.)
Celia Rees believes that pondering over characters is an essential part of the story writing process. Indeed, it is good to spend time thinking about your characters in action: talking, interacting, even doing everyday and mundane things. You will also need to consider what makes them unique, what makes them different or special – do they wave their hands about as they talk? Do they have an unusual laugh? Do they dislike eye contact?

Many writers admit that their characters’ personalities – often quite unintentionally – are made up of people who they have met or who they know well. A few writers will deliberately use friends or acquaintances as the basis for characters in their stories. They will start with someone they know but will change certain details around – their sex, their age, their appearance. However, the majority of fiction writers – such as Malorie Blackman above – claim that although some minor aspects of their characters may be based upon people they know (including themselves), in the main, their characters are invented. Morris Gleitzman talks about how he becomes acquainted with his characters, and reveals that he too does not base them on real people:

**MORRIS GLEITZMAN:** When I’m getting to know a character and I’m starting to think that I have a character whose story I want to tell, I always feel that I want to tell their whole story, I don’t want to tell some peripheral aspect of their story. To do that, I have to know what the biggest problem is in their life at that moment. So I’m always building up stories around the character’s problems. They don’t have to be big global problems or issues, but they must be problems that are significantly important and preoccupy that character.

All of my main characters are a part of me, but exactly where my minor characters actually come from is a mystery to me because what I’ve never done is take people I know from my life and consciously put them into stories. My family are always telling me that they don’t want to appear in my books! And that’s fair enough, because it’s my job to make things up, not to steal other people’s lives. I suspect that what happens is that without even knowing it, I take very tiny pieces of people’s lives, so tiny that they wouldn’t even notice. These minor characters, I think, are combinations of lots of different people I’ve met.

Both Morris Gleitzman and Melvin Burgess believe in letting their readers know exactly how their main character is feeling and what they are doing at any moment in a story. Melvin Burgess adds that young writers should ‘aim for vividness in both character and situation’. It can be difficult to write about a character until you have the right name. One way of overcoming this situation is to call the characters ‘A’ or ‘B’ or ‘C’ until you find suitable names – but make sure that once you are writing your story, you have the names you need. Writers can source names for their characters from many places – such as books of baby names and telephone directories.

**How do authors decide upon their characters’ names?**

**JACQUELINE WILSON:** (on the toy rabbit ‘Radish’ in *The Suitcase Kid*): I was looking for a name for the Sylvanian Family Rabbit. I got thinking about what rabbits like to eat, and ‘Lettuce’ cropped up. And I thought, no, it was too wet and limp! I was after something that was sturdy but little and then I came up with ‘Radish’ the rabbit. It sounded alliterative, and I went with it. I chose this particular toy as I had my own Sylvanian Family Rabbit as a mascot that had originally been my daughter’s. And I have to say that Radish is definitely my most popular character to date.
Out of thin air

You are going to build your own character out of nothing – by simply answering a few questions and developing your character from there. Give yourself just a couple of seconds to answer each question.

- Is it a girl/boy/woman/man?
- How old is s/he?
- Where does s/he live?
- Who does s/he live with?
- What is this person like?
- How would you describe this person’s appearance?

Now you have built up some details to begin with, brainstorm some more of your own ideas in note form – or even use the ‘Invent your own character’ worksheet on p. 92 to learn more about your character. Don’t worry about writing everything down – thinking about the person is just as important. Once you have as many details as you need, write a story based around this character in the first person. You could begin with ‘My name is . . . and I want to tell you about . . .’ or find your own opening.

Empty out your pockets

Instead of writing about a character directly, write about the objects or possessions the character always has in their pockets, and say why these are important to her or him.

Eavesdropping

There are two people sitting on a park bench. They are having a row.
Who are they? What are they rowing over? Go straight into writing the piece without any planning – and learn about the characters as you go.

The hot seat

(This activity has been adapted from one that Berlie Doherty and Gillian Cross have both done in their own workshops.)
Volunteers in turn think of an imaginary character and (in character or not) answer questions about that person from the rest of the group. You can then write about one or a combination of these invented characters.
Every picture tells a story

Teacher-led activity. Cut out pictures of people – but not famous or well known – from magazines or newspapers. There should be one picture per child. Ask the class to brainstorm various details about their character, such as age, background, family, the way they speak, their personality and so on. As they are writing these notes on their characters, sporadically ask the pupils questions such as:

- What important event happened to that character at the age of six?
- What birthday present have they always treasured – and why?
- Whose photograph do they keep in their pocket at all times?

Once the pupils have built up these notes, ask them to write about that character in a situation, perhaps one of the following:

- The character discovers that a friend/relation has been lying about something important for a while.
- The character finds a wallet on the street containing money and credit cards. What does she or he do?

Morris Gleitzman’s activity

MORRIS GLEITZMAN: Decide who your story is going to be about – it could be about you, somebody you know or somebody you’ve heard about or somebody you’ve imagined or even a combination of these. Find out what the biggest problem is in that character’s life. Then, once you’ve thought about that, you can ask yourself what that character is going to do about it. Think about how that character feels about their problem, and how you would feel in that situation too. Before you start writing, consider if the character will actually solve their problem, or part of their problem. Most important of all, think about how they will feel about their problem at the end of the story. For me, feelings are the most important part of a story. You can turn to nearly any page of one of my books and know exactly how my main character is feeling.

What’s in a name?

Authors collect names for their characters from many different places – baby-naming books, telephone directories, school registers and even gravestones! Celia Rees takes authors’ names from the spines of books in the library and mixes them around – so William Shakespeare and Enid Blyton could become Enid Shakespeare and William Blyton. Or try mixing a pet’s name with an author, say Ginger Almond and Rover Wilson! Collect a list of names – first name as well as surname – and then put personalities and characters to them. Write a short piece in which you describe your character doing something that they do every day. You may want to use the ‘Invent your own character’ worksheet on p. 92 to find out more about your character.
Invent your own character

Name: ____________________________________________________________
Age: _____________________________________________________________
Who does s/he live with? __________________________________________
What are her/his hobbies? __________________________________________
Favourite possession? _____________________________________________
What does s/he usually have in her/his pockets? _______________________
What is s/he really good at? ________________________________________
How would you describe her/his appearance? __________________________
What does she/he want more than anything else? Why? _________________
Does s/he have a secret? ___________________________________________
What is the main problem in her/his life? _____________________________
HELEN CRESSWELL: My characters are never called anything like ‘John’ or ‘Susan’. They’ll be ‘Arthy’ or ‘Jem’ or ‘Minty’ or ‘Else’. I used to have a notebook in which I’d collect names, and would sometimes look around graveyards for any good ones! In fact, the names ‘Joshua’ and ‘Caleb’ – from The Night-Watchmen – I’ve been told, come from a piece in the Old Testament. I must have read it when I was at school and I must have stored those names away in my mind.

One final word on characterisation: aim to create central characters that your readers can identify and sympathise with.

**Invent your own character**

When you write a story, it is good to know your main characters well. One way of getting to know them is to do a character file. With this activity, you can invent the character before you write the story. This character – as with all your characters – must be made up, and must not be based on anyone that you know.

Look at the example on the facing page. Write down your ideas in the spaces below. If you think of other ideas, write them on the other side of this sheet. You may want to add details to the stick person (as a boy or a girl) below. Answer as many of these questions as you can.

Once you have finished, you could begin your story with your character doing one of the following:

- receiving an unexpected phone call;
- arriving home to a surprise;
- getting into trouble for something that she or he didn’t do.

**Dialogue: the role of speech in stories**

‘Dialogue’ is another word for talk or speech in fiction, and without it, stories would be very dull. Dialogue is vital in fiction and it serves as one of the major ways that a writer has to bring stories to life.

Dialogue has many roles to play within stories, including:

- to shape and form characters;
- to give the reader an insight into what the characters think and feel;
- to provide first-hand experience of how the characters behave;
- to allow the characters to express themselves;
- to develop the plot and to allow the story to progress;
- to allow conflict to occur between characters.

For many people, dialogue is one of the easiest things to write. However, it is important to make sure that a story is not overtaken by dialogue, and that every line of dialogue serves a purpose.
In order that we can believe in the characters of a story, the words that they speak must be realistic and flow in the same way that real speech does. But just how ‘real’ should dialogue be? And should every ‘umm’ and ‘err’ that a character would say be included? In real life, people often say ‘umm’ and ‘err’, but it would be tedious to put all of these into a story. A good rule is to include utterances such as ‘umm’ or ‘err’ only when a character is hesitating or feeling anxious. And there is no reason whatsoever why your characters should not interrupt each other.

Berlie Doherty looks for specific things when reading her dialogue:

**BERLIE DOHERTY:** When I read through the drafts of a novel I pay close attention to dialogue – and whether something should or should not be in dialogue at all, whether a scene would actually move much faster if you take it away. And also, it must be that character talking. You should be able to recognise a character by the things they say and the way they say it. So, dialogue moves the narrative forward but also tells you something about the character. It’s also got to sound like real people talking, though it hasn’t got to have the monotony of real people talking.

Malorie Blackman has her own way of ‘collecting’ dialogue:

**MALORIE BLACKMAN:** I get a lot of dialogue from being incredibly nosy. I listen to other people’s conversations whenever I get the chance. And I always have a notebook in my handbag so that I can jot down all the good expressions and phrases that I hear other people use.

These authors use the same method of testing out the dialogue in their books:

**HELEN CRESSWELL:** I always read my dialogue to see if it flows. And as I write it, I can hear the character’s voice in my head.

**ANTHONY MASTERS:** When I’m writing the dialogue I’m in total immersion, and the process is so vivid for me that it’s more like recording the voices rather than creating them. When I reread the manuscript I speak all the dialogue aloud.

In the following extract by Helen Cresswell, note how true to the rhythms of real speech the dialogue is:

‘Sit yourself down, Essie,’ she fusses. ‘Gravella’ll fetch a spill and put in to the fire and it’ll be cosy in no time. Oh! Getting quite dark outside, I see. Don’t the evenings draw in? I’d best draw the curtains, or we’ll have half the Dale peering in at us.’

She went to the window, and drew the curtains with a grand sweep. They, too, were of brocade, and she secretly stroked her rough fingers down their softness before turning back to face Essie.

‘Ain’t they new curtains, Jem?’ she said sharply peering forwards. ‘What? Oh, them!’ Jem shrugged. ‘Newish.’

(Helen Cresswell – *The Piemakers*, Oxford University Press 1967)
In many modern novels, not every line of dialogue is qualified with a phrase such as ‘he said’ or ‘she said’, for instance:

‘Who was that?’
‘When?’
‘On the phone.’
‘Oh. It was a wrong number.’
‘But you were talking for ages.’
‘Was I?’

When writing a piece of fiction, you need to decide if you are going to explain who is talking every time a character speaks. Malorie Blackman talks about this issue below, as well as how she achieves realistic speech in her books.

MALORIE BLACKMAN: As I’m writing I hear the voices, the dialogue in my head. It’s not me talking, it’s my characters talking, and I’m just recording what they’re saying. And because I imagine my characters to be real people in my head, it comes out as real people talking. Yet at times I’ve noticed that some of my dialogue has become quite flowery and poetic, and I’ve realised that I’ve taken over too much, and it doesn’t sound like that character speaking, so I’ve had to change it.

With my dialogue I tend to use ‘he said’ or ‘she said’ more than anything else. In the main, a reader should be able to appreciate the way that something is spoken from the dialogue itself. Also, I feel that if you’re using lots of adverbs to qualify how everything is spoken – ‘she replied softly’, ‘he answered quickly’ – then the dialogue is not doing its job. Take for example,

‘Come in for your dinner, John,’ she shouted angrily.

Here, the speech isn’t enough, because it needs the adverb ‘angrily’ to explain. So, it needs to be something like,

‘John! How many times do I have to call you? Come in NOW!’ she said.

There, you get it from the dialogue on its own. But that’s not to say I don’t use adverbs, there are exceptions where I do, such as when somebody is whispering something, and they’re saying something normal and you want to tell the reader how it is being spoken – and then you’ll have to put ‘she whispered’, or ‘she replied softly’.

When you’ve got only two people talking, you don’t need ‘he said’ and ‘she said’ for every time they speak, you can just let the dialogue do the work. It’s actually been proved that when people read they skip over the ‘he saids’ and ‘she saids’ anyway, so you don’t need to put them in every sentence! And anyway, reading a series of ‘she saids’ does slow the reading down.

Drama

Drama can take many forms, including:

- a stage play
- a radio play
- an audio recording
- a film
- a television programme.
Drama activity 1

Write a conversation between two people. Don’t worry about their names to begin with, simply call them ‘A’ and ‘B’.

Begin your piece with ‘A’ saying to ‘B’, ‘Where are we?’ See if you can write a whole page.

Write it in this way:

A: ‘Where are we?’
B: . . .

Give your characters names as soon as you want to.

You could also use the ‘Invent your own character’ worksheet (p. 92) to discover more about your two characters.

Drama activity 2

Do the same as with Activity 1, but this time call your two characters ‘C’ and ‘D’, and begin with ‘C’ saying ‘Where did you get that from?’ or ‘Why didn’t you tell me that . . .’

Drama activity 3

Take one of the pieces you have written in Activities 1 and 2 and turn it into a story in the third person. This time, try to use dialogue sparingly. Don’t worry if the plot changes when you adapt the story – this is all part of the drafting process.
What all these types of drama have in common is that they are all written to be performed.

Writing drama is not only about creating whole plays with three acts or full-length films. A good place to start is with a short dramatic sketch that lasts just a few minutes.

On the surface, drama may seem to have very little in common with the other forms of fiction, yet it has many of the same elements – such as dialogue, plots and characters, to name but a few. But if you look at a drama script it will seem very different from such forms as the novel or the short story because most of the text is in dialogue. Some drama scripts will include stage directions, which can be not only short background details of the characters and the set design, but also instructions to the actors as to how they should speak certain lines, how they should be standing or what physical actions they should be doing. Look at some play scripts for examples of stage directions.

When you are writing a piece of drama you can do a lot of work on developing your plots or your characters, or you can just write about situations – small events, such as two people arguing, one person in trouble, and so on. And as with a short story, you may find that you produce more dialogue than you actually need. So, when you are drafting your piece, remove any lines that do not really add anything to it. Here are the ideal characteristics of a short sketch:

- no more than three or four characters
- one setting
- set over a short period of time.

Once you have written your drama, why not perform it with others? If certain lines or aspects of the piece are not working, don’t be afraid to rewrite them and then try the piece out again.

There are more drama workshop activities at the end of this ‘Drama’ section (see pp. 101–6) after Jacqueline Wilson’s discussion of her play The Dare Game.

Jacqueline Wilson – The Dare Game

Jacqueline Wilson: I originally wrote The Dare Game as a play for The Contact Theatre in Manchester, which, before it was burnt down, was going to be a wonderful theatre for children and young people. A while ago the artistic director for the theatre commissioned me to do an original play. He wanted a play with three or four child characters. I was thinking hard about this and decided that I wanted to write about a really fierce, sparky determined girl. I had this framework of a story about truancy and children who, for various reasons, bunk off school and meet up together. So I was thinking about how all this could be dramatised in some way and become a stage play.

I kept thinking about this girl – who started to seem suspiciously like my Tracy Beaker character, but a year or two on. Usually when I’ve written a book, the story will go out of my mind and I won’t think much about it afterwards and the character will disappear out of my head. Yet Tracy Beaker has remained with me ever since I wrote the original book. Also, I’ve had more letters asking what happened to Tracy – after the point in the story where the book finishes – than any other of my characters. So I thought I would
write a play that would be a continuation of her story, but wouldn’t require the audience to know the original book.

I asked the director how he felt about me writing a new play about one of my old characters and he was happy about it. One advantage of using the Tracy Beaker character was that many people would know the character already and it would encourage them to come along. The book is read a great deal in schools, so I suggested that teachers might want to bring their classes along for school trips.

As the play was originally going to be performed in Manchester, a city that most people associate with football, I decided that one of my characters would be a football fan and that he would have ‘Football’ as a nickname. I thought it would be quite effective if he was forever dribbling a football around on stage. And if the ball bounced into the audience, then the children in the audience could bounce it back. The Contact Theatre is all about getting children who wouldn’t usually see plays to visit the theatre. Because of this, I wanted to have this type of audience participation – not simply a crude ‘Oh yes he is, oh no he isn’t!’ sort of thing, and to actually get the children involved. At times in the play I have the characters turn and ask the audience questions. I thought the footballing thing would be a good way in for boys who are football mad! During the writing of the play I panicked at one stage because I don’t know anything about football, though I’ve come to realise that mostly – apart from two or three lines of dialogue, which any football fan would be able to help me out with – it’s not really about football at all, but more about what’s lacking in his life.

How would I sum up the story? Tracy is being fostered by a writer called Cam. Things aren’t going well and Tracy is regularly playing truant from school. She hangs out in a derelict house where she meets up with two boys, fierce Football and timid Alexander. Tracy starts up a Dare Game which escalates dangerously, none of the children knowing how to back down. Tracy’s real mum appears on the scene and Tracy thinks she’s found her happy ending at last, but, by the end of the play Tracy finds out who really cares about her. And I’m going to have the same actress playing Cam – the woman who fosters Tracy – as well as Tracy’s mum. Because of this, these two characters can only be on stage at different times. It’s interesting to me that there’s these two mother figures for Tracy – and they’re very different types of women. To have the same actress playing both is quite a pleasing idea.

I really enjoyed writing this play because in my books the dialogue is usually the easiest bit to write. In fact, much of my books are dialogue, and I tell the stories through my characters’ speech. So having only dialogue to write, as in a stage play, is quite a nice way of telling a story. Though one limiting factor is cast. In a book you can have a whole class for example, but in a play you may be limited to six people in total. Also, you can’t generally have very young children in the cast. I had to bear these limitations in mind, and, as a result, they very much shaped the story. And because of the small
cast, I had to arrange it so that certain actors would be able to double up certain parts. I had to give them time in the story to get off stage, to change costume and to then get back on stage again.

Overall, I wanted *The Dare Game* to be very lively and eventful, with lots of action. I also wanted it to be very modern and funny too. I wanted there to be a few rude bits as well, because children always respond to these! On top of all this, children's plays need to have an interval, and therefore I needed to have a really dramatic moment just prior to the interval, something powerful and exciting that would get them thinking 'What's going to happen next?' rather than 'Oh come on Miss, let's go, this is boring'. So, having to have that dramatic climax about halfway through affected the shape and structure of the play. And with the introduction I wanted to suck the audience straight into the drama and make them feel that Tracy is their friend.

In my book *The Story of Tracy Beaker*, there are a series of rude and silly dares. In *The Dare Game* there are more dares, but in a new context – that of bunking off school – and the dares get more and more scary. The play looks at issues such as courage and common sense and the way that groups of children can sometimes egg each other on to do dreadful things, whereas individually they wouldn't do these sorts of things.

It's more likely that you write a book and then later it might become a stage play or a television drama. So it was weird doing it the other way around, writing the play and then adapting that into a book. The book is in the form of a journal that Tracy has written. I didn't simply take all of the dialogue I used in the play, but I did use some of it. As I was writing the book I had the play beside me to refer to. Most of the time, I knew what was happening in the story and I let Tracy tell the story in her own way in her diary. The advantage of writing the book – as opposed to the stage play – was that I could put across exactly what Tracy is thinking at any given moment. You can't do that so easily in a play. In the book I also play around with the idea of the 'unreliable narrator' – the type of narrator that doesn't always tell the reader the truth. You see, Tracy writes things in her diary which are whopping great lies, and other times she's being very unkind about the people around her. By the end of the book the reader will hopefully realise what she's made up and which bits are true. Also, the plot structure of the novel was different – for a start, I didn't have to worry about the dramatic climax at the interval.

I hope that when *The Dare Game* is performed there will be music and songs composed for the play. The play of *The Lottie Project* is currently being performed at the Polka Theatre in Wimbledon, adapted and directed by Vicky Ireland. She's made a brilliant job of it and I'm absolutely thrilled. The music in *The Lottie Project* – by Andrew Dodge – is particularly effective.

I was a little bit nervous about writing a stage play because mostly my books are about the internal lives of my characters. To achieve this as well as having lots of action on stage is very difficult. It may sound arrogant, but with writing children's books I feel quite comfortable now and to an extent I feel that I know what I'm doing, but with the theatre I'm very much a novice. I have written for radio, but that's a very different medium again. I do think you have to have things on stage which are great to look at. I've been going to see lots of plays recently to see how other people do it – like Carol Ann Duffy's *Grimms’ Tales* and also *Shock-Headed Peter*. Both productions were so visual and inventive and clever.

My advice for writing drama? Write about a situation that really interests you – with lots of dramatic possibilities. Don't be too wordy and try and have lots of different things happening.
THE DARE GAME  ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

A DERELICT TWO-STOREY HOUSE DOMINATES THE STAGE. TRACY WALKS PAST, DRAGGING HER SCHOOLBAG. SHE LOOKS AT THE AUDIENCE AND GIVES THEM A CASUAL WAVE. FOOTBALL COMES RUNNING IN, DRIBBLING HIS FOOTBALL. TRACY INTERCEPTS, GIVES IT A HEFTY KICK IN THE WRONG DIRECTION, AND RUNS OFF STAGE. FOOTBALL CLAMORS AFTER HER AND RUNS OFF STAGE TOO. ALEXANDER IS IN THE HOUSE, PEEING OUT OF THE TOP WINDOW. HE DOES OUT OF SIGHT AS THE PLAY BEGINS.

A SCHOOL BELL RINGS OFF-STAGE. THERE ARE SOUNDS OF CHILDREN CHATTERING, GIGGLING, GENERALLY AESSING ABOUT.

TEACHER: (off-stage) Settle down, you lot! (ui - etl
Thank you. Now, I don't want to hear so much as a mouse squeak while I take the register. Isla?

CHILD: (off-stage) Present.

TEACHER: (off-stage) Duncan?

CHILD: (off-stage) Present.

TEACHER: (off-stage, speeding up) Meethal?

CHILD: Present.

TEACHER: (off-stage, so speedily there isn't always time for a response) Hannah, Hanif, Zara, Eleanor, Richard, Marcus, Ashley, Dean ...

CHILDREN: (off-stage, very quickly) Present-present-present-present-present ...

TEACHER: (off-stage, loud and clear) Tracy? Tracy?

TRACY DASHES ON AND GOES TO THE FRONT OF THE STAGE, LAUGHING. SHE POINTS TO HERSELF. ALEXANDER DOES OUT OF SIGHT.

TRACY: Absent!

SHE STANDS ARMS AKIMBO, TOSSED HER HAIR.

TRACY: I'm skiving off school. I can't stick it. Can you? Here, you guys - hands up who likes school. Pause.

TRACY: Aha! So hands up who doesn't like school!
**The Dare Game play**

Read through Jacqueline Wilson’s manuscript page of the introduction to the play (p. 100). What will happen next? Even if you have read the book of *The Dare Game*, make up your own alternative version of the story. Write it as a series of short scenes to be performed on stage.

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**The Story of Tracy Beaker**

Take one event from the book of *The Story of Tracy Beaker* and rewrite it as if it were to be performed on stage. For example, you might choose the time that Tracy and Cam go to McDonald’s. But you will have to invent much of your own dialogue. Imagine what they might talk about – and remember that Tracy has a habit of exaggerating. And perhaps it is her exaggerating that makes their conversation interesting. If you can, use stage directions too.

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**Characters in a scene**

Take a character from any Jacqueline Wilson novel and write a short scene for them that could be performed on stage. You might choose Tim or Biscuits from *Cliffhanger* and *Buried Alive*, or Andy from *The Suitcase Kid* or Pearl or Jodie from *My Sister Jodie*. Or you might even want to mix and match characters, and have Beauty from *Cookie* meet Dolphin from *The Illustrated Mum*, for example. For this activity, you could even start off by improvising a few scenes with friends from your class.
Jaqueline Wilson monologue

As with the previous activity, pick a Jacqueline Wilson character (or perhaps a Harry Potter character) and write a monologue for that person. In your monologue you could include details from the book that the character comes from. (See ‘The monologue’ on p. 106.)

Improvisation

TERRY DEARY: There’s a big difference between drama and theatre. Drama is what you do in school when you do such things as explore issues through role play. Theatre is performance to a script on a stage for an audience. Drama doesn’t need an audience, but theatre does. I like to write theatre wherever possible through drama and I use improvisation as a starting point. I let the actors improvise and contribute to their characters around ideas. And that’s what I advise children to do – to get together a small acting group and say ‘Let’s improvise this’. When you’re happy with the improvisation, then you can write it down and script it. Put your pens and scripts away to begin with and get people improvising any ideas you may have. Then you’ll see all kinds of things happen that you wouldn’t have thought of if you’d just written the piece. Many people in theatre work this way, and many don’t. Shakespeare did. He knew his cast very well and wrote parts for specific actors because he knew what they were capable of acting out. If Shakespeare did it, I’m justified in encouraging this method of writing plays!

As Terry Deary suggests, rather than starting with pen and paper, begin with yourself and your friends. All of you can take part. You could record your improvisations and write them out from there. Choose one of the scenarios or work on some of your own:

- Something happens when a group of friends miss the last bus home.
- A parent has kept something important from their children; the children find out.
- A best friend has told a lie.
- Someone new starts at school and things slowly change.
Starting points

Use one or some of the lines below as starting points for a short drama. Don’t worry who A and B are when you begin writing, just get them talking together first of all. When you have written half a page or so, you might want to go back and make some notes on the characters or their situation. Give your characters real names as soon as you like.

A says to B:

‘Why didn’t you tell me about . . .’
‘Do you want the good news or the bad news first?’
‘It’s getting dark. Let’s go back.’
‘It was supposed to be a secret. We promised. Remember?’
‘You haven’t heard a word I’ve said. What’s the matter?’
‘Where are we?’
‘Hey – what’s that over there?’

If you choose to, you can include stage directions. Also, in a short introduction, you can describe the set and give some background details to the characters.

Why did you lie to me?

You have two characters on stage. One of them, a boy, is lying on his bed reading a book. A girl enters and stares at the boy. The boy does not notice her. She moves back as if to go away, but decides to stay. As she whispers ‘Why did you lie to me?’ the boy is startled.

Write down their conversation with stage directions from here.
Recording dramas

These role-plays are to be completed in pairs and do not have to be recorded, but if they are, you could do a transcript of your recording and rework it into a short piece. Below are some scenarios for you to act out. Or, you could use some of the opening lines from the ‘Starting points’ workshop on p. 103. And why not do some of your own?

- Two people find themselves locked in a theatre overnight.
- On a very hot afternoon, a lift in a department store gets stuck between two floors. The two people in the lift have never met before but very quickly discover that they do not like each other.
- Two strangers are sitting next to each other on a plane. One suffers from vertigo.

Scenes from soaps

What is your favourite soap opera? Write some short scenes using characters from the programme. You can use one of the following scenarios or write your own.

Scenario 1: One of the characters has been away for a few days. The person went off without telling anyone where they were going. In the scene you will write, two characters are talking to the one that has been away and are trying to find out where they have been. Think the scene through for a while before you write anything. Also think about the characters’ personalities, the way that they speak and the type of language (words, phrases) that they use.

Scenario 2: Much of the drama in soap operas is based around the family. In your scene, imagine one character has done something to disgrace their family. First choose a character or family – then decide what they have done. In your scene write a confrontation between that character and other members of the family. You could start off with just two characters, and then perhaps you could bring in other family members.
Begin with a book

Malorie Blackman talks here about adapting a novel into a television drama series. Malorie has adapted some of her own books into television series, including *Whizziwig* and *Pig-heart Boy*:

**MALORIE BLACKMAN:** How do you adapt a novel? You use the novel as a starting point. It’s fatal to get too hung up on trying to use every single word and detail from a book. Television and books are totally different media, and that’s the first thing you have to realise. With *Pig-heart Boy*, I put the novel to one side and started afresh thinking, ‘Okay, I’ve got to write six episodes’. And with the television script of *Pig-heart Boy* I begin the story further back in Cameron’s life.

With television drama you have to turn everything – all the events in a book – into something that can be either seen and/or heard. So much of what happens in the novel of *Pig-heart Boy* is going on in Cameron’s head – his thoughts and feelings – so you have to think, how am I going to present that on the screen? How will I show that in a visual way? The convention I use for the TV drama is that Cameron talks directly into a camcorder, which, on the TV screen will look as if he’s talking directly to the viewer. Whereas with the book, being in the first person, it’s as if Cameron’s talking directly to the reader. So I had to find a way of achieving the same thing – that intimacy – and the camcorder approach is absolutely perfect for that. Also, with children’s TV, you have to keep the momentum going. Whereas in a book you can have two people talking for a whole chapter, you can’t do that on TV – it would quickly get very boring.

My advice for writing drama? What I try to do is to imagine the story as a film or TV programme running in my head. I think to myself – what is the camera seeing? Where are the characters? What time of day is it? And as you watch this going on in your head you have to record what the characters are saying.

Choose a book that you like and know very well. Think about how you could turn it into either a television drama or a play for the stage. To start off, read the opening to the book. How could you adapt that? If it was to be a TV drama, what would the opening scene look like? What would the camera be showing the viewer? As Malorie Blackman says, books and television are very different media and you may need to make many changes. Would you go straight into an event or have a slow introduction, perhaps with the camera following or observing a character or even showing the setting for the drama? You could first organise the plot as a story board, a series of images like a comic strip.

If it is to be a stage play, what would the set look like? How many characters would you have on stage for your opening? Would it start at the same place as the book, or would you need to write a new scene to introduce your characters?
A visitor from one hundred years ago

Imagine a character who has a dream in which she or he meets an ancestor who died exactly one hundred years before.

What would they want to ask each other? How different would they be? How would they react to each other? This is not a ghost or horror story – the ancestor will seem as real as your present-day character. And for once, this will be a piece in which your character will wake up and it will all have been a dream! Write your stage directions alongside the dialogue. What props – other than the bed in the bedroom – will you include on the stage?

The monologue

This is a performance or a text in which there is just one character, who will talk often about aspects of their life, their experiences, interests, observations or problems. One of the benefits of writing a monologue is that you don’t have to worry about a plot. Nothing has to happen at all. You just have one character that talks. However, you have to know that character very well; you have to get to know their voice, their mannerisms, their way of speaking – and what they say has to have a purpose. Most monologues give an insight into the personality of the character. Also, like conversation, the monologue will no doubt drift from one subject to another, but there will usually be a central thread running through – one theme or subject that the character will keep returning to and discussing.

It does not matter whether you like your character or not, what is vital is that what they say is of interest to your audience. Here are a few starting points for writing a monologue:

• Your narrator has kept a secret for a few years, but now they are going to reveal all – but gradually as it is difficult to talk about.
• Your narrator is someone who loves complaining about everything.
• Pick a narrator talking about their job: a ticket inspector on a train, an ice-cream vendor, a vet, a police officer or a dentist.
• Or begin with an opening line, and get to know your narrator as you write:
  – ‘It all started the day I met . . .’
  – ‘It was one of those times when I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. I just stood there and . . .’

Also see the ‘Jacqueline Wilson monologue’ workshop at the end of her discussion of the play The Dare Game on p. 102.
Narration and point of view: writing in the first and third person

In fiction there are two main forms of narration: first person, in which one person tells the story, an ‘I’. For example:

‘It all began last summer when I met . . .’

‘I’m going to tell you this story because I can’t keep it a secret any longer . . .’

And there is the third person, when someone unknown is telling the story. With this form of narration, characters in the story are referred to as ‘he’ or ‘she’ or by their names. For example:

‘She couldn’t remember a single thing about the dream, but she knew that . . .’

‘Joe heard another scream out in the hallway. He ran to the door and . . .’

Narration and the point of view of a story are very much linked together. Every story is told from one or a number of points of view. A first person story is told from the point of view of a single person, that is, the narrator of the story. Everything that comes into the story is communicated by that person, so as readers we are limited to that individual’s viewpoint, knowledge and experience. Even if we are reading dialogue, it is there because the narrator has decided to tell us about it.

In the third person, a story can be told from one, two or even a whole number of viewpoints. The third person is the oldest, most traditional form of narration. Think of fairy tales – ‘Once upon a time there was a . . .’. Find two books that are written in the third person and see which point(s) of view they are told from.

One of the most important decisions you can make about a story is whether to write in the first or third person. Your choice of narration will affect how the story is told and, as a result, the way the reader responds to the story. Sometimes a writer makes a decision – ‘This story ought to be in the third person because –’, and at other times the author will just begin writing in whatever voice – first or third – comes to mind.

Some writers avoid the limitations of one point of view by having two different first person narrators; see how imaginatively this is done in Malorie Blackman’s Tell Me No Lies or Jacqueline Wilson’s Double Act and The Lottie Project. Another way is to include letters, postcards, diary extracts, emails or text messages written by other characters. (See the ‘Epistolary’ workshop on p. 129.)

Most writers believe that the third person gives you more freedom. Unlike the first person, you do not have to stick with one character telling the story, and you can tell your story from many points of view.

**GILLIAN CROSS:** Most of my novels are in the third person – but close to a character’s point of view. I always imagine that I’m a particular person looking at the scene. But I don’t always keep to the same point of view throughout the book. For example, in most of The Demon Headmaster books, it’s alternately Dinah and Lloyd.
In addition to this, third person allows you to write not only what your characters are saying, but also what they are thinking. These authors enjoy the ‘freedom’ and ‘flexibility’ that the third person can offer:

**PHILIP PULLMAN:** I like the third person voice because I like swooping in and drawing back, and giving a panoramic view – in the same way a film camera does. I like directing the story as one would direct a film.

**MORRIS GLEITZMAN:** I didn’t ever consciously choose to write in the third. When I started writing books I wrote in the third person because that’s the one that most books tend to be written in. I then realised that I didn’t want to ever write in the first person unless I had a really good reason to. With the third person I can vary the degree to which we experience every moment, every thought, every feeling with the central character. Or, I can vary the degree to which I pull back slightly and do a bit of summarising. There’s more flexibility in the third person. Sometimes you can show an event in real time, and there’d be five minutes of the character’s life in such detail that it takes fifteen minutes to read. And then, in the next chapter or paragraph or sentence you can cover five days of their life. You can do that in the first person too, but there’s slightly more flexibility in the third. When I’ve used first person with *Belly Flop* and the *Blabber Mouth* trilogy those stories are both told as internal monologues, directed at the reader, and that’s why I’ve used it.

Berlie Doherty enjoys the first person because of the intimacy with the narrator:

**BERLIE DOHERTY:** With the first person narration, you get to know your characters better. And I prefer writing in the first person, I think. It helps me to get inside a character.

Michael Morpurgo feels the first person sets up a better relationship with the reader:

**MICHAEL MORPURGO:** I think I can tell a story better if I’m one of the characters. It’s something to do with being able to reach out to your reader and take him or her by the hand and say ‘here is the story’ in a more engaging way than the third person can. I think the third person can distance a story. I do use it, often, but I prefer the first.

**Places and descriptive writing**

Stories tend to have fewer and shorter descriptions of people or places nowadays, as authors concentrate more on storytelling and creating interesting characters and situations.

**Looking at prose styles**

When you are writing your own descriptive passages, try and be as original as you can without going over the top. Think of interesting *similes* and *metaphors* and adjectives that you could use. Look at these two sentences:

The sea was nice. The sky was beautiful.
**Narration: early memory**

Think back to an early memory, one that you have not thought about for a long time. Spend a couple of minutes going over the details of that event. Now, write it down in your own voice and in your own language, just as the memory comes to you. All you need is a few paragraphs, but write more if you want to. Sometime later, go back to the piece and rewrite it in the third person. So, instead of ‘I’ you will write either your name or ‘he’ did this or ‘she’ did that. When you have completed the piece, ask yourself:

- Which was easier to write?
- Which felt more natural to write?
- Which do you prefer?
- Were there things you could do in the third person and not in the first and vice versa?

**Point of view: fairy tales**

All traditional fairy tales are written in the third person. Some modern versions have started to retell fairy tales in the first person and from the point of view of one of the characters in the story; one well-known example is Jon Scieszka’s *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs by A. Wolf*. Try one of these or think of one of your own:

- *Jack and the Beanstalk* from the giant’s point of view.
- *Hansel and Gretel* from Gretel’s point of view.
- *Cinderella* from one of the two sisters’ points of view.
- *Rapunzel* from the prince’s point of view.
- *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* from the troll’s point of view.
- *Beauty and the Beast* from the beast’s point of view.

When you have finished, think:

- Does it affect the story? If so, how?
- Does it seem unusual? Why?
- Does it work?
These sentences actually tell us very little. Why was the sea nice? What was beautiful about the sky? As a rule, adjectives like ‘nice’ and ‘beautiful’ are greatly overused and are best avoided. An unoriginal or overused phrase or description is known as a cliché. Here is an example of a cliché:

The beautiful blue sky was full of cotton wool clouds.

Instead, you could try something like:

A platoon of clouds marched across the ice-blue sky.

This phrase has an unusual but powerful metaphor – that of a ‘platoon’ of clouds marching. And the second part of the sentence gives the reader a vivid description of the sky with just two simple words – ‘ice-blue’.

Aim to be creative but also specific with your descriptions. So rather than saying something like ‘the man walked down the street’ – you might want to consider how the man was walking. Think – is there a better way to describe his action? You could use an adverb – ‘the man walked swiftly down the street’ – or better still, you could use a more expressive and descriptive verb – ‘the man hurried down the street’.

The following passage is from the classic early twentieth-century novel The Wind in the Willows by Kenneth Grahame, and demonstrates a very poetic style of description. At this point in the novel, Ratty and Mole are walking through a snow-covered village. As you read this extract, look out for the metaphors, alliteration and assonance.

The rapid nightfall of mid-December had quite beset the little village as they approached it on soft feet over a first thin fall of powdery snow. Little was visible but squares of a dusky orange–red on either side of the street, where the firelight or lamplight of each cottage overflowed through the casements into the dark world without. Most of the low latticed windows were innocent of blinds, and to the lookers-in from outside, the inmates, gathered round the tea-table, absorbed in handiwork, or talking with laughter and gesture, had each that happy grace which is the last thing the skilled actor shall capture – the natural grace which goes with perfect unconsciousness of observation. Moving at will from one theatre to another, the two spectators, so far from home themselves, had something of wistfulness in their eyes as they watched a cat being stroked, a sleepy child picked up and huddled off to bed, or a tired man stretch and knock out his pipe on the end of a smouldering log.

Some authors, for example Helen Cresswell, write their prose as if it were poetry:

**HELEN CRESSWELL:** Although I don’t do drafts as such, I will spend a long time on certain passages, polishing them as if they were a poem. I did that with The Bongleweed in the section where the plant takes over the graveyard. I think of my major fantasies – like The Piemakers, The Night-Watchmen, The Bongleweed – as almost being poetry. Those books were written in the same kind of process. It was as if my poetry skills were still there, even though I hadn’t written poetry for a while. In fact, I would say that some of my best descriptive passages are in The Bongleweed. This is one of them:
The flowers were brimful with sunlight, suffused with it so that each individual blossom seemed itself to be a source of faint, glowing light. The heads were alive, they sniffed the wind like pale, fluorescent foxes.

(Helen Cresswell – *The Bongleweed*, Oxford University Press 1975)

Here, two authors reflect upon their prose styles:

**MALORIE BLACKMAN:** I’ve tried writing metaphoric and descriptive prose, but it doesn’t ring true for me. Though I do love reading lyrical poetry and evocative prose myself. I guess I write in a straightforward, down-to-earth way because that’s the kind of person I am. If I’ve got something to say, I’ll just say it, and get on with it. I have tried changing my style and being more lyrical, but when I read it back I get a bit bored with it! And I always think that if I’m bored reading it, my readers are going to be bored too. However, I hope I don’t write every book in the same style. But I have found what works best for me – which is getting to the point and getting on with the story.

**GILLIAN CROSS:** The main quality I aim to achieve in my prose is that it’s invisible – I want it not to interfere with the story. I don’t want the reader to be conscious of my language – though I think that this approach can make me too conservative and not as daring as I ought to be. I don’t want people to read something I’ve written and think, ‘What beautiful prose this is!’ I just want them to be thinking about the story.

As Philip Pullman says, narrative prose can be more of a challenge to write than dialogue:

**PHILIP PULLMAN:** When you’re writing a story, the dialogue is easy to write. It’s just a question of writing down what the characters in your head are saying. Narrative prose is much harder. You have to choose just the right words to tell the story with.

Melvin Burgess comments that you should ‘write in a clear, lucid way so it is easily understood. This is the essence of good writing.’ The opening to his novel *The Cry of the Wolf* demonstrates how direct and simple yet very striking Melvin Burgess’s own prose style is. Notice in the introduction below that he does not use any long words or complicated phrases, but concentrates on painting a picture using everyday words:

Ben Tilley lay on the banks of the River Mole keeping very quiet. It was a still, hot day. The river moved silently below him and around him in the grass there were tiny rustlings and scratchings from insects about their business. A robin was singing nearby and the sun beat down, baking into his back, pressing him into the dry mud. Ben could quite easily have fallen asleep if he had not been so excited.

(Melvin Burgess – *The Cry of the Wolf*, Puffin 1992)

Melvin Burgess further believes in being economical with words – and this particularly applies with adjectives:

**MELVIN BURGESS:** You should never use two words where you can use one. And never use a long word where a short word will do.

Morris Gleitzman has similar advice:

**MORRIS GLEITZMAN:** Stick mostly to the words you use when you talk to your friends. The trick is to bung them together in new and exciting ways.
Two further important issues to consider with your prose style are:

• using sentences of varying lengths;
• not repeating the same words or phrases too often. If you find yourself doing this, a dictionary or thesaurus may help.

**CELIA REES:** Sentences can stretch and shorten depending on the mood and subject and events of a story. Short, sharp sentences – and even sentences of just one or two words – can be good for anger or for sudden events, for slowing a story right down or building up suspense. Long sentences are generally more suitable for detailed descriptions. Very long sentences can be hard to follow and are best avoided.

For a further example of descriptive writing, see the ‘Painting animals with words’ workshop on p. 164.

**Writing about places**

Writers spend far less time now describing the various settings in fiction than they used to and will only fully portray a place – be it a room, hallway or park or wherever – if it is relevant to the story in some way. And generally speaking, a story in the first person – that is, a story told by one narrator – will have fewer descriptions than a story in the third person. Exceptions to this rule are when a place is either significant to the narrator or to the story they are telling, or it says something about that narrator – that they are the type of person for whom detail and descriptions are important. In the main, writing in the third person can lend itself to more detailed and descriptive passages. (See extracts from *The Wind in the Willows* on p. 110 and *Blood Sinister* on p. 113.) Also, fiction in the first person does not tend to use as many poetic devices as it does in the third person because the prose will be mainly in the everyday language of the narrator. However, there are many exceptions, which would include Berlie Doherty's *Daughter of the Sea* and David Almond's *Kit's Wilderness*.

When writing about a place, try not to think only in terms of the visual aspects of the setting – call upon the other senses too. Take a room, for example. What does the room smell of – and are there a variety of smells? What sounds are in the room – a clock ticking, a creaking floorboard – or is it totally silent? Are there noises outside – a road drill or a train rushing past? Is the room warm or cold – and is it warmer by the window where the sun comes in? What are the textures of various items in the room – the carpet, the chair, the cushions, and so on. As Morris Gleitzman suggests, ‘Let your readers see, hear, smell, taste and touch your story’. And as Anthony Masters encourages, when you are writing a descriptive passage, close your eyes occasionally and imagine the setting in your mind’s eye as vividly as you can.

**CELIA REES:** Place is fundamental to my work. For me, it’s one of the most important elements. I need to have a strong sense of place in my books – it’s one of the areas that lends novels realism. When, like me, you’re working within genres that are inherently unreal, say horror or the supernatural or even a thriller, you need to tack it into a reality. A strong sense of place will give it just that, and makes it possible, believable, which is vital. I always have an actual place in mind when I’m writing – even down to small
locations like bus stops or shops. Everywhere is a real place. But it will get changed as I fictionalise it. I hope I give my reader a sense of a real place but also something they can relate to. With each new place that my characters go to, I put a brief description in, but I choose places common to anywhere, so they can fill in the rest of the details themselves. I put in a few pointers, and they’ll know what a McDonald’s or a school hall is like. I think long descriptions put young readers off, so I keep them short.

Whatever its original purpose, the room had been transformed from the last time I’d seen it . . . Oil lamps and candles compensate for the lack of natural light and cast a suffused glow over everything. Richly patterned carpets adorn the floors and walls, a heavy brocaded curtain, encrusted with gold and silver thread, cordons off the sleeping quarters. The more public area contains comfortable chairs and sofas. A beautifully carved table holds an exquisite chess set.

(Celia Rees – Blood Sinister, Scholastic 1999)

Celia Rees adds that researching a place is important:

**CELIA REES:** Every story has to have a setting, a place where things happen. Make sure you know that place well. Make it real in your head by mapping it and collecting pictures, photographs and postcards of the actual place or places like it. The more real the setting, the more believable the story.

In contrast to the authors above, Morris Gleitzman believes that by not describing the settings in his books in great detail, he is empowering his readers:

**MORRIS GLEITZMAN:** My books have very little description at all – which leaves a lot of space for readers to fill in.

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**Setting for a ghost story**

**BERLIE DOHERTY:** In a workshop we might start off with a kind of brainstorm where we talk about the place we’re going to set a story in. This would be with 9 or 10 year olds. And perhaps we’d be going to write a ghost story. I like to tell the children that I like to know the landscape that I’m writing about. Then I ask them if they can think of anywhere they know which might be suitable – and they’ll all know somewhere, it might be a disused railway station or a shop that’s all boarded up or a big house. And then we’d describe the place, talk about it. And I then give them ten minutes to write about it with all the sounds and smells and all the things they can feel, using all their senses. We’re not going into a story yet; we’re just writing about the place.

Teacher-led activity. Here Berlie Doherty talks about a workshop that she has held in schools. Read the passage and then write your own ghost story. Begin the piece with an atmospheric description of the place where the story is set.
**No adjectives**

Write a short descriptive piece about a place you know very well without using any adjectives. If you get really stuck, you are allowed to use two – but in different sentences.

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**No looking**

Describe a place – a room, a house, a building, anywhere – that you know well. Describe it in terms of senses other than sight. Imagine you are walking around that place with your eyes closed. Concentrate on smell and feel and sound. What are the different smells you come across? What are the different textures you can feel? What sounds are there? If it was a kitchen there could be a kettle boiling, cars driving past outside the window or a radio playing in the background. For this activity you might choose to use a combination of your own, everyday language as well as some interesting metaphors and similes. You could even write this piece in the first person and in the present continuous tense – for example, ‘It is the middle of the night and I am walking around . . . ’ or ‘It is Friday afternoon and I am walking around the market in . . . ’.

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**Invisible soundscapes**

(Adapted from a poetry workshop by Colin Macfarlane)

Go outside. Close your eyes. What can you hear? The more you listen, the more your ears will begin to pick up the smallest of sounds. Keep a notebook with you and make a list of the sounds every now and then. You could even compare what can be heard at different times of the day. Think of imaginative ways of describing what you can hear. You could use metaphors (‘The wind is breathless, gasping in my ear’), similes (‘The train beats past like a stuttering drum’), alliteration (‘branches bristle in the breeze’) and assonance (‘more cars roar by’). If your piece of writing wants to become a poem, then let it – and you could even do a verse for each sound. You might even end up with a piece that is a cross between prose and a poem.

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**Opposite snapshots**

Think of a place in your mind’s eye and take a snapshot of it. What would the opposite of that scene be? If you picked a busy beach on a hot summer’s day, one opposite might be the same beach deserted and bleak on Christmas Day. Another scene might be that of a bridge in a city that crosses a river. One snapshot of it might be at 9 a.m. in the morning with pedestrians, cars and buses rushing off to various destinations. An opposite for this might be the same bridge but at night, and it is snowing, with only the occasional car or person crossing. Find two opposites for your place and write about them. Get your ideas down first. Do not worry about your words and phrasing. In a second draft go back and particularly look at how you can improve your phrasing and give the reader the best image possible. Use imaginative similes and metaphors as well as alliteration and assonance.
Places: snapshots

Photographs by Rob Vincent

Spend time looking at the three photographs below. Make notes on them. Choose the one that interests you the most. Write a piece or a story that begins and finishes with a description of that place. Or, find a story that will link two or three of these settings together.
Plot: a sequence of events

Otherwise known as the storyline, plot is the sequence or series of events that happen in a fictional story – be it in a film, television soap opera, cartoon, play, novel, short story, comic strip or picture book. Put another way, the plot is the bare bones of a story, a story stripped down to its most basic parts. Consider how the plot to the fairy tale Hansel and Gretel might begin:

Hansel and Gretel’s parents can’t afford to keep their children any longer so they try to lose them in the woods. The children come back and once again the parents . . .

This is not the story as such. The story, with all the incidental details and dialogue included – the details that make the tale exciting and engaging and much longer – might begin:

Once upon a time there were a man and woman who lived in a cottage on the edge of a wood. They had two children – a boy called Hansel and a girl called Gretel. Times were hard and the man had no work. One night, after Hansel and Gretel had gone to bed, the man and the woman sat by the fire talking.

‘We have no food left,’ said the woman. ‘The children will have to go.’

Writers have their own individual ways of finding plots.

MALORIE BLACKMAN: I tend to get the storyline or plot first, then I think about the people in the story. And I play ‘what if’ games. For example,

‘What if a girl goes into the future and meets herself as a grown up?’ (Thief!)

‘What if a boy and his sister have to prove their dad didn’t steal one million pounds from the bank where he works?’ (Hacker)

‘What if a boy and his friend get involved in a dare game which goes horribly wrong and one of them goes missing?’ (Deadly Dare)

So, I’m always wondering ‘What if, what if . . .’ and then I find a plot. With all of my books I try to build up my novels to a climax where each incident is the direct result of something which happened previously and inevitably leads to something else – usually worse!

Some writers seem to be more motivated by writing about their characters’ feelings and situations rather than actually working out a plot for their characters – see ‘Characters’ section on p. 86 onwards. Yet Celia Rees is interested in both:

CELIA REES: I’m as concerned with plot as I am with character. When you write for young people, you have to have a strong plot. Equally, you’ve got to have believable characters that your readers can care about – particularly if you’re writing in the genres that I do. Otherwise, you wouldn’t care if the characters were killed or whatever. You’ve got to care about them and you can only do that by developing credible characters within a strong plot. And plot, for me, has got to work and have an internal logic. There can’t be any boggy areas where nothing much is happening, or any loose ends that don’t make sense. There’s got to be a coherent sequence of events that work by cause and effect – a knock on from one to the other. You have to be able to see that this
happened because of that. You have to be able to look forwards and backwards at any point.

A story cannot simply contain non-stop action or the reader would lose interest eventually. Quieter moments are necessary as you do not want a book equivalent of a car chase going on all the way through your story! Some dynamics – a balance of busy and quieter moments – are important.

Most novels will have a series of plots – perhaps a main plot and a minor subplot, or a number of subplots. But in a short story, as David Almond commented in the ‘Short story’ section on p. 81, there is no room really for much more than a single main plot.

However, it is only too easy to worry about the plot, and to lose sight of what you are trying to achieve. A storyline, as Philip Pullman advises, does not need to be a complex chain of events and should ideally be kept as simple and as straightforward as possible. If you are worried about writing a plot or storyline – as Celia Rees suggested earlier – why not begin by writing some short pieces that focus on one single event or character, and you may find that a plot develops out of one of these. Philip Pullman has his own unique way of describing the process of choosing the events for a story:

**PHILIP PULLMAN:** With a story, you have a path and a wood. The wood is the world of the story – everything that could possibly happen to all the characters. The path is the story itself that goes through the wood – and some things happen and some things don’t. But with every turn in the path something else could have happened. Cinderella could have thought, ‘Stuff it, I don’t want to go to the ball at all’. Or, the ugly sisters could have said, ‘All right, Cinderella, come to the ball’. All sorts of things could have happened. You need to know many more details about the fictional world you have created than you will actually tell in your story. So it is the role of the storyteller to decide which path to take – that is, which details to include and which to discard.

Russell Hoban says that ‘what happens next’ is ‘the essence of story’. The ‘what happens next’ – that is, whatever the chain of events in the story will be – is for the writer to work out and the reader to follow, experience and enjoy. As a writer, you want your reader to be interested in your story and to anticipate what the next event will be. Now imagine you have a character, and that character is called Tom, and your story begins ‘Tom awoke one morning to find . . .’. Well – what will happen next? You are in control of your story and it is up to you what you do with Tom. Is Tom going to find out that it’s only 4 a.m. – so he goes back to sleep? Or, is he going to find two pairs of eyes peering at him? Or, is he going to find himself in a strange place that he doesn’t recognise? It is your decision – you have invented your characters, and you must decide what you want to do with them, and how you will entertain your reader. One way is to inject suspense in your story, which is dealt with later in this chapter.

Here, Philip Pullman explains how he works out the plot for a novel:

**PHILIP PULLMAN:** I use those Post-it notes – the smallest yellow ones. I use them for planning the shape of a story. I’ll write a brief sentence summarising a scene on one of them, and then I’ll get a very big piece of paper and fill it up with sixty or more different scenes, and move them around to get them in the best order . . . I have pictures in my mind like daydreams. Like dreams, they can stay with me. If they’re good, they will
keep coming back. Such ideas can come unexpectedly and stay with me for a long time. For the *Northern Lights* trilogy, I had a whole series of images. My task was to discover how I could connect each of these images together and to find the narrative thread that joins all the images together – a story to connect the pictures. The only way I can do this is by sitting down and working the whole thing out.

Jan Dean has some useful advice on checking if the plot of a story is working well. Like Philip Pullman, she describes plot as a ‘path’:

**JAN DEAN:** Once you’ve written a story it is often a good idea to look at the plot by dividing your story up into its key scenes. A plot is like a path. You don’t want it to meander too much. You want it to be reasonably straight, though you might want a few surprises along the way – something that jumps out at you. Do a storyboard, a series of simple pictures, and break the story up into its scenes. If you’ve got lost with your story, this can help you to see where you have gone wrong. If you want to, you can even do a storyboard as a plan for your story before you write it out. Whenever I write a book, I think: which are the bits that people will really want to read? So I look at my key scenes and work out how I can tell the story so that I can get as quickly and as neatly as possible from one scene to another. Try and imagine your plot as a series of beads on a string.

Most stories – whether deliberately or not – follow a set pattern. This pattern or formula can be divided into four basic parts:

- **Opening**
- **Complication**
- **Climax**
- **Conclusion**

Every fairy tale follows this pattern. Consider ‘Cinderella’:

- **Opening:** Cinderella lives with her two bullying sisters.
- **Complication:** All three sisters receive an invitation to the ball. The two sisters insist that Cinderella cannot attend as she does not have a suitable ball gown.
- **Climax:** Cinderella goes to the ball thanks to her fairy godmother. She has a fine time dancing with the prince, but so much so that she forgets that the magic wears off by midnight. As the clock strikes twelve, she flees the ball, dropping her glass slipper on the steps outside.
- **Conclusion:** Luckily, the prince finds Cinderella’s slipper. After scouring the region many times, the prince finds that Cinderella is the true owner of the slipper and they consequently marry.

Think of books or short stories that you have read recently. Do they follow this pattern? Write out the basic plot of some of the stories in terms of Opening – Complication – Climax – Conclusion. Then invent a few of your own plots with this model, using the worksheet ‘Plot overviews’ on p. 120.

Other popular and useful ways of drawing out or planning plots are timelines, comic strips, storyboards and picture maps.
Invisibility

Many writers say that ‘happiness writes white.’ What they mean is that it is impossible to write a story in which all the characters are happy all the time. It would be a non-story! But what if . . . your central character had a special pen that wrote with invisible ink? What messages could they send to friends? Who is your central character and why would s/he need to write secret messages? Perhaps your character is in trouble or a difficult situation. How would the pen help? Think how this could work in a story. Work out a storyline first before you begin writing.

Flight versus invisibility

Has anyone ever asked you whether you would rather be able to fly or turn invisible at whim? Which would you choose and why? What if . . . your central character was able to do one of these? Write a fantasy story in which – for a limited time – your central character wakes up to discover that s/he is able to fly/turn invisible, but only on the condition that they don’t tell anyone. What will happen?

What if

Write stories for one of these scenarios:

- What if . . . someone is travelling on a train and overhears two people in the seat behind plotting a terrible crime?
- What if . . . someone walks through the car park of a railway station – and as they enter the ticket office they walk into the past?
- What if . . . someone was granted three wishes?
- What if . . . someone finds something in a trunk in the cellar/attic/shed?

Scenarios

Read through the following scenarios and decide which one you would like to develop into a full story. Think to yourself – how should I start? Should this scenario open the story or appear later on?

- Empty pocket: A person has something – an object – in their pocket at all times, day and night. It is extremely important to them. That object goes missing.
- Window gazing: A person is gazing through a window at something that they need or want. Who is that person? Why do they want it? Will they get it? Where is the window?
- The waiting room: A person is waiting to meet someone that they have not seen for a long time. Who are these two people? Why have they not seen each other for so long?
- Escape: Someone is getting on a train/bus/coach/plane/boat. They are escaping from someone or something.
- Lost and found: Someone is lost somewhere. They do not know where they are or how they got there. Who is this person? Where are they? Why do they not know? How will they return home?
Plot overviews

Write out a few plots that follow this structure. Start with an everyday situation in which everything in your fictional world is fine – a man is reading a newspaper on a park bench, a family are eating their tea, a child is answering the phone, a teacher is talking to a class, and then go from there. When you have a plot structure that you like, write out the story in full.

Opening

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Complication

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Climax

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Conclusion

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Here is Malorie Blackman talking about adapting her dreams into stories:

**MALORIE BLACKMAN:** With my first short story collection, *Not So Stupid!*, I used my dreams as starting points. One or two of the dreams were full stories, and all I had to do was to remember them and write them down. With others, like ‘Such are the Times’, I had a dream about rain being so acidic it would dissolve the flesh off your body. I used that as a starting point. I thought, ‘Okay, what would the rain do to people?’ As ever, I was playing a ‘What if . . . ?’ game. I was thinking about what would happen to the character if this happened, and if that went wrong, then what would she do? And so on. I’m always trying to escalate events in a story. But with short stories, it’s a tighter framework, and there’s not so much room to expand your story.

For a week, write down your dreams as you wake up. Choose one event from a dream and use it as the basis for a short story.

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**Picture this/looking for an idea?**

The worksheets ‘Picture this’ (p. 122) and ‘Looking for an idea? (pp. 124–5) offer ways of using images as starting points for stories. Generally, when you use an image, you can fire all kinds of questions at the image – Who? What? Where? When? Why? and so on – to spark off details for a story.
Picture this

Below are four photographs. Find a story that links one, two, three or all of these images together. Find a sequence of events.
What's happening?

Have a look at the illustration by Peter Bailey, and then answer the questions below to start your own version of the story.

1. Who are the two children?

2. Why are they hiding?

3. Who is the man with the torch?

4. Where is this?

5. What time of day is it?

6. What has happened up to this point?

7. What will happen next?
Looking for an idea?

Looking for something to spark off a story? Perhaps one of these images – or even a pair or more – could start something off for you.
Looking for an idea? (continued)

Looking for something to spark off a story? Perhaps one of these images – or even a pair or more – could start something off for you.
Suspense and atmosphere: engaging the reader

Here Philip Pullman talks about the role of suspense in fiction:

**PHILIP PULLMAN:** It really does help to know that surprise is the precise opposite of suspense. Surprise is when something happens that you don’t expect: suspense is when something doesn’t happen that you do expect. Surprise is when you open a cupboard and a body falls out. Suspense is when you know there’s a body in the cupboard – but not which cupboard. So you open the first door and . . . no, not that one. And up goes the suspense a notch.

Suspense can occur in any form of story – be it an oral story, a novel, film, play or TV drama – when the tension is being built up. As Philip Pullman says, suspense is when the reader/viewer knows that something is going to happen. It is the build-up to a climax, a moment in which something horrifying, alarming, unusual, frightening, or exciting, is going to take place. At these times the events or the action in the story will slow down and the reader/viewer will read/watch the event taking place in something close to real time. As a writer, suspense is one of the most effective tools that you have to engage, grip and excite your reader. Just occasionally, you might choose to have an anti-climax: you will build the tension up only to reveal that there was nothing to worry about – the strange noise outside was actually a cat or the banging against the window was simply a branch.

Celia Rees concentrates on how her reader will respond:

**CELIA REES:** Most fiction relies on suspense to make the reader actually carry on reading. As a reader myself, I read to find out what is going to happen. As a writer I do exactly the same, I impel the reader to find out what will happen in the story. For me, suspense is all about setting up a series of problems and then slowly answering them. My advice would be not to give away too much too soon – to pace the story slowly and subtly. Think of how you would feel if you were the reader of your story. What would scare or interest or intrigue you?

Atmosphere – often connected with suspense – is all about letting the reader know how it feels to be in a certain place at a certain time. For this you will need to picture your setting clearly in your mind’s eye and then choose your words and phrases very carefully. Consider all the senses that you might call upon – sight, sound, feel and smell. Describe the weather too – the wind, fog, snow or rain – as well as the heat or the cold and also the quality of the light – is it bright, dim or totally dark? (For ideas on writing about settings, please refer to the ‘Places and descriptive writing’ section on p. 108 onwards.)

Celia Rees says that atmosphere stems from clear and vivid descriptions:

**CELIA REES:** With atmosphere, you need to learn how to describe well, and to use every sense. And it’s a case of ‘showing’ and not ‘telling’. You can’t just ‘tell’ the reader directly ‘It was very scary in the house’. You have to do much more than that, and ‘show’ by describing the place in detail – how it looks, feels, sounds and so on. You have to discipline yourself into writing detailed descriptions of places. Usually, you’ll write too
much, so you’ll have to select what you want to keep and edit out what you don’t need. Think of what kind of mood you are trying to create, and foreground those details that will achieve that.

Here are two more passages of atmospheric writing – both very different in style, subject and overall effect. What techniques can you notice each author using? Are there any devices that you would wish to use yourself? In this first extract, from David Almond’s *Skellig*, there is both atmosphere and suspense. At this stage in the novel, the reader knows that the character will meet someone in this tumbledown garage, but not who it is or what they are doing there.

I switched the torch on, took a deep breath, and tiptoed straight inside. Something little and black scuttled across the floor. The door creaked and cracked for a moment before it was still. Dust poured through the torch beam. Something scratched and scratched in a corner. I tiptoed further in and felt spider webs breaking on my brow. Everything was packed in tight – ancient furniture, kitchen units, rolled-up carpets, pipes and crates and planks. I kept ducking down under the hosepipes and ropes and kitbags that hung from the roof. More cobwebs snapped on my clothes and skin. The floor was broken and crumbly. I opened a cupboard an inch, shone the torch in and saw a million woodlice scattering away. I peered down into a great stone jar and saw the bones of some little animal that had died in there. Dead bluebottles were everywhere. There were ancient newspapers and magazines. I shone the torch on to one and saw that it came from nearly fifty years ago. I moved so carefully. I was scared every moment that the whole thing was going to collapse. There was dust clogging my throat and nose. I knew they’d be yelling for me soon and I knew I’d better get out. I leaned across a heap of tea chests and shone the torch into the space behind and that’s when I saw him.

(David Almond – *Skellig*, Hodder 1999)

A faint crack of light did in fact splinter the otherwise inky eastern sky, and as Henry watched, a nearby bird let out the first jubilant call of the day. By the time he was dressed and had carefully let himself out by the back door the dawn chorus was in full, amazing song. He stole down the dark, deserted streets and from every garden came such ear-splitting whistles and deafening song that he expected at any minute to see windows thrown open and heads peering out to see what the din was. ‘I sleep through this every day,’ he thought with wonder.

He had never heard birdsong so echoing and clear. It was as if the darkness had its own edges, as if it were a tunnel with its own echoes. As the light strengthened, so the birdsong blurred and softened. Below he could make out the shape of the Town Hall dome and rows of rooftops like cardboard cut-outs. He stole by a complicated zig-zag route to by-pass the market-square and approach the canal bridge from the far side, as he had the night before. And all the while the gaps in the sky were widening until when he finally turned on to the canal road it was to find the sun itself before him, spilling fire into the smooth, dark water.

(Helen Cresswell – *The Night-Watchmen*, Hodder 1970)
**Suspense**

Inject some suspense into one of the scenarios below. Portray the event moment by moment, in real time. You could even tell the story in the present tense. Aim to let your reader experience your story as if they were there:

- Someone has broken down in their car by a wood at night.
- You are all alone in the house. You are brushing your teeth before going to bed when you hear a noise.
- Someone is cycling past a moonlit canal. They feel that they are being watched.

**Atmosphere**

Write about these places in the most original way that you can and conjure up an atmosphere:

- A disused bus station/hotel/swimming pool/factory.
- A cellar or attic.
- An underground tunnel.
- A snowy forest.
- A beach during a storm.

One way of extending this is to work in pairs and to take two atmospheric pieces – perhaps one of a bus station and another of a cellar. The partners write one descriptive piece each and then devise a story that will link these two pieces together.

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**Animal → human**

Teacher-led activity.

**JAN DEAN:** Think of an animal and turn it into a person. Take a bear, for example. If that bear became a person, what would they look like? They’d be big and shambling. They’d have big hands and big feet, and they might bump into furniture. They’d be quite strong. They might have a sweet tooth – and eat a lot of fish! So, you can get a character simply from an animal’s physical characteristics. Now write a paragraph or so about that character coming into a room. Give clues as to what your original animal was, but without mentioning the animal’s name.
Collages
Collect all kinds of pictures from magazines, newspapers, brochures or leaflets – even use some of the images from the ‘Looking for an idea?’ worksheet, pp. 124–5. Cut them out and make a collage. Spend time looking at your collage and see if you can find a story by connecting two or three of the images that you have used together.

Comic strip
Instead of telling a story in words, tell one in pictures as a comic strip. Have a look at some Tintin or Asterix books to see how the strips are laid out. If you are writing your own story, work out your plot outline first. Alternatively, you could adapt a scene from a favourite book – such as a Harry Potter or Point Horror title, an Anthony Horowitz book or a Jacqueline Wilson novel, or even a scene from a live action or cartoon film as a comic strip. (See ‘Picture books for a younger audience’, p. 135.)

Epistolary
Begin a piece of writing in the ‘epistolary’ form, that is a story told in the form of letters, postcards, mobile texts or e-mails between two people. These two people may or may not be related, may have never met before, and may even live in different parts of the world. First brainstorm details about these two characters – such as their backgrounds, and how they got to know each other. Write a letter from one character to the other and then respond. What you will need to do – apart from including all the many different things these two may write about (such as updating each other with their news) – is to find an interesting plot or storyline to weave in and out of the letters. You will probably discover one as you are writing. Before you start you might want to look at some examples of epistolary novels and books – such as Clifftop by Jacqueline Wilson (which includes postcards), Dear Nobody by Berlie Doherty (a teenage novel), or even the picture book Dear Greenpeace by Simon James. Another way would be to select a book that you know very well. Write a series of letters between two of the characters. If a whole new story emerges from these letters, then develop it as far as you can.
Fables

Fables are a most underrated and little-used story form for creative writing, and yet they are ideal for young writers as they are short, highly achievable and a lot of fun. One simple way of writing a fable is to adapt a well known story, such as Aesop’s ‘The Hare and the Tortoise’. A new version of this could become, for example, ‘The Shark and the Turtle’, ‘The Wolf and the Weasel’, ‘The Fox and the Shrew’, or ‘The Cat and the Mouse’.

Decide upon your two creature-characters first. Then consider these questions (in pairs or as a whole class):

- Where do they meet?
- At what time of day?
- Why do they meet?
- Is one possibly trying to catch and eat the other?
- Why do they arrange to have a race?
- The slowest must win, but how? Perhaps by a combination of the slower creature’s cunning and the faster creature’s complacency?

To plot your fable, do a timeline of events. This could begin, for example: ‘One creature is . . . / along comes a . . . / one creature says it will eat the other / the other responds by suggesting a race / and so on.

Even introduce additional characters and events if you wish, but make your main characters colourful and larger than life. Give them some lively dialogue that will work well when read out loud. Perhaps begin your fable with a brief description of the setting and the time of day and then describe what your first creature is doing. The moral to ‘The Hare and the Tortoise’ is ‘slow and steady wins the race’. You could think of your own moral for your version of the fable.

Another popular tale by Aesop is ‘The Boy that Cried Wolf’. You could write a very modern version of this, perhaps with a central character that has to look after something at school, at home or at work. You decide!
Fairy tales

Think of all the fairy tales you’ve ever seen, heard, read or watched. What do they have in common? What elements occur over and over again? Here are a few examples:

- ‘Once upon a time . . . they all lived happily ever after.’
- Set ‘a long time ago’ in a ‘faraway place’.
- Set in woods and forests/towers and palaces.
- Good and bad characters/rich and poor characters.
- Wishes.
- Magic.
- A rhyme/a chant: ‘mirror, mirror . . .’ and ‘I’ll huff, I’ll puff . . .’ and ‘Fe, Fi, Fo, Fum . . .’
- Good behaviour is rewarded/bad behaviour is punished.
- Talking animals.
- Shapeshifting.
- Numbers 3 and 7.
- A moral.

What others can you think of? Make a list. Now write your own fairy tale using at least four of these elements.

You can also mix and match existing fairy tales. For example, what if Goldilocks went to the home of the seven dwarfs instead of the three bears? Or, what if Hansel and Gretel came across a giant beanstalk in the forest?
**Fairy tales: told orally**

Teacher-led activity. An oral, whole class activity: the teacher or workshop leader begins, ‘Once upon a time . . .’ and, in turn, each pupil contributes a phrase or sentence of their own. So, one example may go something like:

**TEACHER:** Once upon a time –

**PUPIL 1:** there lived a lonely prince –

**PUPIL 2:** in a huge empty castle.

**PUPIL 3:** One day the prince set out on a journey.

**PUPIL 4:** Passing through a wood the prince met a –

The teacher may need to intervene occasionally and encourage responses and contributions. If the tale dries up or finishes, then start again. This oral story can later be written out and developed.

**Fairy tales: points of view**

Yet another way to write a fairy tale is in small groups and to consider point of view. If there are five in your group you might choose *Cinderella*. Each of the five adopts a different character – Cinderella, the fairy godmother, the two sisters and the prince – and can write (or even tell) the story from that character’s point of view.

**Fairy tales: modern**

Instead of writing a traditional fairy tale, set ‘a long time ago’ in a ‘faraway place’, write a fairy tale set in the present, in a town or city – using four or so of the fairy tale elements. There can still be the fantasy ingredients such as magic or talking animals. Perhaps a girl called Red could visit her nan in the city, or Cindy could go to a nightclub and meet a celebrity!
**Genres**

Here are some of the many genres of fiction:


Which of these do you like most of all? Pick just one. Think:

- What types of events happen in these stories?
- What types of characters are there?
- What types of places are these stories set in?
- Where are these stories set?
- Do these stories usually begin and end in the same way?
- Are these stories usually told in a particular way using certain words and language?

Once you have made a list of these, write your own version of a story in that genre.

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**Genres: mix and match**

This activity can be done in pairs or small groups. One partner begins a story in one genre, say science fiction. The other partner continues the piece in another genre, say a horror story. Together the partners swap over until the piece is written.

Or, pick two of the genres and write a piece in which you mix them together, such as a sci-fi crime story or a time travel school story.

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**Genres: openings**

To get you started on writing in various genres, here are some openings. Read through them all first and identify which genre each is from:

- It was the darkest and stormiest night for many a winter.
- ‘All right, 5b,’ barked the teacher. ‘Have it your way. But no one goes home until I find out who did it.’
- By the fifth millennium most planets had been colonised by Earth – all except XX8, of course – so why had Mission Control sent her there?
- A penalty? Had the referee gone mad?
**Notebooks**

Many authors keep notebooks to write their ideas in. Keep a notebook of your own. You might want to use it for many things – your dreams when you wake up, notes of interesting people that you have seen around, interesting places in which to set stories. When you have collected some ideas, pick just one and develop it into a piece of fiction. You could even decorate your notebook with pictures and drawings. Don’t worry about neat handwriting, spelling or punctuation in your notebook; it’s your private place for writing and even drawing and doodling.

**Mini-sagas**

A mini-saga is a story in exactly fifty words. This one has a ‘twist’ ending:

**Dying?**

Thrown in with a crowd,  
the door slams shut.  
I hear water.  
I feel redness oozing from me  
colouring the water.  
Gasping for air,  
blood runs to my toes.  
Knocked out by arms and legs,  
I come round  
hanging on the washing line –  
a red sock  
among pale pink laundry.  

*Lucy Ogbourne from Wells, age 11*

Write your own mini-saga in as close to fifty words as you can. You can include a title with up to five words. Write your story first – perhaps about a very small event – and then prune it down to fifty or so words. Use only those words that you need.
Picture books for a younger audience

IAN BECK: Try and remember what it was like to be really young. What scared you? What sort of things made you laugh? Try and build a story around one of those things. Keep it simple, but shape it so it has an ending, which seems right. Remember that really young readers like to look at pictures as well. Select the important bits of the story to make pictures of. These might be the funniest bits or they might be the scariest bits. Some of the pictures might be small and some might fill a page to make the story more dramatic.

Try to write the picture story with as few words as possible, perhaps only one or two lines on a page for instance. Look at some picture books for younger children and count how many words are used to tell the story, and see how the pictures are used. Remember that the pictures do some of the work of telling the story as well as the words. Write a story that you are interested in, making it exciting for yourself to write and picture, and it will be exciting for younger children. Try out the story on some of the younger children in the school, or on your younger brothers and sisters, and gauge their reaction to it. You might amend the story slightly depending on how you think they reacted to it. It might be worth trying out the pictures for your story on rough paper first, that way you can correct any mistakes before making your finished pictures. Above all, enjoy making the story and the pictures – if you enjoy making it then the younger children will enjoy reading and looking at it.

As Ian Beck encourages, write a story to be read aloud to a small group of pupils younger than you – lower Juniors or Infants. Before you read your story, prepare your performance first – practise it with friends or siblings. Make sure your illustrations are large enough for your audience to see from a distance. And why not read some picture books to give you some ideas? Try some classics such as Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak, The Very Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle, The Gruffalo by Julia Donaldson, Eat Your Peas by Kes Gray and Nick Sharratt or Ian Beck’s Home Before Dark series.

Sequels

Find a book or story that you have enjoyed and write a sequel. Spend time thinking about the character(s) and think about what they may do next. Perhaps you could read the last few pages of the book again and make notes on possible ideas.
**Philipp Pullman’s short exercises**

Philipp Pullman suggests:

- Write the story of Cinderella in exactly 100 words.
- Write the story of Little Red Riding Hood without using any adverbs or adjectives – not even Red or Riding.
- Write a paragraph without using the letter a.
- Write a paragraph in which every word begins with the last letter of the previous word.
- Describe a room, and without using any abstract words, suggest an atmosphere of foreboding or evil.

**Song titles and lyrics**

Here, Celia Rees talks about titles in fiction:

**CELIA REES:** A title gives a story an identity. A title should say something about the story and should grab a reader’s attention in some way. Finding the right title can be very difficult. I’ve used and adapted lyrics and titles from pop songs for three of my novels: Every Step You Take, Colour Her Dead and Midnight Hour.

Have a look at some song lyrics and song titles on various CDs. See if they suggest a story to you. Or perhaps you could create a story in which a certain song is played or sung by the main character. The theme of the song could be reflected in the theme of your story.

**Themes**

Every story has at least one theme, which is a subject that it addresses. Write a fictional piece in which you explore one of these themes, or choose a theme of your own: loneliness, mistaken identity, friendship, sibling rivalry, greed, favouritism, destiny, good versus evil, discrimination, history repeats itself.
The title is one of the most important aspects of a piece of fiction. It’s the first thing that you come across when you hear about a book for the first time. The title will help you to decide whether you are going to read that book or not. Many authors do not give a new piece of fiction a title until they have thought of something that they are happy with, which can often be when the piece is finished. However, David Almond has a different way of working:

**DAVID ALMOND:** Originally, my novel *Skellig* was going to be called ‘Mr Wilson’. I knew it was wrong, but I just needed a title. Unless a story has a title at the top of the page, it doesn’t exist. It has to have a name from the start – so I just put something at the top, even if it’s just ‘Mr Wilson’! The year before I wrote *Skellig* I had been to Ireland and there’s a bunch of islands called Skellig Islands off the south-west coast in the Atlantic Ocean. Halfway through the book I looked up from my computer and saw the book about the Skellig Islands and I thought, that’s the name. It’s a beautiful word, so I pinched it really.

Write a piece based upon one of the titles below. Do a brainstorm first. You could even change the title once you have written your piece if you find something more suitable:

- ‘Before Tomorrow’
- ‘Perfect Strangers’
- ‘Dear Diary’
- ‘The Newcomer’
- ‘Deep Water’
- ‘The Hidden Door’
- ‘A Different World’

**True fictions**

Teacher-led activity.

**CELIA REES:** One writing exercise I do is to take a local newspaper and cut out loads of stories and news items. In groups, I’ll get the children to discuss the other possible details behind these stories. I’ll tell them that the newspaper clipping only gives brief details, but behind it is a whole human story of what has actually happened. So, working from the short piece they’ll make their own story around that event. Children like the fact that these events really happened, and they enjoy creating background stories to them – wondering why this or that happened, inventing names for other people involved and thinking of the various events that led up to this particular story.
Fiction word wheel

Teacher-led activity. Photocopy one sheet for each member of the class. Pupils can cut out the three wheels and join them together using a paper fastener. They then choose a combination of two or three words and write a piece that combines these features.
Fiction checklist

The questions below will help you to remember everything you have to think about when reading through a draft of a story.

Beginnings and endings
- Does the opening grab your attention and encourage the reader to go on reading?
- Do you get into the story as quickly as you can?
- Have you got the best possible opening sentence or paragraph?
- Have you chosen the right place in the story to start?
- Do you have the right ending? Is it realistic?

Prose and language
- Does your prose and language flow?
- How well does it read out loud?
- Do you repeat some words or phrases too often?
- Are there too many overused adjectives (nice, beautiful, lovely, spooky, etc.)?
- Is any of your phrasing awkward?
- Are there too many descriptions?
- Are there too many adjectives or adverbs?
- Are you using metaphors or similes?
- Are your sentences or paragraphs too long?

Dialogue
- Does the dialogue sound real?
- Can you recognise the characters by what they are saying?
- Is there enough or too much dialogue?
- Do you need to spend more time on thinking about how your characters speak?

Plot
- Does the story make sense?
- Does the story build in tension or excitement?
- Is too much information given away too soon?
- Is your story too complicated?
- Does too much/too little happen?
- Is there anything in the story that you don’t need?
- Does it have a good structure: a beginning, a middle and an end?
- Does the story drag at any point?
- Do you move quickly from scene to scene?

Character
- How does the reader get to know your characters?
- Are you telling or showing?
- Do you need to get to know your characters better?
- Do you have too many characters?

General
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the story?
- Is the title right?
- Were you right to choose first person/third person for this story?
- Is the story original in any way?
- Does anything sound corny or clichéd?
- Does the story do what you want it to do?
- Is place important to your story – if so, do you portray the settings well?
- Are you entertaining your reader/how will a reader respond to this?

The next step
- How could it be improved?
- What needs to be done next?
- Is it ready to be published?

If you have gone through the checklist and you are not sure what needs to be done next, leave your story for a while and come back to it later.
## Fiction glossary

**alliteration** Where words begin with the same letters or sounds: ‘table top’, ‘car keys’, ‘green grass’.

**assonance** Where words have the same sounds: ‘green bean’, ‘new view’.

**atmosphere** How it feels to be at a certain place at a certain time in a story.

**characters** The people in a story.

**cliché** An overused and unoriginal phrase or description: ‘as black as night’, ‘as cold as ice’.

**dialogue** The speech in stories as spoken by the characters.

**drafting and editing** Drafting is doing different versions to improve and develop a piece of writing. Editing is checking a piece for spelling, grammar and punctuation, or adding/removing parts of the story.

**drama** A piece that is written to be performed.

**epistolary** A story told in the form of letters, postcards, emails, texts, etc.

**fiction** An invented story.

**form** The type of fiction, for example novel, short story, play, monologue or mini-saga.

**genre** The type of story, for example fantasy, horror, science fiction or fairy tale.

‘**in media res**’ When a story goes straight into an event at the beginning.

**metaphor and simile** Simile is when you say one thing is *like* something else: ‘as cunning as a fox’, ‘she felt trapped like a bird in a cage’. Metaphor is when you say one thing actually *is* something else: ‘it’s raining nails’, ‘the city is a jungle tonight’.

**mini-saga** A story told in fifty words.

**monologue** A performance in which one character talks about aspects of her/his life or makes observations about the world around her/him.

**narrative** The story in a piece of fiction.

**narrator** The person who tells a story.

**plot** The sequence of events that take place in a story.

**prose** Written language that is not poetry or dialogue.

**setting** The place(s) in which a story is set.

**structure** How the story is set out, with a beginning, middle and an end.

**suspense** The feeling that something is about to happen in a story.
NEIL ARDLEY: Writing non-fiction is all about entertaining as well as educating your reader.

Creative with the truth: ways into writing non-fiction

Similarities between fiction and non-fiction

It may seem as if fiction and non-fiction are very different forms of writing. Fiction is the world of invention and make-believe whereas non-fiction, to an extent, is rooted in everyday realities, and is concerned with facts and real events. Yet, as the Fiction chapter has illustrated, much fiction can be inspired by actual events and happenings.

Like fiction, non-fiction can also tell stories. Take a look at any of Terry Deary’s Horrible Histories. In every book you will find tales of human experience, endeavours and achievements. Think of the Horrible Science series: these books also recount stories of how individuals have made incredible discoveries about the world we live in. So fiction and non-fiction actually have a great deal in common and the boundaries between the two are often blurred.

When writing both forms – fiction and non-fiction – you will need to:

• entertain your reader;
• keep your reader’s interest;
• consider how to express what you want to write in the most interesting and appropriate way that you can;
• ensure that your writing style is clear and easily understood;
• use the best possible words – and be imaginative with your language, and use devices such as metaphors and similes – even tell the odd joke or include a pun or two;
• use a good structure with a coherent opening, middle and end.

In the specific case of non-fiction you also need to:

• enlighten your reader about a particular subject matter;
• inform your reader what information you are going to cover, as well as guide your reader through the piece of writing; a contents page and bold headings are ideal for non-fiction projects;
• if you are using technical terms or jargon explain what they mean;
• use humour (if appropriate).
Text and graphics

Until quite recently, information books contained very informative but often dull and dry text. Nowadays, non-fiction writers are expected to come up with fresh and exciting ways of presenting facts and information to entertain their readers. Later in this chapter, Nick Arnold discusses this issue. In addition, he reveals how he writes, plans and researches his non-fiction titles. Presenting information – as Nick Arnold explains – is all about using visuals such as pictures, photographs, diagrams and maps as well as words:

**NICK ARNOLD:** As I’m writing I’m always thinking in visual terms . . . I am always thinking to myself – how can I visualise this information? What cartoon could I include? Would this work well as a diagram? Considering all these visual details in this way is a very important part of the process of writing non-fiction.

Genres of non-fiction

Fiction has many forms – known as ‘genres’ – such as horror, crime and fantasy. Non-fiction too has a variety of genres but also covers many topics. This short list details just a few of the forms and subjects of non-fiction:

- reference books such as dictionaries, thesauruses and encyclopaedias;
- school textbooks;
- biographies and autobiographies;
- domestic texts – cooking, gardening, do-it-yourself;
- religious texts such as the Koran, the Torah and the Bible;
- books on science, geography, history and philosophy;
- texts on the natural world – animals, plants, the environment;
- car manuals;
- books of song lyrics and sheet music;
- travel writing.

This is not to forget that non-fiction includes magazines and newspapers, leaflets, catalogues, pamphlets, information posters, CD-ROMs and information presented on websites.

Choosing a topic

Nick Arnold and Terry Deary agree that the first stage in writing a piece of non-fiction is taking time to find the right topic:

**NICK ARNOLD:** First, choose a subject you really want to write about. It has to be something that you find interesting. You may discover that the more you find out about a subject the more interesting it will become. If that is the case, then that’s brilliant, and you’re on the right lines.
**TERRY DEARY:** Choose something that really interests you. It's got to be something that makes you think: 'I'd like to share this information with somebody else'. When you do that, when you've got that enthusiasm, that's going to so much improve your own writing.

**Researching**

Nick Arnold encourages young writers to do much research and to produce a good plan from the start:

**NICK ARNOLD:** Be very thorough in your research. What you need to do is to get hold of and read as many books on your subject as possible. Use your school library as well as your local library. And don't just use books – watch TV programmes or videos on the subject. Use the Internet. If you know anyone who is either interested in your subject or works in the field that you’re writing about, then you might want to talk to them. Be so thorough that you think: ‘I’ve got lots of material, but where can I get that extra exciting fact that will make my book really interesting?’

You will need to have a rough plan of what you’re going to write – like a contents page to one of my Horrible Science books – before you start doing your research. You will almost certainly find that you’ll have to change your plan according to the facts and information that you find.

As Nick Arnold says, planning in non-fiction is vital – and is as important as in any other form of writing. (See ‘Planning and organising information’, p. 144.) When reading a non-fiction book as part of your research you may wish to consider the following points:

- Use the contents page at the front of the book and the _index_ at the back to see which topics are covered and where specific information that you require appears in the text.
- Check if there is a ‘glossary’ in which special or technical terms are explained; you could even produce a glossary for your own project.
- Make notes in a notebook: if there is a lot of information you could devise your own shorthand (with abbreviated words) or even photocopy pages from the book if this is allowed.
- When using reference books you must not reproduce the original text word for word in your own project; you must rewrite and adapt the material into your own language – copying directly is theft.
- As you are reading through reference books, make sure you read the information carefully and that you fully understand the text.
- It is important to make a note of the books (as well as other media) that you have sourced information from and to put these titles in a _bibliography_ at the back of your project; write down the title and author of each book, the year that it was published and the name of the publisher if you wish.

As well as books, consider using other media for your research, such as websites, CD-ROMs, newspapers and magazines, TV programmes and DVDs.
When you research your subject, you will come across much more information than you actually need. Selecting what is most relevant to the book or project you are working on is one of the key aspects of the non-fiction writing process.

When using a library to source information, ensure that you cover every possible source of information. Use the subject search on the PCs and you may wish to ask the librarians the following:

- The classification number of your subject – so that you can check the bookshelves for all the books on that topic.
- If they know of any books/DVDs/CD-ROMs/other media that might be useful.
- If there are further resources available at other libraries.
- Websites that cover your topic.

Depending on the nature of your topic, museums may be a further source of research information. But wherever your research takes you, make sure that you have a notebook with you at all times.

**Planning and organising information**

As with books, non-fiction projects need to have a structure and a logical sequence in which the information is presented. As Nick Arnold commented earlier, **drafting** a contents page can be a useful way of starting a project as it can help you to select what information you are going to cover, and organise a structure for your material. Here is a standard format for a non-fiction project that can be used and adapted:

- Cover
- Contents page
- Introduction
- Chapters/sections
- Conclusion
- Glossary
- Bibliography
- Appendix.

When drafting your project, it is wise to avoid long paragraphs, as information is best presented in small chunks. In this way it is more accessible to the reader.

**Interviews and questionnaires**

Interviews and questionnaires are two very different but productive methods of getting information from people. An interview is ideal for acquiring material from an expert or if you want someone to explain a subject to you. Just two examples would be interviewing the manager of a local football team about the history of the club, or interviewing an older person about life in your local area during the Second World War or the 1950s or 1960s.
In many modern novels, not every line of dialogue is qualified with a phrase such as ‘he said’ or ‘she said’, for instance:

‘Who was that?’
‘When?’
‘On the phone.’
‘Oh. It was a wrong number.’
‘But you were talking for ages.’
‘Was I?’

When writing a piece of fiction, you need to decide if you are going to explain who is talking every time a character speaks. Malorie Blackman talks about this issue below, as well as how she achieves realistic speech in her books.

MALORIE BLACKMAN: As I’m writing I hear the voices, the dialogue in my head. It’s not me talking, it’s my characters talking, and I’m just recording what they’re saying. And because I imagine my characters to be real people in my head, it comes out as real people talking. Yet at times I’ve noticed that some of my dialogue has become quite flowery and poetic, and I’ve realised that I’ve taken over too much, and it doesn’t sound like that character speaking, so I’ve had to change it.

With my dialogue I tend to use ‘he said’ or ‘she said’ more than anything else. In the main, a reader should be able to appreciate the way that something is spoken from the dialogue itself. Also, I feel that if you’re using lots of adverbs to qualify how everything is spoken – ‘she replied softly’, ‘he answered quickly’ – then the dialogue is not doing its job. Take for example,

‘Come in for your dinner, John,’ she shouted angrily.

Here, the speech isn’t enough, because it needs the adverb ‘angrily’ to explain. So, it needs to be something like,

‘John! How many times do I have to call you? Come in NOW!’ she said.

There, you get it from the dialogue on its own. But that’s not to say I don’t use adverbs, there are exceptions where I do, such as when somebody is whispering something, and they’re saying something normal and you want to tell the reader how it is being spoken – and then you’ll have to put ‘she whispered’, or ‘she replied softly’.

When you’ve got only two people talking, you don’t need ‘he said’ and ‘she said’ for every time they speak, you can just let the dialogue do the work. It’s actually been proved that when people read they skip over the ‘he saids’ and ‘she saids’ anyway, so you don’t need to put them in every sentence! And anyway, reading a series of ‘she saids’ does slow the reading down.

Drama

Drama can take many forms, including:

- a stage play
- a radio play
- an audio recording
- a film
- a television programme.
Before an interview, do as much preparation as you can. Spend time working on a list of questions to take with you. Try to avoid too many ‘closed’ questions which encourage a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer, such as ‘Did you like doing that?’ or ‘Were you scared when . . . ?’. Instead, ask more ‘open’ questions that give the interviewee a chance to talk and explain, such as ‘How did you feel when . . . ?’ or ‘What do you think about . . . ?’.

Take a recording device with you to tape your interview. Make sure it has a mains lead or that you have some new batteries. Do not be afraid to ask the interviewee to explain something that you do not understand. And do ask any extra questions that come to mind during the interview. When you return, listen to the interview recording carefully. Then play it again, but this time write out all the important material that you want to use. This is called an interview transcript. (You may decide to remove all the ‘ums’ and ‘errs’ that people say – your interviewee will not mind at all!)

From there, select which quotes you want to use and decide where you are going to use them in your text. You could, if you choose, share the responsibility and conduct an interview with a friend. (See the ‘Interviews’ workshop, p. 157.)

A questionnaire is useful if you need to gather information or opinions from a number of people, perhaps friends in your class or people who live near you. Information from a questionnaire can be represented in the form of graphs and can help you to evaluate people’s opinions and lifestyles. One example of a questionnaire might be on the topic of the environment; it might ask if people use recycled paper or unleaded petrol. Another questionnaire could be on transport and would ask people how they travel to school and what transport they use at the weekends. Decide if you will fill out the forms as people answer your questions or if you wish people to write their answers themselves. You can include the questionnaires in the appendix of your non-fiction project.

The reader in the text

In addition to Neil Ardley, whose observation that ‘Writing non-fiction is all about entertaining as well as educating your reader’ opens this chapter, Nick Arnold and Terry Deary stress the need to consider the reader at all times in non-fiction.

**NICK ARNOLD:** When you are writing non-fiction always think about how interesting and entertaining it will be for your reader. Just because you as a writer find that information interesting doesn’t necessarily mean to say that your reader will be as interested and as impressed with the facts as you are.

You need to think very carefully about how you are going to present your information to your reader. This means you need to consider the tone of voice that you adopt in your writing. Imagine yourself talking to the reader – are you going to be constantly nudging them in the ribs and making jokes or are you going to be telling them in a very straightforward and serious way? Information and entertainment go together like a chicken and an egg. You couldn’t have one without the other. Clearly, if your books aren’t entertaining people won’t want to read them, so you won’t inform anybody of anything. On the other hand, if you are not informative, you’ve simply written a book of comedy – with jokes and puzzles. Most of all in your writing you need to be enthusiastic.
TERRY DEARY: Be aware of the fact that you are writing for a reader. You’re not writing for yourself, you’re not gathering information just to stick into a book or a word processor, you are writing to have an impact upon a reader. So always have your reader in mind.

Talking points
Here are some issues regarding non-fiction that you may wish to discuss in a workshop context:

- Is non-fiction more or less important than fiction or poetry?
- What is a fact – and is there such a thing? Give examples.
- Is the process of reading non-fiction any different from reading other forms of writing such as poetry or novels?
- Do we use non-fiction books in different ways to other texts?
- What are the qualities of a good non-fiction book? Give examples.

Nick Arnold – Bulging Brains and the Horrible Science series

NICK ARNOLD: There are a number of stages in the writing of each Horrible Science. At the start of every new book I have to find out what information is available on the subject I’m going to be writing about. So I’ll go to my local public library to see what books are available which cover that subject. Then I’ll do a rough plan – which is like a contents page for the book – to see what my chapter headings might be. Then it’s a question of doing the research, reading about each area and collecting information for each chapter. For Bulging Brains I didn’t need to use the Internet or go to medical libraries as my research was all from books from my local public library.

Take the ‘Nasty Nightmares’ chapter in my book Bulging Brains, for example. It’s all about sleep. It was something I knew I was going to include right from the start as sleep is an important function of the brain. It would be impossible to sleep and to dream if your brain wasn’t there to help you. I knew I would come across a lot of material about sleep. So ‘Nasty Nightmares’ was one of the headings I wrote down in a list that I knew I was going to research.

There’s one thing I cannot do and that is to research only the areas I know that I will cover in the chapters of the book. That’s a terribly bad idea. Although you can cut the amount of research work you do by a half that way, you may well miss out on some really fascinating and useful material. I would rather spend time looking at everything that is available on that topic – be it vegetables, insects, light, the brain, whatever – and then sample that and take the best information. If I spent less time doing research I could still end up with a reasonable book, but I would probably miss out an enormous amount of exciting information.

When I have finished my research I plan the book in greater detail and I work out exactly what is going to go in each chapter. I then begin writing quite intensively. My first draft is simply a matter of translating the research into my own words. If I’m writing well, this will come very easily and very fast indeed. I can easily produce a thousand words in an hour and sometimes even more.

I don’t write to a set time schedule. I could research and write a book in a month quite easily but, on average, I write four Horrible Science books a year. Bulging Brains
took longer than other books to research and write and that’s to do with the fact that there was so much information available – loads of books have been written about the brain. The entire project took me from February to August 1998.

I never write my books by hand. Because I only ever work on a computer, it’s difficult to talk of different drafts and versions of a book, but every section of each book will go through changes and each piece of text will get revised a number of times. I’ll never send anything to a publisher until I’m really happy with it.

Of all the books in the Horrible Science series, Blood, Bones and Body Bits has been the most popular, so the publisher is keen for me to do more books on the human body. While I was writing Blood, Bones and Body Bits I was aware of the fact that I had an enormous supply of information – far more than I would ever need in that one book. The body is a world in itself. With the chapters on the brain and digestion I knew that I could only use a small amount of the information that I had.

When I was talking to the publisher about the success of Blood, Bones and Body Bits, they asked if there was anything else I could write about the body. I mentioned the brain and digestion. And these subjects have now become books in their own right – Bulging Brains and Disgusting Digestion. The chapter in Blood, Bones and Body Bits on the brain is called ‘The Baffling Brain’, and that’s what I was originally going to call this book. As you can see on the manuscript page here, I drew up a whole list of possible titles. And to date, I have always come up with the initial idea for each of my Horrible Science books.

How do I decide how to present the information in my books – be it a quiz, joke or comic strip? For a start, it depends on the amount of material I have on a certain topic.
The Amazing Brain
The Mind-blowing Brain
The Baffling Brain
The Barmy Brain
The Batty Brain
The Brilliant Brain
The Scatty Brain
The Frazzled Brain
The Brainy Brain
The Blood-curdling Brain
The Bewildering Brain
The Brain: an owner's manual
(provisional title)

Introduction

Science can be a pain - the brain

Can you get your mind round it?

You can be very, very smart if you wish.

1. Pretend you're a dog and your words make sense.
2. Show respect for other people's minds.
3. Make your friends think you're stupid.
4. Teach your dog how to think. If you can get your head round it, you'll get a pass every time.

serotonin - reticular

Reticular formation

nubs makes you crack a smile

Gordon make an ultimate surround.
It's a dream.

If you can just read this page now, I know you're a winner. You may think you're a computer game.

Ok, we make your mind up.
And sometimes it can be obvious to me that I should present one piece of material as a story. If this material is not so much a scientific fact – but it is more about people, people struggling in their lives or people discovering exciting things – then, the chances are that I will feature this information in the form of a story. In a way, that information is already a story, so it makes sense to tell it in that form.

When I've finished my research for a book I look at my notes and think: what am I looking at here? Could it be a story? Is it a little nugget of fact? If it is a scientific fact, I might decide to have it as a ‘Bet you never knew!’. If it's a piece of information that's quite unusual or unexpected, I might keep that as a quiz question. My rule with the quizzes is to include one question that is funny, one that is possible, and one that is correct. If the information I’ve got is just an exciting fact I might decide to put it into a sequence with lots of other facts. You’ve got to look long and hard at your material to discover the best or most effective way of presenting it. Doing this is like looking at something through a curtain – trying to make out what it is or what it might be.

I deliberately change the range of presentation forms from one Horrible Science to another. I think it would be very boring for children to read the same book with a different cover over and over again. But, to a degree, the content, my subject, will suggest the way in which I present the information.

Tony de Saulles’ illustrations are vital to Horrible Science books. It’s impossible to measure his contribution to the books, but it’s very great. He is a really gifted artist – and also his jokes are much better than mine! In a series like Horrible Science, illustrations are so important. As I’m writing I’m always thinking in visual terms and making notes as to how a certain diagram should look or a page should be laid out. And I am always thinking to myself – how can I visualise this information? What cartoon could I include? Would this work well as a diagram? All this tends to come naturally. My mind just tends to work like this – I’ve always thought of information in terms of both words and pictures. Considering all these visual details in this way is a very important part of

‘Bet you never knew!, from Bulging Brains. Illustration © Tony De Saulles/Martin Brown 2008 (Bulging Brains). Reproduced with permission of Scholastic.

Bet you never knew!
Although scientists no longer keep people awake, in one experiment volunteers were woken up as soon as they started to dream. The scientists wanted to find out how the brain would act if it couldn’t dream. The poor volunteers ended up getting woken over 30 times a night as their brains tried harder to make them dream.

How do you feel about not being able to dream?

It’s a nightmare!

But why is dreaming so important?
the process of writing non-fiction. I’m not an artist or illustrator, but occasionally I send Tony a rough diagram. Most of the time I will put a note in the manuscript asking him to do a certain diagram – say a cross-section of the brain – and then Tony will look that information up.

The editors always play a key role with each Horrible Science. I’ll use Bulging Brains as an example. On the editors’ advice, one story that was in the original manuscript was dropped as it was too sad and downbeat. Also, the editors were very keen that I explained things in more detail than I’d done with previous books because so much of the science of the brain is unknown to children. So as I was writing the book I was forever trying to anticipate what my reader might want to know. The editors also came up with the title Bulging Brains. They felt that with my own title – ‘The Baffling Brain’ – some readers might not know the word ‘baffling’, but everyone knows what a Bulging Brain is! It’s important that children can grasp a title – if they see a title they don’t understand, they might not want to read that book.

In addition to Tony de Saulles and myself, the writer, the Horrible Science team includes the main editor, the copy-editor (who will check for such things as spelling and grammar), the book designer and two science consultants – specialists in the topic of the book. The stages that a Horrible Science goes through once I’ve finished a new manuscript are as follows:

1. Manuscript of new book sent to publishers
2. Editor
3. Copy-editor
4. Two science consultants
5. Manuscript back to me for changes
6. Book designer
7. Illustrator – Tony de Saulles
8. Several intermediate stages
9. Printing
What struck me as I wrote *Bulging Brains* was how much yet how little we know about the brain and how much we’re still discovering every month. Because it’s such a developing area it’s a very exciting topic to write about. Ten years ago we knew hardly anything compared with now, which is something that I talk about in the epilogue of the book. And this is something that I try to put across generally in all the *Horrible Science* books – the idea that science is something that is happening now and developing and ever-evolving. So I’m going to have to revise and update these books every few years to keep them up to date.

I’ll talk through the introduction to *Bulging Brains*. There’s a tradition in children’s non-fiction that there has to be an introduction. It’s there to lead the reader into the book – however, the different parts of the *Horrible Sciences* can be read out of sequence. In my introductions I always make fun of the boring side of science and I like to inform the readers that (a) this book is that little bit different, (b) they are going to be entertained and (c) they too can be experts in science. I think that this last point is an important thing to express because I’ve always felt that it’s wrong to say that science is only about boffins in white lab coats. To an extent, we’re all scientists. Anyone who seeks after truth – and that’s what science is, it’s what the word ‘science’ means – and anyone who wants to find out the truth of how things work or why things happen, is a scientist.

As I begin to write a new book I do the introduction first, and then I often come back to it during the writing of the rest of the book, adding and changing material. The introduction is so important to me. In the first sentence of the introduction to *Bulging Brains* I say:

> To hear some scientists talk you’d think they knew everything about science . . .

This is a common view of scientists – that they know everything. But the point is that scientists don’t know everything about the brain. In addition, what I also try to achieve in an introduction is to introduce what the subject is, say what our understanding of the subject is, and in a humorous way I try to welcome the reader into the book. In the opening to *Bulging Brains* I tell of a recent discovery – the one about the girl who giggled when she was given an electric shock to the brain. The last line is an introduction to the reader to read on:

> Now ask your brain to send a message down thousands of nerves to tell your finger muscles to gently lift the next page.

That was a clever idea suggested by the publisher. And hopefully, once the reader has read this introduction and turned over the page, they’re interested in the subject and hooked on the book! As for me, the whole point of an introduction is to encourage my readers to read the book.

**Introduction**

To hear some scientists talk you’d think they know everything about science . . .

But don’t be fooled – scientists don’t know everything. After all, if they did there would be no need for any new experiments. Scientists could sit around all day with their feet up. But, in fact, there are lots of mysteries left to solve. Lots of things we don’t know or understand.
For example, there’s one object that’s so mysterious it makes the brainiest scientists scratch their heads. It’s wet and squishy and looks revolting – and oddly enough, it’s found between their ears. What is it? No, it’s not their disgusting, snotty nose. It’s the bit inside their heads – their bulging brain. Scientists aren’t even sure how it works . . . But if scientists are puzzled by their own little grey cells what chance do the rest of us have? No wonder learning about your brain can make your head ache.

Well, if science scrambles your brains, help is at hand. This book is bulging with brain facts. For example, bet you never knew that in 1998 US scientists found the part of the brain that makes you laugh. They gave an electric shock to this area of a girl’s brain and she started giggling uncontrollably. And that’s not all. Did you know that in one brain experiment children were forced to sniff their little brother’s stinky old T-shirts? (Page 52 will give you all the smelly details.) Now that really is cruelty!

So by the time you’ve finished reading this book your knowledge will be so vast you could easily be the brains of your class. And who knows? Your teacher might even mistake you for a mega-genius. But to enjoy the full benefits you’ve got to ask your brain to help you read this book. Your eyeballs scan the letters, your brain makes sense of the words, and your memory reminds you what they mean. But hold on – looks like you’ve already started . . . oh well, don’t let me stop you. Now ask your brain to send a message down thousands of nerves to tell your finger muscles to gently lift the next page.

(My author’s voice in these books is me talking, it’s my voice but in written form instead of speech. All that enthusiasm that comes across is mine. Though at times – like when I’m telling a story in the voice of a fictional character or scientist – I’ll adopt a different style or tone of voice, according to the person talking. This is the skill of a fiction writer.

I often write in the second person in my Horrible Science books – using such words as ‘you’ and ‘your’ in my text. See how often I have used these words in my introduction to Bulging Brains. The ‘you’ I talk about so often in my text is my reader, the person I’m talking to in my books. I am always aware of the fact that my reader may not be that interested in science, but they will be interested in themselves. Absolutely everyone’s interested in themselves. If I’m writing a book about the human body, the reader will be interested in how the body works. If the book is about light, the reader will be interested in how they can see light and why the sky above them is blue. In fact, I’d say that the reader is a character in the Horrible Science books, in the same way that I’m a character – as the narrator – in these books. Horrible Science is a world which we all inhabit – a world in which we live and read about at the same time. The reader in a Horrible Science is as important as me the author. And above all, what I’m trying to do is to get the reader to go out and look at and interact with the world in a scientific way.)

(Introduction to Bulging Brains, Horrible Sciences series, Scholastic 1999)
**Gruesome games**

**NICK ARNOLD:** In one library I did a writing workshop aimed at pupils creating their own *Horrible Science* books. We chose the title ‘Gruesome games’. At the start I did a talk based on the science involved with playing various games to provide some raw material for the children’s books. I talked about the science of throwing a ball, playing tennis, all sorts of things. The children worked in groups to produce their own quizzes, cartoons, book covers and stories based on the topic of gruesome games. They assembled these and made them into their own books.

Create your own ‘Gruesome games’ – with cartoons, quizzes, fact files, diagrams and other *Horrible Science* elements. Pick a sport that you enjoy and consider what science is involved:

- Why does a ball spin?
- What does the brain have to do when someone (a) kicks or catches a ball, or (b) hits a ball with a bat or racket?
- How do people swim – and what keeps them afloat?
- What muscles do we use when we jump or run?
- Why is exercise good for us – and what body parts does it help?

**Body parts**

Pick a part of your body that interests you – it could be the muscles, the eye, the brain, the foot, the lungs or the heart. Research that body part.

What does that body part do when you are awake or asleep? What is its job? Does it help you to eat or digest food or what exactly? Do some diagrams in which you show what your body part does during different activities – such as eating, drinking, reading, walking or watching TV.

**The latest discovery**

**NICK ARNOLD:** Science is constantly in the news. It’s happening now. It’s changing the way our whole world operates. There are new discoveries being made in science every month.

Find out about a new discovery in science. It could be a cure for a disease, a robot, a new craft for space travel or a new machine for playing music. Write your own *Horrible Science* pamphlet – with text, diagrams and a quiz – explaining this new discovery to younger readers. Consider how you should present this information so that it will be entertaining and educational and also understood by a younger audience.
Author profiles

Which authors do you enjoy reading? Why not create your own author profile or even a series of profiles? Most authors have websites nowadays, so try Googling your author. Even try the author’s publisher’s website too. Publicity departments of children’s book publishers will be happy to send you information on their current authors. Libraries too can be a good source of author information, and some fiction texts – novels and short stories – have short author biographies on the first page.

Your profile could be in the form of an illustrated leaflet or even an information poster. Or, each member of your class could pick an author and everyone could produce an author ‘fact file’ with a standard format. Whatever format you choose, think about all the different types of information you could research:

- Current books in print by the author.
- A star rating out of five for each of these books.
- Biographical details – such as where the author was born and now lives, what the author has done other than writing.
- Awards the author may have won.
- Different forms of books written by the author (novels, poetry, picture books, information books); different genres of books – fantasy, horror, school drama, etc.
- Does the author have any favoured themes that he or she writes about?
- Are there characters that appear in more than one book by that author?
- If the author is an illustrator too, how would you describe his or her style of illustration?
- What are the author’s favourite books by other writers?
- A few quotes from the author – often included in publicity blurbs – such as ‘I like writing because . . .’ or ‘I get my ideas by . . .’.
- Comments from your friends on the author: ‘I like ——’s books because . . .’.

Can you think of anything to add to this list?

(A list of publishers can be found in the Children’s Writers’ and Artists’ Yearbook (Black) and The Writers’ Handbook (Macmillan). Young Book Trust (London) – and Young Book Trust Scotland – also provide author biographies and bibliographies.)
**Autobiography/biography**

Here are a few ideas for different forms of auto-biographical writing:

- What is your very earliest memory? How much of it do you remember? Focus on it for a while in your mind and then write about it in as much detail as you can.
- Use the five senses to bring your writing to life – for instance, can you remember the smell of a room, the sound of someone’s voice and so on?
- Look around your home and find a few objects that have a special meaning for you. Write a piece which is divided up into sections in which you talk about each of these objects as touchstones into your memories.
- Make a ‘timeline’ of interesting/important events for each year of your life.
- Write a short summary for each year of your life.
- Think about when you have experienced something for the first time. It might be your first day in the Infants/Juniors or at Secondary school, your first attempt at swimming or learning to ride a bicycle. Try and remember one of these as vividly as you can and then write about it.
- Imagine a photograph album in which there is a picture of each member of your family. Begin with a description of each imaginary photograph, and then move on to talking more generally about that person. This could even become a poem if you wish.
- Another way of doing an imaginary photograph album is to have photographs of special memories throughout your life. So you could start each imaginary photograph with, ‘This is me and my sister on the beach at . . .’ or ‘This was the day we went to . . .’.

One way of preserving the memory of a family member or perhaps even a pet that has died is to write about them. Write about that person or animal in a positive way that celebrates their life. (See also the ‘Travel writing’ workshop, p. 165.)

Read a few autobiographies to give you some ideas: *Boy* by Roald Dahl, *Singing for Miss Pettigrew* by Michael Morpurgo or *Jacky Daydream* by Jacqueline Wilson.

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**Autobiography: interview yourself**

In the opening chapter of Jamila Gavin’s autobiography *Out of India*, Jamila answers questions that children used to ask her at school when she first arrived in England. Write your own autobiography in which you interview yourself. First, imagine the type of questions that you might ask someone new in your class, such as:

- When and where were you born?
- How many people are there in your family?
- What’s the funniest/scariest/weirdest thing that has ever happened to you?
- Have you ever had any pets?
- What is your earliest memory?
- What makes you happy/annoyed?
- What is the nicest thing anyone has ever said about you?

Draw up a list and then answer them yourself. Make your answers of interest to a reader.

Or, write a biography of someone that you know. Interview them. Work out your questions beforehand and record your conversation. Include photographs and pictures and do a timeline of their life. (Look back at ‘Interviews and questionnaires’, p. 144.)
### Book reviews

Pick a book that you have recently read. It does not have to be a favourite book necessarily, but one that you can say some interesting things about. Aim for two main paragraphs in your review:

**Paragraph 1:** Give an overview of the plot. In a few sentences, talk about the main events of the book. Don't give too much away – especially the ending!

**Paragraph 2:** Give your overall responses to the book – with a mixture of personal feedback and factual details. Respond to some of these questions:
- Did you enjoy the book? Why?
- Did your opinion of the book change as you read it?
- How did the book make you feel?
- What were the book’s strengths and weaknesses?
- What are the themes of the book?
- What are your responses to the main character(s)?
- What style of book is it? Have you read any others like it or by the same author?
- If you have read other books by that author, how does this compare?
- Were the characters realistic?
- If there were illustrations in the book, how would you describe them? Did they complement the text?
- What did you think of the title, cover and design?
- What age group is this for?
- Would you recommend it to others?
- How many stars would you give it out of five?

Try not to make your responses too personal – consider what other people might think of the book too.

### Events from history

Anton Campbell (aged 9) from Berkshire is interested in the aeroplanes of the Second World War. He enjoyed Terry Deary’s *The Blitzed Brits* so much that he wrote his own *Horrible Histories* project – and included his own jokes, illustrations and quizzes. He called the project *The Potty Planes of the Battle of Britain*. What makes Anton’s title so good is that some planes at that time actually were made out of recycled pots and pans!

What special time/event in history fascinates you? Do your own *Horrible Histories* project on that time/event. If you are unsure what to choose, read some *Horrible Histories* books for ideas. Once you have done your research, include some of these *Horrible Histories* elements:

- alliterating and amusing titles for each section
- timelines – pick just a few of the most important dates
- quizzes
- jokes (if relevant)
- fact files
- captions
- cartoons and comic strips
- diagrams, illustrations and photographs.
**Face the facts: model fact sheets**

Two information sheets entitled ‘Space is far out!’ (p. 160) and ‘Don’t be mean to mini-beasts!’ (p. 161) contain information on outer space and mini-beasts respectively. The information for each was assembled from a range of non-fiction books and websites. These sheets are models to show how information on topics can be assembled in interesting and stimulating ways – and can be given to classes for discussions on ways to present facts and information.

**Interviews**

Have you ever interviewed anyone? You could approach your own interviews in one of two ways:

- Either think about who would make an interesting person to interview, e.g. someone in your school or local community. Has someone you know achieved something special or done something unusual? Has anyone been famous for anything? Could you interview a visitor to your school?
- Or think about what subject you would you like to learn more about. Do you know someone who is an expert in that subject, someone you could talk to?

For advice on conducting interviews, see ‘Interviews and questionnaires’, p. 144.

**Invention**

Invent your own product. It can be anything at all: a type of food or drink, a special domestic appliance such as a cooker or vacuum cleaner, a music-playing machine, a pair of trainers, a form of transport, a musical instrument – anything at all. First, brainstorm your ideas. You could present your product in a variety of ways:

- draw a diagram;
- produce a poster or pamphlet explaining the purpose(s) and benefit(s) of your product;
- do an advert to go in a magazine or newspaper;
- write a jingle for the radio;
- write a storyboard for a TV advertisement;
- design a website for your invention.

**Newspaper article**

Take an event from history and tell it in the form of a newspaper article – such as the Great Fire of London, the arrival of Pocahontas in England, the Battle of Hastings, the invention of the steam engine, the Romans invading Britain or the birth of Jesus. Begin the article stating what the subject is and finish off with a quote from someone who had been at or involved with the event.
The 1940/2100 house

A television series on Channel 4 entitled ‘The 1900 House’ featured a family who were invited to live as Victorians in London in a terraced house that had been redecorated using only the household objects and technology that were used in the year 1900. There was no modern equipment whatsoever – no TV, video, microwave, washing machine or even an electric kettle – as in most houses there was no electricity then.

Now think back to the year 1940 – the time of the Second World War. What would it have been like living in a terraced house in a major city? Research that period and then write about a 1940 house. What would each room contain? What technology did people have then? Also think about how a family would have spent their evenings. To research the year 1940, use reference books and even interview people who you know were alive at that time. To develop this further, why not write about how your own family would cope with living in a 1940 house.

An alternative would be to write about a 2100 house – a house nearly 100 years in the future. Imagine how people will be living then, and what technology there will be in homes. Do a plan of a 2100 house and write about an average day in 100 years’ time.

Local history

Do you know anything about the history of the area in which you live? You could research the whole area, or pick a more specific aspect – such as families who have lived in the area for a long time, or a building, monument, park, railway station, a local company, industry or organisation, or even a farm – the list is endless!
**Pick a star: picture books**

In his books *Picasso and the Girl with the Ponytail*, *Camille and the Sunflowers*, *Degas and the Little Dancer* and *Leonardo and the Flying Boy*, Laurence Anholt has written about four artists and how they came to produce some of their most famous paintings and sculptures. Rather than just telling the stories in words, he has told each of these stories in both words and pictures. Each story is seen through the eyes of a real child who knew the artist. Here Laurence talks about the background to these four texts:

**LAURENCE ANHOLT:** When I was a small boy, I lived in Holland. One day I was taken to the Vincent van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. I can still remember the excitement – it was like being sucked into a rushing, swirling, multicoloured snowstorm. The place made me as dizzy as a fairground and from then on, whenever anyone asked me what I wanted to be, I said, ‘I want to be an artist’. That’s why I went to art school when I was older, that’s why I taught art for many years and that’s why I made this series of books about great artists. I wanted everyone to get excited about art, but I also wanted to tell stories about real people with real feelings. These books take a very long time – about two years for each book. First I have to do a lot of research – so I use libraries, the Internet, museums and galleries. I can always find plenty of information about the artists, but the tricky bit is finding out about the real children who met the artists – children like Camille (in *Camille and the Sunflowers*) who was the son of the postman and became van Gogh’s friend, or Zoro (in *Leonardo and the Flying Boy*) who tested Leonardo’s flying machine. When I decided to write about Picasso, I began a long hunt, to track down the real ‘Girl with a Ponytail’ whom Picasso painted in 1954; eventually, by an amazing coincidence, I bumped into her at a dinner party and she told me the story herself!

When I have finished the research, I begin the process of putting the book together; although the events were real, I have to invent conversations and other details. Most importantly, I have to make it all into a really good story. All of that involves using my imagination and trying to ‘get into the skin’ of these amazing people – a little like being an actor. At the same time, I am doing dozens of sketches and I surround myself with that artist’s pictures. In the end I only use a tiny part of all the writing and drawing I have done because I want the books to be very simple. Do I enjoy writing and illustrating? You bet I do! It’s not easy but it’s the most satisfying job in the world, especially when I receive so many drawings and letters from readers all over the world – I opened one the other day which said, ‘When I grow up, I want to be an artist . . .’

What famous people do you admire? Is there a sports person, a celebrity, a TV presenter, an actor or actress, a pop star, a film star or someone in the media? Pick one person and do some research. Find out about their background, how they became famous and what they have done in their life. Pick one aspect of their personal history and write about it – and, like Laurence Anholt in his books, use pictures and words. Don’t be afraid to invent some of the details – such as conversations – and to be creative with the facts. Perhaps you could even write it as a picture book or as a comic strip for younger readers.
FACE THE FACTS: Space is far out!

You can buy the Moon For a while now, it’s been possible to name your own star. But that’s nothing. You can now buy land on the Moon. Apparently, over 850,000 people have bought their own strip of land on the Moon so far. One website is selling parts of the Moon for under £10 an acre. Could you put that on your Christmas list to Santa though?

Without Jupiter, Earth would be history Jupiter is the biggest planet in our solar system. It has gravity much stronger than ours – so strong it pulls all the comets and meteorites into it that would otherwise come to Earth and squish us all. Thank you, Jupiter!

Your tongue would boil in space Not nice, but unfortunately true. If you jumped out of a space craft – without your space suit on – the first major catastrophe would be that the saliva on your tongue would boil. If you are squeamish please stop reading . . . and then your eyes and skin would expand . . . and then you would pass out after fifteen seconds. Nasty. Don’t try this at home – I mean in space.

Animals are space travellers too But not out of choice. For various reasons, all kinds of creatures have been sent out there. Most famous of all is Laika, the first dog in space. Laika was originally a stray, found roaming the streets of Moscow. Sadly, Laika died five hours after take-off, in orbit. Laika is now one of the most famous animals that has ever lived. Other space-bound critters include spiders, fish, pocket mice, monkey squirrels and chimps. Is this cruelty or important for the advancement of humanity and space travel? What do you think?

The Beatles sing ‘Across the Universe’ Literally. And literally. On 4 February 2008, NASA started broadcasting the Beatles’ song ‘Across the Universe’ all the way to Polaris, the North Star. With a title like that, it seems only appropriate, plus it was the fortieth anniversary of the song, which was penned by John Lennon. It should take about 431 years to get there. Hope the fans on Polaris appreciate it.

You think the Sun is big? Yes, it’s absolutely huge, in fact. But the star known as Eta Carinae is nearly 100 times bigger. And it’s set to explode – and become a ‘supernova’ – in about 10,000 years time. But it’s quite a long way away from Earth. Your great great great great (times several hundred) grandchildren should be safe. Honestly.

Mr Bean was an astronaut That’s Alan Bean, actually. He went up in Apollo 12 and was one of the nine men to walk on the Moon. He now works as an artist specialising in lunar paintings.

Light travels fast but . . . The nearest cluster of stars are called Alpha Centauri. It takes light from Earth four years and three months to travel there. To travel by spacecraft to Mars, our nearest planet, it would take over seven months. That’s how long it took the Mars Express probe. Call that an ‘express’?

Even on the Moon, housework comes first When Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong landed on the Moon, they had to clear away the dirty dishes before making those all important steps. Well . . . you don’t want little green men popping in to your lunar module and seeing all that washing up hanging around, do you?

WRITE ON: There are many, many more facts about space out there. Go and research them – in non-fiction books, on the Internet, on DVDs/CD-ROMs, on TV or even visit museums. Keep your facts short and snappy, and try not to include too much detail. Keep it as interesting as you can. Inject some humour if you want. Then compile your own list of space facts – perhaps you could title it ‘Space: did you know . . .’. Maybe you could even publish your piece on the school website.
FACE THE FACTS: Don’t be mean to mini-beasts!

Do you like bugs? Who doesn’t? Well, maybe not cockroaches or slugs or wasps or spiders. But you can’t beat finding a ladybird, letting it crawl along your finger and then watching it fly off somewhere. Or even going out for a walk and seeing a grasshopper has landed onto your shoe. If you’re lucky, it’s just the one grasshopper. You see, for every human being on this planet there are some 200 million insects.

Now just because they’re small, it doesn’t mean to say that mini-beasts can’t do some awesome things. Even the ones where you live are out and about doing incredible stuff right now. You probably don’t want to, but take spiders – with those eight legs of theirs, they can run just as quickly forwards, backwards or sideways. Plus – you thought your mum was a good multi-tasker! In a single moment, a spider can be clinging to its web, spinning out silk, and all the while its front legs can be catching some bug or other that it will eat later. What’s more, spiders are hardy critters. An experiment conducted back in the eighteenth century proved that a spider could live in a jam jar – without food or water – for over eighteen months. But please don’t try this at home. Make some jam instead!

Imagine dancing instead of talking. No, seriously. That’s what honeybees do. It’s called a ‘waggle dance’. They can tell each other where or how far away food is by a series of movements. Next time your teacher asks you where your homework is, try tangoing or waltzing the answer to her. But don’t blame me though! So why do bees buzz? you ask. So they can hear each other and also so that they can scare others away from their honey. Amazingly, bees are able to recognise people. ‘Oh look, guys . . . here comes Frank, the beekeeper.’ And did you know that honey was found in an Ancient Egyptian tomb? Apparently it was still edible. Ancient Egyptian sandwich anyone?

There are many reasons why ants are f-ant-astic (sorry!). Some of them work as farmers. They grow fungi – mushroom-type stuff. But what for? To sell to a supermarket? To make a nice soup? Who knows? And are ants strong? Let me tell you. Ants use their jaws to carry all kinds of things, like food and leaves. They can carry things up to seven times their own weight, but they can drag stuff up to twenty-five times their body weight. That’s like you dragging along a hippo with your teeth. I wouldn’t try that at home, either.

Yet the hardiest critter of all on this planet is a miniscule mini-beast. Found in the sea, in lakes and ponds, the tardigrade (also known as the ‘water bear’) has lived on Earth for 530 million years. Why so long? Because the tardigrade is tough! And if you could see it (it only grows up to 1 mm long) you could squash it, squash it, burn it, boil it, freeze it – and it would still survive. We salute you, you little toughie!

My favourite band ever? The Beatles! And my favourite bug fact is also beetle-related. There are literally millions of different species of beetles. Most of these have not been named yet. Perhaps you could have a go at naming a few yourself. ‘Well that one over there can be Ringo . . . and that one . . .’. My second bug fact is that butterflies like drinking human sweat (yuk!) but moths like drinking tears of elephants and buffalo and sleeping birds. Aghh. Tears and sweat you see, so scientists tell us, are a good source of salt, protein and water. One to try at home? Oh, go on then.

What else can these incredible insects do? They can fly, glow in the dark, work as a friendly team without whinging (none of this ‘Hey, Miss – can we have a break soon please?’), build their own homes, kiss in mid-air and eat absolutely anything – thus ridding the world of poop and rotting stuff. So hurrah and thank goodness for them!

WRITE ON: What animals are you into? Do as much research as you can – in non-fiction books, TV or the Internet – or visit zoos and museums. Write in your own voice, and keep the style as lively and as fun as you can, without going into too much detail. Perhaps you could publish your piece on the school website.
Research topics

Here is a list of further topics that you may wish to research and write about. Useful sources of information include encyclopaedias, reference books, CD-ROMs, specialist magazines, libraries and the Internet.

• The origins of Guy Fawkes/Bonfire Night and Halloween.
• Religious festivals – such as Diwali, Holi, Ramadan, Eid, Hanukkah, Thanksgiving.
• The history of Christmas/how other European countries celebrate Christmas.
• Life in your community 100 years ago or during a specific era – the 1960s, the Second World War.
• Important scientific discoveries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
• A historical figure – Shakespeare, Elizabeth I, Charles Darwin, Anne Frank, Gandhi.
• One important national or world event that happened in each year of your life.
• The environment.
• Unexplained phenomena – UFOs, hauntings, the Loch Ness Monster.

There is advice on conducting research (including the Internet) at the beginning of this chapter, see p. 143 onwards.

Second World War history

What was it like to live through the Second World War in the city/town/village where you live? Is there anyone in your area who can remember the war? Research that time. Go to your library and look out for books on your local area. Interview people. Visit your local museum. Use the Internet. Write a pamphlet or booklet or even do a presentation on the subject.
Journalism

Have a look at some of your local newspapers. Find out what types of news they cover – such as key local events, business news, sports, weddings, concerts. Look at the style of writing and see how a lot of information can be put across in just a few short paragraphs. Here is one example:

‘Festival of Light is Shining Glory for Hindus’

(Reading Chronicle)

More than 300 members of the Hindu community gathered on Saturday to celebrate Diwali, the Festival of Light. The Festival dates back to when Lord Rama and his family returned to his kingdom after 14 years in exile.

His people celebrated the homecoming by lighting their houses, holding street parties and distributing sweets and the Hindu community has celebrated the same way ever since.

Last Saturday the Festival at Reading’s Hindu Temple was divided into two halves. Part of the programme was held in the middle hall at the Whitley Street Temple and concentrated on prayers and the religious aspects of the occasion. Festivities then moved on to the main hall for the cultural element with the evening’s singing and dancing, finishing with a meal for all the guests.

Paul Gupta, chairman for the Reading Hindu Temple’s Educational and Cultural Community Centre said, ‘It was very well received. The children who took part have been practising for the past few weeks and it was marvellous to see them on the stage.

‘The actual date of the festival was on Sunday but we decided to hold it on the Saturday evening because the families would hold celebrations in their own homes the following day.’

Choose an event in your local area. It could be a forthcoming football match, a school concert/play/performance, the hundredth birthday of a local person, a village fair, a writer visiting your school, a shop being opened by a celebrity or even a protest against a new car park being built. Do as much research as you can, and if possible, include quotes from people involved. Write a piece informing people of the event. As with the piece above, aim to give an overview of what happened without going into too much detail.
Painting animals with words

This passage, taken from Janni Howker’s fictional short story Badger on the Barge, contains a description of a badger. Notice how the author paints a very striking picture of the animal. Much of her description is based on sound – such as the noise the badger makes when it is eating, its whinny and the sound the animal’s claws create on the wooden floor of the barge. Notice too how she uses such devices such as simile (including ‘like a grey shadow’ and ‘noisy as a pig’) and metaphor (‘skirting-board of his body’), alliteration (‘claws clicked’), assonance (‘planks, making a chickering’) and many colourful, expressive verbs, such as ‘rippling’, ‘thumping’, ‘chickering’, ‘snuffling’ and ‘guzzled’.

Helen peered through the crack. Beside her, the smell of damp earth rose from the bucket of worms she had left on the deck. For the first time ever, she saw a badger. The black and grey striped head poked through the door, and then came the fat rippling skirting-board of his body. Like a grey shadow, he moved out of the far cabin – then he was like a fat bear, bouncing along, thumping the planks, making a chickering snuffling whinny, like a tiny horse.

His claws clicked and scratched on the wood. He lifted his striped snout towards the old woman, as if he was looking at her from out of his black nose, then he buried his face in the milk, and slurped and guzzled, noisy as a pig.

(Janni Howker – Badger on the Barge, Walker Books)

Think of an animal. Write a short piece in which you describe this animal doing a number of things (depending on what type of animal it is) – such as moving, eating, sleeping, swimming, hunting for or catching food, wriggling or flying. As in Janni Howker’s piece, make your language colourful and expressive.
Travel writing

See how in this short extract from her childhood autobiography, *Out of India*, Jamila Gavin creates a vivid and lively picture of a railway station:

More travel; tongas, trains, busy Indian railway stations; more excitement.

An Indian railway platform is a composite of all life in India: animal and human. As you stand there waiting, at any time of night or day, for a train which could be hours late, the vendors are cooking any number of delicious dishes. Everywhere are groups of people or families, crouched in intimate circles, or wrapped in shroud-like coverings, grabbing sleep whenever possible. And watching, scurrying, poised, coveting, are the rats and cockroaches and ants and dogs and crows and monkeys, all waiting to pounce on any morsel which falls their way. Sometimes, they take things into their own hands – or claws! Once, when the train had pulled into a station, I got off to go and buy a dry banana leaf of vegetable curry from a platform vendor. Little did I know what other eyes were on my food. As I returned with the banana leaf cupped in my hands, a huge crow flew down. It grabbed the edge of the leaf in its beak and pulled it from my hands. All my curry went spilling down on to the platform as the crow flew away. But there wasn’t a mess for long. Immediately, the hungry station dogs leapt forward, as did the monkeys, cockroaches and all kinds of other creatures, to consume my meal. As for me, I was forced to go back and start all over again.

Think of a memorable place you have been to or a special journey that you have made. It could be a holiday abroad, a trip to London or another city, a visit to a museum or a day at the seaside. Brainstorm as much as you can remember about the day/holiday/journey. Before writing your piece, consider the following issues:

- Have an opening sentence/paragraph that will grab your reader’s attention.
- Give short but detailed descriptions of the places to let your reader know what it is like to actually be there.
- If the holiday was abroad, try to use some of the language from that country in your own writing.
- Tell your reader how you felt about being there. Were you excited, frightened, fascinated?
- Use dialogue – conversations between you and other people – as if it was a story. Speech can make the piece more lively and vivid.
- Do you have any photographs or postcards you could put in your piece? Could you refer to part of a postcard or letter that you sent someone?

Make your travel writing as stimulating and entertaining as you would a piece of fiction.

The ‘Planning for fiction’ (p. 71) and ‘Places and descriptive writing’ (p. 108) sections in Chapter 3 will also be useful.
Non-fiction glossary

**alliteration** Where words begin with the same letters or sounds: ‘table top’, ‘car keys’, ‘green grass’.

**appendix** A section at the back of a non-fiction book or project that contains extra information such as research notes, interview transcripts or questionnaires.

**assonance** Where words have the same sounds – ‘green bean’, ‘new view’.

**autobiography** A piece of writing in which one person writes the story of her or his own life.

**bibliography** A section at the back of a non-fiction book or project which lists all of the books (and all other sources of research from websites, to newspapers to DVDs to CD-ROMs) mentioned or used for research.

**biography** A piece of writing in which one person tells the story of another person’s life.


**contents page** A page at the front of a book that lists the various chapters and sections.

**drafting and editing** Drafting is doing different versions to improve and develop a piece of writing. Editing is checking a piece for spelling, grammar and punctuation, or adding/removing parts of the text.

**genre** The type of non-fiction, for example biography, travel writing, science, natural history and journalism.

**glossary** A section in a book where technical words and phrases are explained in everyday language.

**index** The last part of a non-fiction book, the index lists all the different subjects, themes and topics covered in the book with page reference numbers.

**interview** A meeting in which one person asks another a set of prepared questions.

**journalism** Reporting on and writing about real events and news stories.

**non-fiction** Writing based on facts and real events.

**metaphor and simile** Simile is when you say one thing is like something else: ‘he eats like a horse’, ‘her hands are as cold as ice’. Metaphor is when you say one thing actually is something else: ‘it’s raining nails’, ‘the sea is an angry beast’.

**research** Finding out information on a subject, for example from books, websites, CD-ROMs, libraries or by conducting an interview.

**structure** How a piece of writing is set out, with a beginning, middle and end.

**theme** The subject of a piece of writing.

**transcript** An interview in written form.

**travel writing** Autobiographical writing about journeys, places and people.
Reference texts and further reading

The following publications provide useful introductions and insights into various aspects of creative writing. Some of these are intended for adult writers, but still contain a number of activities relevant to the classroom and writing workshops in general.


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Featured authors

Website/contact details for all featured authors:

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Laurence and Catherine Anholt: www.anholt.co.uk
Neil Ardley (now deceased): books published by Dorling Kindersley
Nick Arnold: www.nickarnold-website.com
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