



Writing Competition lesson plan for 8–11 year olds

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You will need

- Writing Competition invitation (available on collins.co.uk)
- Writer's Toolbox resource sheets 1–6
- A selection of Big Cat books on the theme of bravery
- Writing Journals

The Launch

Aim: To capture interest and identify purpose of, and audience for, writing.

Capture the children's interest and imagination by announcing the Big Cat Writing Competition with a touch of drama. For example the invitation is hand delivered by a uniformed 'courier' or in a large wrapped box that is waiting for the children when they arrive in the classroom, or posters suddenly appear around the school.

Encourage discussion about the competition and explore the children's reactions.

Highlight the key points:

- Who they will be writing for
- What the stories will be about
- When the stories have to be entered
- What will happen to the winning entries

Explore the children's understanding of the theme bravery and courage, encouraging them to give some examples of being brave or having courage. Ask whether they have read any stories where characters have been particularly brave. Establish that bravery isn't just about physical strength, it can also be about having mental strength. Ask children to look through the recommended Big Cat books that use the theme

of bravery and discuss the different types of courage that are shown.

(Note that each school taking part in the competition can only enter one story for this age group. This means that there will have to be an in-school competition or some other means of deciding which story will be entered. Certificates are available on the Collins website for this purpose)

You may like to establish Writers' Circles at this point: small groups in which children can develop ideas; share their stories at different points in the writing process and feed back on each other's writing. Children need to feel comfortable in their particular Circle and secure in both giving and receiving comments on their writing. It may be necessary to model the type of questions and responses that you expect in Writers' Circles. Equally, you could give children the prompts on the *Writer's Toolbox sheet: Discussion prompts*. Providing dedicated Writing Journals would also be helpful. The children can use these to record research notes; ideas for stories, characters, settings etc; words and phrases that they hear or read as well as drafts of their stories and their Writer's Toolbox sheets. In essence, the Writing Journals act as a chronological record of the writing journey.

The Audience

Aim: To identify how the audience affects the style, tone and content of writing.

The children need to think about for whom they are writing, as the audience affects the style, tone and content of writing. This competition is for writing children's stories. Support a discussion about whether the children are going to write for other children of their age or maybe younger children.

The children will need to talk to their intended audience and find out their likes and dislikes when it comes to stories. Give each Writers' Circle the chance to explore the Big Cat books that their audience are reading. They can then choose a couple of the books to read aloud to their audience. *Writer's Toolbox Sheet: Book Talk* is useful for prompting and

recording responses to the books. If the audience is younger children, it would be useful for the writers to be able to talk to parents about what their children enjoy about the stories they are read. Remind them to record their research notes in their Writing Journals.

Encourage each Writers' Circle to clarify their thoughts about their audience's responses and the impact this will have on the stories they are going to write.

Allow each Circle to feedback to the rest of the class and build in time for discussion about what features their stories should have. It could be easy for the children to get bogged down in detail at this point so try to keep things simple and emphasise that *enjoyment* is the key word – for both the writers and the readers. Give the children time to record their thoughts in their Writing Journals.

Identifying the Ideas

Aim: To identify an effective plot and theme.

This is the first step in the writing process and one that is a challenge for some children. If the cry 'I don't know what to write about!' is ringing round the classroom, it's time to give the children some hooks to hang their writing on.

Show them something you 'found' at home or on your way into school for example a large, old key; a box containing a cryptic message or an old photo; a postcard with an intriguing instruction.

Encourage the children to use talk to explore the object and to build up stories about it:

- Where has it come from?
- What does the key open?
- Who is in the photo?
- What does that mean?

Borrow ideas from existing stories – after all, people do say there are only seven types of stories in the world! Pie Corbett, in his book *How to Teach Fiction Writing at Key Stage 2*, has turned them into child-friendly versions:

- Defeating the Monster – the main character overcomes an obstacle of some sort, for example a bully, a fear, an illness.
- Rags to Riches – the main character feels ill-treated but overcomes their difficulties and is transformed in some way. Think Cinderella
- The Quest – the main character is challenged to go on a journey and retrieve something. They set off, overcome some obstacles and return – successful.

- Character flaw – the main character has a character flaw of some sort for example greed, selfishness, spitefulness which gets them into trouble. By the end of the story, they have learned their lesson and changed.
- Finding Tale – the main character finds something which leads them into trouble. The character has to get out of trouble and often ends up losing, or giving away, the object they found.
- Losing Tale – the main character loses something. They then have to search for it. The story ends either with them suffering the consequences of the loss or finding the object again.
- Warning tale – the main character is warned not to do something or go somewhere. However, they ignore the warning, do it anyway and get into trouble. The character is rescued in the end and (hopefully) learns a lesson.

You could identify and explain two or three of these story types to the children and encourage them to choose one that will lend itself to the theme of bravery and courage.

Read some of the many spoofs on the traditional tales genre to the children and involve them in identifying the changes the author has made. This could be a change in the gender or animal of the main character (Collins Big Cat *The Three Little Rabbits*), a change to the behaviour of a character (*The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs*), or a change in the outcome (*Jim and the Beanstalk*). This should trigger some ideas for a similar treatment of another traditional tale.

Children could take a character from one of the Big Cat books and take them on a different adventure, or write a sequel, or prequel.

Planning the Plot

Aim: To structure and plan a story.

Step two in the writing process is planning – a step which helps children to map out their stories and identify any parts that don't work or are weak.

Talk with the children about their knowledge and understanding of the structure of stories. For this age group, they should have moved beyond the simple beginning, middle and end structure towards a five-part story. To support the discussion, introduce, or reinforce, the idea of a Story Mountain (*Writer's Toolbox sheet: Story Mountain*). Essentially this is a profile of the excitement level in a story and can be broken down into 5 sections:

- The opening – character(s) and setting are introduced
- The build-up – the character(s) are going about their daily lives and a challenge or problem is introduced
- The exciting bit – the character(s) face the challenge/problem
- The resolution – the challenge/problem is overcome
- The ending – the character(s) return to their daily lives

Given the theme of the children's stories, bravery will probably be demonstrated around sections three and four. Emphasise that a story with a flat excitement profile is not going to keep their readers interested.

Some children will be able to turn their ideas from the previous step into a plan without further support. Others will need to use some of the ideas below.

Each Writer's Circle can take one of the Big Cat books that they read to their target audience, or indeed another story, and analyse the structure, making brief notes about what happens in each section. These can be recorded on *Writer's Toolbox sheet: Story Mountain*.

Children can use the *Writer's Toolbox sheet: Boxing up grid* to turn the notes into a generic plan. You may need to demonstrate this if it is an unfamiliar technique.

The notes from the analysis of the Big Cat book, or other story, are recorded in the Original column. They are then turned into a more general version in the General column – removing characters' names and detail specific to the original story. For example, if you are boxing up Little Red Riding Hood, the notes in the Original Opening cell might read: LRRH told to take cakes to Granny's house. The notes in the General Opening cell could read: Main character (MC) sent on errand. The New column is then used to plan a new story that is based on the structure of the original so the notes could read: Ben asked by his dad to go to shops for a newspaper.

Planning and writing an effective ending can be challenging – endings that show the characters going home for their tea or waking up to discover it was all a dream aren't original enough. If children need support, give them these tips:

- If a character has changed or learnt a lesson in the story, tell the reader, for example The Wolf slunk off into the forest: he wouldn't be masquerading as a grandmother ever again.
- Use dialogue where characters reflect on what has happened for example 'That's the last time I go up the hill for a pail of water,' Jack said, rubbing the huge bump on his head.
- Take the story full circle, so if the story opened with characters sitting in front of a blazing log fire, it could end with them gazing into the glowing embers.

Give the children time to practise writing endings by taking a well-known story, reading almost to the end and then asking What if ...? questions. For example, in Cinderella, what if the shoe had fitted one of the stepsisters? Now, write a different ending.

Capturing the Characters

Aim: To develop characters and use effective dialogue.

In this step of the writing process, the children start to build their characters and look at writing effective dialogue. These activities give children practice in developing characters using techniques that they can then draw on when writing their own stories.

Find a bag (handbag, rucksack, sports bag) and put a few items in it that give hints about the bag's possible owner for example a purse, silk headscarf, map, travel card, ticket for a play or film, a pair of glasses, a scrap of paper with an address on it. Unpack it in front of the children and ask them to build up an image of the owner, using the contents of the bag as clues, for example: The bag belongs to an elderly lady who is taking the train to an unfamiliar city to go to see a play. She's going to meet up with someone at the address on the piece of paper. Develop the character through a Role on the Wall activity (see below).

Role on the Wall (see *Writer's Toolbox sheet: Role on the Wall*) involves recording a character's external features (appearance, how they speak, how they move) outside the outline and their characteristics (personality traits, feelings, thoughts) inside the outline. Encourage the children to use expanded noun phrases, for example sparkling blue eyes, curly black hair, in their notes and challenge them to use more sophisticated vocabulary, for example courageous rather than brave, so they can draw on this language as they write their story.

Source images of interesting looking people from the internet, magazines and newspapers. Each Writers' Circle can choose one of the images and use *Writer's Toolbox sheet: Role on the Wall* to build up a character profile of them.

By now, children should have created the main characters in their stories. They could use the *Role on the Wall* technique to develop them further.

Explore the names that authors have given their characters and how these names can tell readers something about the character. Roald Dahl's books contain some good examples for example Veruca Salt, Slugworth, Miss Trunchbull. Names can also give an insight into the time a story is set, as names come and go in popularity, and the culture in which a story is set. Encourage the children to make careful name choices for their characters.

Writers' Circles can use role play and drama to explore and develop their characters. One example activity is First Lines. Give the children an opening line for example Why did you go into my bedroom this morning? They can work in pairs and Child A (in role as their character) says the opening line and Child B (also in role) answers. Child A then develops the conversation by responding.

Emphasise that when the children are writing dialogue for their characters, it needs to tell the reader something and to move the story on. Give children time to practise writing dialogue between two characters that demonstrates this. They can share their writing within their Writers' Circle and use *Writer's Toolbox sheet: Discussion prompts* to support feedback.

Sorting the Setting

Aim: To build atmosphere through setting descriptions.

This step of the writing process involves children creating settings and developing atmosphere. The setting of a story is *where* the story happens and *when* it happens. A story might take place in one setting, or the characters might start in one setting and then move to a different setting. These activities give children practice in developing settings using techniques that they can then draw on when writing their own stories.

Source images of interesting settings that have a sense of atmosphere. Give copies to each Writers' Circle and give them time to look closely at the images. Use these questions to prompt discussion about one of the images:

- What can you see?

- What time of day is it?
- What time of year is it?
- What is the weather like?
- What might you be able to hear?
- How would you feel if you were in the picture?
- What might be outside the picture?

Children can then start to build up a setting description that includes these details and share these descriptions in their Writers' Circle. They can use *Writer's Toolbox Sheets: Discussion prompts* to give and receive feedback.

Use Shared Writing to involve the children in building up atmosphere in a setting description. You could start with an old house, add crumbling stonework and ivy covered walls, clouds scudding across a pale moon, the hoot of an owl, a sudden clap of thunder and ... you have all the ingredients of a scary atmosphere.

Looking at Language

Aim: To make informed, effective language choices.

By this point in the writing process, the children have planned their stories and created characters and settings. They can now write a first draft and start thinking carefully about the language that they use. These activities give children practice in making informed, effective language choices.

On a flipchart or whiteboard, write up a simple sentence for example The cat sat on the mat. Challenge the children to help you add detail that will help the reader to visualise the scene. Use these prompts to help:

- Give me an adjective that describes the cat
- Give me an adverb that tells us how the cat is sitting
- Let's change the verb 'sat' to something more interesting
- Do we need to change the adverb?
- Give me an adjective to describe the mat
- Let's change the noun 'mat' to something more interesting
- Do we need to change the adjective?

Don't accept the first, and often most obvious, words the children give you – push them to make more adventurous and unusual choices.

'Show not tell' is a very useful technique that can make a significant difference to children's writing. Write up this sentence: Mr Green was an old man who used a walking stick. Establish that the sentence tells the reader three facts about Mr Green (he's old, he's a man and he uses a walking stick). Demonstrate how to show the reader the same three facts without mentioning them for example Silver-haired Mr Green shuffled along the street, his stick tapping uncertainly on the pavement.

Give children opportunities to practise the 'show not tell' technique and to share their efforts in their Writers' Circle.

'Less is more' but budding writers don't always recognise it! If you find children are writing elaborate and flowery descriptions or long rambling pieces of dialogue introduce the 'less is more' phrase, particularly as they have a 500 word limit on their stories. Model how using one effective adjective can have more impact than using three adjectives with similar meanings for example 'The big, strong, muscly man walked into the supermarket.' could become 'The powerfully-built man walked into the supermarket.' You could then involve the children in choosing a different verb and adding an adverb.

Give children opportunities to put 'less is more' into practice and to share their efforts in their Writers' Circle.

Many successful authors use the 'rule of three'. Find some examples and show them to the children. It might be three words used together (Towering waves tore chairs, tables and lifebelts from the deck of the ship.). Three phrases in a sentence (She saw men building a timber house, a couple arguing about what to have for dinner, a wood turner making bowls and cups.). Three sentences with a similar structure (Nothing happened. It was very dark. She waited.) or three events in a story.

Give children opportunities to put the 'rule of three' into practice and to share their efforts in their Writers' Circle.

Give children time to write their drafts, drawing on their original plan and the activities they've done involving the development of characters and settings and making informed language choices. They can share their drafts in their Writers' Circle and use *Writer's Toolbox Sheet: Discussion prompts* to support feedback. Join in with some of the Writers' Circle sessions and share your responses.

Polishing the Prose

Aim: To edit a draft in order to improve a story.

This step in the writing process gives children the opportunity to take on board feedback from their Writers' Circle and to improve their draft stories.

Remind the children of their identified audience, the theme of their stories (bravery and courage) and their word limit (300 – 500 words). Ask them to read through their stories to double check they have addressed these three elements and to make any necessary changes.

Hold meetings with each Writers' Circle and discuss what they are going to focus on as they polish and proof-read their stories. Check that they understand that a successful story has to keep the reader interested and entertained as well as being correctly spelt and punctuated and grammatically accurate. Offer 1:1 sessions with children who feel that they need support or guidance with the polishing process.

Remind them of the three techniques 'show not tell', 'less is more' and the 'rule of three'. Do they think they have used these techniques effectively or even overused them? Once the children feel happy with their stories, they can share them with a friend in their Writers' Circle for any final feedback and make any necessary changes.

Explain that they are going to spend time carefully proofreading their stories and that this is challenging, as we tend to see what we meant to write rather than what we actually wrote.

Give children copies of *Writer's Toolbox sheet: Proofreading tips*, explaining any techniques that they are unfamiliar with. Allow time for the proofreading process and for the children to make any necessary changes.

Discuss with the children whether the finished versions of their stories are going to be handwritten or typed up. Allow time for the children to create their final versions.

Reading the Result

Aim: To read aloud with fluency and expression.

The final step in the writing process is to present the stories to the intended audience.

Discuss with the children how they want to go about this. If they've written for younger children, they could visit the classrooms and hold a read-aloud session. If they've written for children of their own age, they could hold a Story Slam where each Writing Circle reads their story to a small group of peers. If reading aloud is going to take place, give children the chance

to rehearse within their Writers' Circle until they feel confident. Some children might prefer to give their stories to their audience for them to read themselves.

Depending on how you have decided to choose which story will be entered for the competition, you could organise an anonymous voting system for the stories.

And now – crunch time! Check the rules of the competition and make sure that you submit the story by the deadline.

Gill Matthews is the series editor of the *Collins Big Cat Guided Reading Handbooks*. To find out more visit collins.co.uk/collinsbigcat