



The Usborne Young Writers' Award 2010

Guidance for teachers

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Introduction

The Usborne Young Writers' Award is a great way to encourage the students in your class to write a story. It provides a purpose which can motivate children to write, and an external audience which can help promote a sense of achievement.

The ideas in this guide are simply suggestions that may help you get started. You can use them selectively, adapt them for your own context, and incorporate your own ideas as you wish.

Curriculum context

The story starters provided by the five Usborne authors cover a range of genres. For example, the story starter by Sophie McKenzie might be the opening for a magical fantasy or perhaps magical realism, while Keith Brumpton's story opener might lead to the writing of a comedy. The Two Steves' story starter could be used as the beginning of a mystery or an adventure story. Diana Kimpton and Anne-Marie Conway's story starters might lend themselves to an issues based story or even a thriller. Of course there are plenty of other directions to take the stories in, so students should not feel constrained by these suggestions.

Specifically the stories could be incorporated into any of the following units or themes, which feature in the renewed Literacy Framework:

- Narrative
- Stories with familiar settings
- Adventure and mystery
- Stories that raise issues and dilemmas
- Fiction genres
- Stories with flashbacks
- Authors and texts

At Key Stage 3 they can be integrated into a scheme of work that explores the author's craft and provides opportunities for composition. Students can use the story starter to generate imaginative ideas and reflect on ways in which their stories both engage and entertain the reader.



You may want to select a story opener that works best with your current unit or scheme of work. Because the story openers are not age specific, you can select the opener that best suits the work you are doing in class.

If you are working on a two or three-week genre based unit, the story starters will provide a useful focus for the writing phase, after the students have had rich opportunities for reading and exploring stories.

However, if you do select a specific opener, it is vital that you do not over plan with the class, in order to allow students space to respond in individual ways. You should avoid submitting a set of class entries where each child has written to a prescribed plan or formula. By all means provide guidance on planning but leave space for the students to input their own ideas and most importantly allow space for students' individual voices to flourish.

Alternatively, you may want to offer a free choice of story opener, so that students can pick the one that holds the most appeal for them.

Making a splash: creating a stimulus display

It's a good idea to create a stimulus display to generate interest in the writer and their books. Imaginative displays can intrigue, inspire and motivate the students to read the books. They can also be used to display students' own work such as drawings, comments, new vocabulary, character studies, photographs of drama work, added over time. The story starters could form a focal point in the display.

Visit www.usborne.com/youngwritersaward to find lots more information about the authors and their work, including video profiles.

Suggestions for stimulus displays:

- Author display – a collection of books by the selected author, posters, reviews, web links, and so on. There are interviews with each of the authors at www.usborne.com/youngwritersaward.
- Genre display – a collection of books and stories in a range of media including webpages, comics, blank postcards for reading recommendations which can be added to a 'We like this book' board, for example.
- Book display – a special focus display on one of the books by a selected author which you might be reading as a class novel. For example, a display of Sophie McKenzie's novel *Time Train to the Blitz* could include historical information, maps, and key quotations from the book.

Getting started: some suggestions

Distribute copies of the story starter. Read aloud to the class or get them to read to each other in pairs.

Provide some quiet thinking time for the gestation of ideas. You might play music quietly to establish a mood for quiet reflection. Also provide workbooks, pencils and paper for students to jot down ideas that come into their head. Suggest they jot down everything no matter how unlikely it seems at this stage. Notes can be added to and things can be deleted later.

Some students might benefit from guided visualisation. For example, if you are using *The Two Steves* story starter, you might:

- Read the opening.
- Follow with a sequence of prompt questions. Ask questions quite quickly, encouraging the students to note everything that comes into their head. Explain that it isn't important if they can't think of an answer to a question, they can simply leave it out and move on to the next question.

Imagine the narrator is feeling scared, s/he has been involved in some very dangerous incidents, and decides to go home. On the way, a car pulls up and instructs the narrator to get in:

- What is s/he feeling as s/he hears the voice?
- Does s/he decide to obey the voice and get in the car?
- What else is happening on the street? Does s/he see or hear anything unusual or unexpected?



When you engage in this process, students will start forming ideas in their heads about the strange occurrences – why have they been happening?

Invite the students to share their ideas with each other and with you. Your responses can further prompt them to find the story that is lurking in their imagination. For example, ‘what is that person/object doing here?’

These initial thoughts can be added to or discarded by students when they start to write their stories.

‘What if...?’ questions are a great way of generating ideas. Remind students that they can keep asking the ‘what if...?’ question once they have started writing. What would this character do next? How would they respond to another character or situation?

Some students might want to put together an ideas notebook to carry around with them - they don’t just have to think about their story in the classroom. As Anne-Marie Conway recommends: ‘Take a notebook with you EVERYWHERE. A good idea can pop into your head at the strangest times.’ Students might also like to make a collection of visual images that they think will be useful to them when they write their story. They may want to take cuttings from magazines and brochures for character ideas or setting. Having visual images may help children build the story in their heads.

Planning the story

Share the writers’ ideas about planning with the students (you can find these at www.usborne.com/youngwritersaward).

Diana Kimpton suggests, ‘Decide how your story will end before you start writing. It’s easier to create the rest of your plot if you know where you are going.’

Planning should aid students with their writing. A skeletal plan may help students shape their stories, identify the conflict or complication in the story and bring it to a satisfactory conclusion.

Anne-Marie Conway’s advice is an accessible way of thinking about a plan: ‘Try to have a rough idea of where your story is going. It’s a bit like setting out on a journey - anything can happen on the way but it’s quite useful to know where you want to end up.’

Guard against ritualised planning that is so detailed that students fail to see the point in writing the story. Teresa Grainger, author of *Creativity and Writing*, found that many children disliked story planners simply because they felt they had exhausted their ideas and energies in the planning stage. Many writers assert the importance of leaving space for discovery during the writing process to keep the writing fresh and interesting.

Whatever the preferred approach to planning, remember you can be flexible with the plan, you can change your mind and deviate from your original ideas. As Sophie McKenzie suggests, ‘Daydream a lot - let your imagination go wild!’

Offer students a menu of planning possibilities which, once taught, can be selected from, as suits the needs of the individual student. Here are some suggestions:

- Story mountain
- Storyboarding or drawing
- Talk before writing

story mountain

Representing the story diagrammatically using a story mountain may help students visualise the trajectory of their story. At the bottom of the mountain the characters and setting are introduced. Climbing the mountain introduces the conflict or complication, at the peak of the mountain we have the climax and as we come down the other side of the mountain we have the denouement, where the plot is unravelled and the final resolution or conclusion is reached. Using a story mountain can help some students grasp the idea of the rising and falling action in the story.

Other diagrammatic devices can be used and students can devise their own.



Storyboard or drawing

Visual learners may prefer to plan their story visually. Divide a sheet of paper into a small number of boxes. The boxes are then used to map out the key incidents in the story. Stress the point that this is not about producing fine art work and that quick sketches that aid the thinking process are best. The storyboard can be annotated with short pieces of narrative or dialogue that can be used as prompts to aid the writing.

For some students it can be helpful to draw a scene or the characters from their story before they start writing.

Talk before writing

For most children in the primary years, oral language competence outstrips competence with written language. Younger students often benefit from 'rich talk' opportunities before they write. Working in pairs, they can read their chosen story opener and then continue to tell the story verbally. This oral rehearsal is a form of pre-planning. The principle underpinning oral rehearsal is that anything that is spoken can be written down. This approach helps with the generation of ideas, which can be developed and refined during the writing process.

Finally, remember a plan is useful only in as much as it helps the student write the story. If your planning format isn't working, try something different.

characters

Characters are vital for all stories. Many writers talk about the importance of getting to know their characters and understanding how they would act and react in different situations.

The Two Steves advise young writers to explain 'how your characters felt. If readers don't sympathise with them, they won't be interested in the story.'

Keith Brumpton agrees on the importance of great characters: 'Without these, you're doomed!'

One way of creating believable characters is to get into the details. As Sophie McKenzie puts it, 'it's the details that make stories, people and places come alive!'

Realistic dialogue is important too. The Two Steves recommend that 'dialogue can tell your readers a lot about the setting and the motivation of the characters.' Encourage students to think about how their character would talk. Would they speak informally or formally? Would it depend who they were talking to? Would they speak differently to their friends to the way they speak to their teacher? What sorts of things might they say in different circumstances? In his book *Did I hear you write?*, Michael Rosen encourages young writers to eavesdrop on people's conversations and to think about the things people really say when, for example, they are angry, sad or embarrassed.

A range of strategies can be introduced to help students develop the characters for their stories. They might, for instance, draw them or create a profile of the character with a question and answer. Some questions can provide useful background information e.g. What is their favourite band? What is their favourite book? Other questions can help students get inside the mind of the character. For example, what do they think about a current political situation or news item? Students won't use all of this information in their stories but it will help them create characters that people can believe in.

With younger writers, 'hot seating' is a useful strategy to help build the character. In small groups, children can take on the role of the main character in their story while other children ask them questions about the character. They answer in the first person as though they are that character.

Encourage students to choose names that suit their characters and are right for the genre. For example, the name Voldemort works well for a villain in a fantasy story. Students can have great fun choosing names for their characters, but it isn't only the outlandish names that need to be thought about - choosing everyday names can be just as challenging.

And don't forget, it shouldn't just be an easy ride for the characters. Diana Kimpton offers some useful advice: 'Give your characters a tough time by putting obstacles in their way to spoil their plans... Endings are more satisfying if the characters have to struggle to succeed.'



Redrafting and revising

Writing for an audience is different from the private writing that we do for ourselves. It is important that we present it in the best way that we can. It is unlikely that the first draft of a story will be flawless and most students will be able to make improvements.

A word of caution, especially for younger writers: too much redrafting and revising can make the story dry. It is important that the students retain control of the revision process and that the fresh voice and the vibrancy of the storytelling are not edited out through over-zealous correction.

Working with a response partner is a great way to gauge a potential audience's engagement with the story and will help students identify which parts need more work. Reading aloud will also help them discover where they have missed out words, or where their thoughts were simply running too fast for their writing hands to keep pace.

One motivating way to introduce the idea of redrafting and revising is to set up an author's chair in the class. Invite students to sit in the author's chair to read their story aloud and then invite responses and questions from other students. It is important that students retain ownership of their work through this process and that comments are addressed direct to them rather than through the teacher.

Inexperienced students will need guidance in the initial stages so that the process is constructive and positive. Encourage the 'author' to voice problems they have faced in the writing and invite suggestions from others in the class. The Two Steves advise that, 'If you possibly can, talk about your story with someone you trust... Ask them if your narrative makes sense and interests them. And listen to what they say!'

Even if students are working on their own, reading aloud can still be helpful. Anne-Marie Conway advises: 'When you finish writing something, read it out loud. It's a great way to make sure it flows.'

Diana Kimpton points out that this is an ongoing process, and writing doesn't have to be perfect straightaway: 'Accept that your story won't be right the first time. When you've finished your first draft, put it away for a day or so. Then read it right through as if you're seeing it for the first time. You'll be surprised how many ways you can spot to make it better.'

Making it a pleasurable experience

Students will get most from this project if time is dedicated to writing and developing the story. Provide support for students but allow for an individual response. You may want to provide time and space outside the curriculum for students who are absorbed in their story writing or 'in the flow' - perhaps a story writing club can be set up, or just a quiet place provided for keen writers.

And just for fun, why not write your own story using one of these story starters? You may not be eligible to enter the competition but writing with children can help stimulate an enthusiastic community of writers.

Above all, enjoy! We look forward to reading your students' stories.

Resources

Download the story starters and further resources at:
www.usborne.com/youngwritersaward

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