About the story
A stern old sorcerer announces that he’s leaving his apprentice, Max, alone in the workshop. Max’s delight at the prospect of a free afternoon soon gives way to dismay at the chores he’s supposed to do. First he must fill the water tank, a job that would take hours... unless he uses a little of his master’s magic. Max knows he shouldn’t try any spells, but he can’t resist enchanting a broomstick to carry the water for him. The sorcerer’s toad, Tabitha, looks on disapprovingly as the broomstick comes to life and starts filling the tank in record time. Feeling smug, Max decides to take a nap.

He wakes to find water flooding the workshop. What’s worse, he doesn’t know how to stop the broomstick or reverse the spell. Tabitha helpfully suggests chopping the broom up, but Max is horrified to see the two broomstick halves coming to life and working twice as fast. In the nick of time, the sorcerer returns and casts a spell to undo the mischief. Max is a wand’s flick away from being turned into a tadpole, until Tabitha points out that he might make a good sorcerer himself one day. On reflection, the sorcerer decides to give Max a second chance and he becomes a star pupil.

About the author
The story originally formed part of a longer tale, written down by a Greek named Lucian of Samosata, nearly 2,000 years ago. Lucian was known for his caustic wit, both in his writings and in his speeches. He trained as a rhetorician, studying the art of pleading, arguing and persuasion. He then went from city to city, earning his fame and considerable fortune by giving amusing lectures.

Lucian’s story inspired the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) to compose his own version in verse, in 1797. Goethe had trained as a lawyer, but was always more interested in literature. His first anthology of poems was published in 1770, and he went on to become a world famous poet, playwright and novelist, the author of classic German Romantic works such as Faust and The Sorrows of Young Werther. His work inspired numerous composers including Beethoven, Schubert and Schumann.
Key phrases

- to be fed up with
- Back to work
- could do with
- Rats! [as exclamation of annoyance]
- to keep [someone] out of mischief
- to come to life
- How hard can it be?
- to be up to something
- all at once
- in no time
- to feel pleased with yourself
- fast asleep
- to take no notice
- Good thinking
- That was close
- What have you got to say for yourself?
- perfect pupil

Before reading

Ask the class if they know what an apprentice is. Explain the concept if they’re not sure. Do we have apprentices today? Can the students name some people who are likely to take on an apprentice [e.g. plumber, electrician, builder]? Why might an apprenticeship be a good way to learn these jobs, rather than going to classes? [They involve practical skills which are more easily learned through experience.]

Does anyone know what a sorcerer is? [Students might be more familiar with the word “wizard” or “magician”.] What skills might a sorcerer’s apprentice need to learn? You could write a list on the board.

Reading or listening

You can listen to the story on CD or read it aloud to the students, take turns to read or read together silently. Each double page spread in the book is one track on the CD, so that you can pause between tracks or repeat tracks if your students need it. The first reading is in a British English accent, and it is followed by an American English reading. The words are exactly the same. After the story, there is a short selection of key phrases that can be used for pronunciation practice.

During reading: you might like to ask some of these questions.

- What does the speech bubble tell us about how Sticklewick treats Max? Does it tell us something about Max, too?
- Sticklewick’s shopping list is rather unusual. What do you think the items are for?
- What does Max think about being an apprentice? And what does the sorcerer think of his apprentice?
- Why does Sticklewick tell Max not to try any spells?
- Why doesn’t Max listen to Tabitha?
- Why do you think the broom takes no notice of Max?
- Which of the spells in Sticklewick’s book would you like to try?
- Do you think this is a good idea?
- Why is Max wondering what it’s like to be a tadpole?
- Is Sticklewick surprised at what’s happened?
- Why does Sticklewick decide to give Max a second chance?

After reading

Ask the class what jobs they’d like to do apprenticeships for. Encourage them to be inventive.

This version of the story is based on a poem by Goethe, but his poem doesn’t have a toad in it. Why do you think Fiona Chandler added one? What other animals might there be in a sorcerer’s workshop? Encourage the class to think up interesting characters, e.g. Bronwen the black cat, Drusilla the dragon.

The Sorcerer’s Apprentice is one of eight animated shorts in the 1940 Disney movie Fantasia, set to the music of Paul Dukas. Mickey Mouse plays the part of the apprentice and there is no dialogue. If you have a copy of the movie, or you can borrow one, you may like to play it to your class at the end of the day or for an end-of-week treat.