

## Reading into Writing

### Brightstorm by Vashti Hardy

We all know that the best writers are readers. They have the bank of ideas, the control over their writing and the flair, which often leaves you feeling you are reading the work of someone much older. However, in order for children to become writers who draw upon their reading, they need to be explicitly taught how to read quality texts. It is not enough to get children to read and hope that osmosis takes care of the rest. After all, you don't suddenly start writing like Tolkien after reading *The Hobbit*! Children need to be taught to identify the writerly tools used to create a particular effect. Furthermore, they need to have the grammatical knowledge to be able to use the tools accurately and an inner writerly judge to analyse and critique the effectiveness of their language choices.



**The Ridge Primary** @RidgePrimary · 29 Jul 2018

This book has everything: explorers, mysteries to solve, a race to win, a world you'll want to visit, magical creatures, personal tragedy and an array of characters to love (and hate). The thought-wolves and Felicity were my favourites!

@vashti\_hardy 🐾

In July 2018, I tweeted about the book *Brightstorm* by Vashti Hardy. It went as follows:

This book has everything: explorers, mysteries to solve, a race to win, a world you'll want to visit, magical creatures, personal tragedy and an array of characters to love (and hate).

When reading a book, I always read as a reader in the first instance (as opposed to a writer) and enjoy the book for what it is. However, I always know when I have come across a part that I want to use to support writing as it packs a punch and stays with me. I'll post it note the page, keep reading, and then return later to unpick the writerly tools that the author has used to achieve a particular effect. I then have a bank of extracts and use them accordingly, depending on what my focus for a unit of work is.

*Brightstorm* has fantastic examples of characterisation, suspense and action which can be used to support the teaching of writing. When choosing extracts, I look for ones which demonstrate a particular writing tool that I want to develop with the children – e.g. how to create a really effective character or setting. It can be tempting to try and fix everything all in one unit, e.g. characterisation, suspense, openings, endings etc. However, rather than do everything and not do it properly, it is important to focus on a key aspect and do it well, pass ownership of it to the children and then see it transferred to their own writing - beyond the one you are currently working on. This is when a long term whole school overview is crucial so that it is clearly mapped who will be doing what and when.

In *Brightstorm*, my favourite creations were the thought-wolves who are introduced to us properly in Chapter 20. Wolves are in many great stories but I loved that Arthur, one of the main characters, could communicate with the wolves through thoughts. It was a fresh and original idea and I could see that the description of the thought-wolves would be fantastic to share with Key Stage 2 classes to inspire them and develop them as writers.

## Context

### The Door.

Marty ran past the bike sheds, round the corner and onto the school allotment. He could just hear the other boys running after him. Blinking back his tears, Marty dashed towards the rickety, allotment shed. He opened the door and stepped in. It seemed like a good place to hide.

At first, he saw the wooden bench with cobwebs dangling down and dust settling. But then.... as the door closed behind him, he found that he was standing in a brightly lit room. High above him yellow parrots flew round stone pillars and on the floor was a scarlet carpet. In front of him stood a boy of about his age, dressed in a long cloak. Wherever he was, Marty knew that was no longer in the allotment shed!

"Quick," yelled the boy, grabbing Marty by the arm. The two of them ran down the great hall and dived under a wooden table. Something was moving towards them. Marty could hear its feet thudding like drumbeats. To his horror, an enormous, green dragon appeared. Its tongue flickered and smoke billowed from its slimy nostrils. "Stare it down," hissed the other boy. "It's a coward!"

A moment later, Marty found himself standing in front of the mighty beast, staring into its eyes. He glared deep into the dragon's gaze with the fierceness and fury of fire but his legs were trembling. However, it only took a few seconds before the dragon blinked, turned and scuttled away. Marty and the boy chased after it, shouting with joy at their triumph.

As Marty dashed through the great hall doorway, he stumbled and found himself.... back on the allotment. The gang was standing right in front of him, still shouting. Marty halted. He stood upright and fixed them with a glare. It was a glare that had only recently halted a dragon. It took a few seconds before the other boys stepped back, turned and ran. Behind them, they could hear Marty laughing....

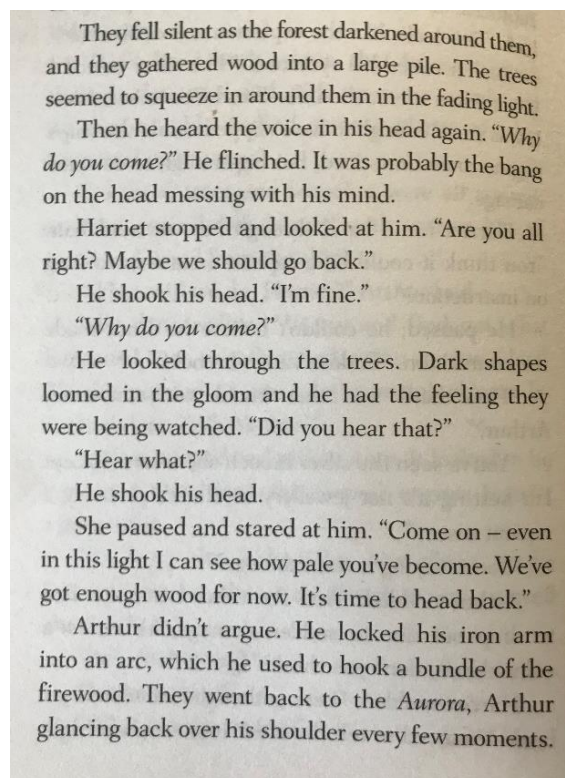
The model that I used as a basis for this unit of work was *The Door* by Pie Corbett. *The Door* was chosen due to the freedom it allowed for. Talk for Writing is used from Nursery through to Year 6 at The Ridge, meaning that by Years 5 and 6, children spend more time raiding their reading to support their writing than learning the model text like other year groups. The whole school overview ensures there is a coverage of story types. These are embedded by Years 5 and 6 so that rather than focusing on one plot structure e.g. rags to riches, children produce stories which are hybrids, e.g. a portal story with a warning at the start and a monster which must be overcome. Confident writers shake hands with the model and very quickly make the decision to wave goodbye to it. Although for less confident writers, the model acts as a skeleton on which to hang their own story.

For this particular unit of work, I combined the hook with the cold task as children had completed a lot of writing previously during invention week, and had recently been involved in writer conference where they were able to meet and chat with either myself or a highly skilled teaching assistant to discuss their writing and their next steps.

## Teaching and Learning

For the hook, I took the class outside to the school shed and they acted out being chased and having to rush inside. I explained that things weren't as they seemed and there was something or someone inside the shed! At that point, we returned to the classroom and children completed an ink waster style activity where they wrote about who or what they had encountered. I made sure to write at the same time so that they could see me doing what writers do – pausing at times, re-reading to check the tune of the text, proof reading, crossing out words (and sometimes whole paragraphs), putting dots underneath great words which were tricky to spell etc. It gets a bit competitive as children are desperate to do a better job than you! However, it's very useful to do as it highlights any potential stumbling blocks that children may encounter. If you as a competent writer find something a challenge, then it is more than likely the children will too!

Next, I revealed the rest of the model to the children so that they could see who Marty had come into contact with. I then set the children the challenge of creating their own creature. Following a brief synopsis of *Brightstorm*, I then shared an extract with them.



They fell silent as the forest darkened around them, and they gathered wood into a large pile. The trees seemed to squeeze in around them in the fading light.

Then he heard the voice in his head again. "Why do you come?" He flinched. It was probably the bang on the head messing with his mind.

Harriet stopped and looked at him. "Are you all right? Maybe we should go back."

He shook his head. "I'm fine."

"Why do you come?"

He looked through the trees. Dark shapes loomed in the gloom and he had the feeling they were being watched. "Did you hear that?"

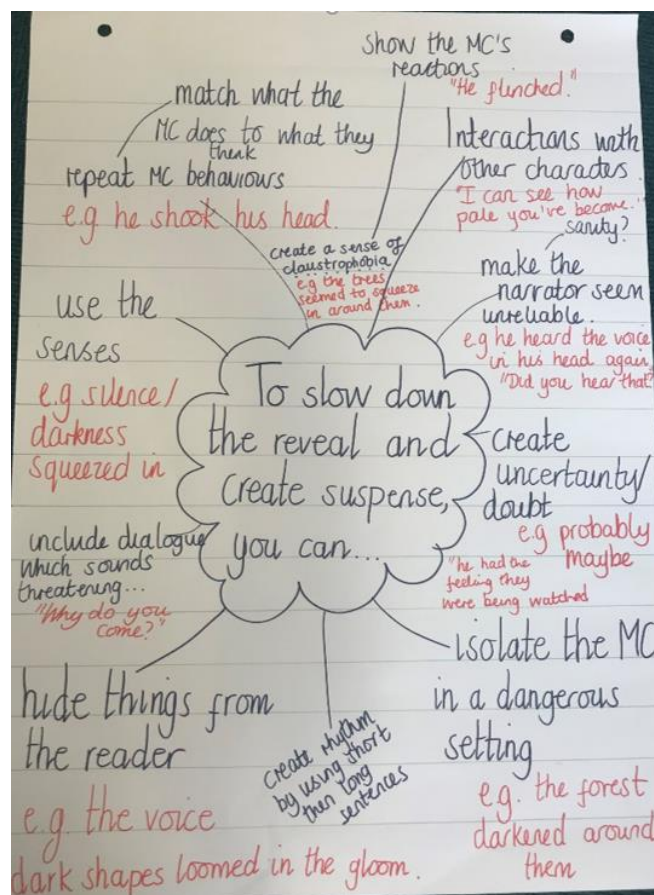
"Hear what?"

He shook his head.

She paused and stared at him. "Come on – even in this light I can see how pale you've become. We've got enough wood for now. It's time to head back."

Arthur didn't argue. He locked his iron arm into an arc, which he used to hook a bundle of the firewood. They went back to the *Aurora*, Arthur glancing back over his shoulder every few moments.

This page was purposely chosen because of the way Vashti Hardy creates suspense and slows down the reveal of the thought-wolves - the children were tending to jump straight in and reveal everything and then finding they had left themselves with very little to explore. I shared the extract with the children line by line. This infuriated them – in a good way! They were desperate to know who or what was out there! The line by line strategy ensured that they were monitoring their own comprehension but were also appreciating the way that the reveal was being slowed down and recognising the impact this had on them as readers. As soon as children had read to the end of the page ...Arthur glancing over his shoulder every few moments...I discussed with the children how Vashti Hardy had achieved this and together we co-constructed the writerly tools they could identify which created suspense.



Once we had established what tools had been used by the author, we used the grammatical names where appropriate. It's not necessary to establish the word class of each word on the page but it is important to give the grammar a context and prepare them for the demands of the end of Key Stage 2 GPS tests. For example, in this extract, the use of the adverbs to indicate possibility, 'It was **probably** the bang on the head...' and '**Maybe** we should go back.' are important to point out as they show the characters' uncertainty.

After co-constructing the tools with the children, I then used shared writing to show children how to transfer these tools to their own writing. In preparation for the shared writing, GPS warm up games and activities were used, based on my AfL and pitched to ensure personal targets and ARE were met. The brief was to slow down the reveal and create suspense. Instead of Arthur from Brightstorm, I used Marty from The Door. The shared writing should be pitched so that it challenges the very highest attaining writers and should be planned in advance so that the teaching is clear. I make sure I know in advance which bits I want to slow down and linger on and which parts I can afford to crack on with. Having said that, it is important to remember to trust the children to have the words and not stick too closely to what you have planned (thanks Kathryn Pennington for those wise words). Equally as important is the need to film yourself, reflect and refine accordingly. If you aren't modelling writing you aren't teaching writing (you wouldn't teach long division without ever modelling it!) so it is incredibly important to get it right!



Inside the shed, the darkness was suffocating. Something was wrong.

"What's going on? What's happened to the light?" Maudie breathed.

It was more than just a lack of light ~~in~~ that was troubling Marty; the temperature in the room seemed to have dropped suddenly, and he could feel cold clawing at his insides. There was a whistling coming from somewhere, or was it a whisper? Marty couldn't tell. He shook his head and tried opening his eyes wider.

Marty felt Maudie trembling beside him. As his eyes grew accustomed to the light, he could see how pale she was.

"Come on, Maudie," Marty urged. "Let's get out of here."

He glanced over his shoulder and headed in the direction of where he knew the door should be. He couldn't help feeling that they weren't alone in there.

Then he saw it: shadows moving towards them, twisting and writhing their way through the gloom. Marty gulped. He could have sworn that the shadows had faces. ~~He~~ He shook his head and opened his eyes wider. The faces were

gone. It was probably just his eyes playing tricks on him.

He reached the door, pushed the handle and slammed it shut behind them before the shadows had chance to chase after them.

This was followed up immediately by the children writing independently. They went back to their cold/ink waster tasks and edited and improved those pieces of work using the Brightstorm extract and the associated tools they had acquired from it. In order to test out the effectiveness of their writing, children worked with a learning partner, put one book on top of the other and then read as a reader considering questions such as:

How does it sound when read aloud?

What am I picturing in my head when reading it?

What do I like and dislike? Is there anything that puzzles me?

What effect is this having on me as a reader?

Then, using the toolkit for guidance, children read again but as writers, discussing the tools and techniques that were used. The co-construction of the toolkit gave them a structure to discuss their own writing. Any changes or revisions were decided upon by the child whose work was being looked at.

Joe was in a dimly lit cellar with a flickering lightbulb hanging from the cracked ceiling. The room was large and had massive scratch marks on the concrete floor. It stunk of oil and decomposed flesh - he nearly gagged on the stench. Everything was silent. Then, he heard a slow whirring sound coming from behind him. He froze. Slowly, he turned around. In front of him was pitch-black darkness where the weak glow of the lightbulb didn't reach.

Whirr! The sound came again and it was right in front of him this time. He gulped. Then, with a clank and a screech, something came out of the darkness.

Now with the build up to the reveal addressed, it was time to share another extract from Brightstorm, this time where the thought-wolves are revealed.

In Arthur's haste to chase the *Victorious*, he'd forgotten about the darkness within the forest.

"It's the beasts," he breathed.

Judging by the height of the eyes, the creatures were enormous: much taller than a person.

"Don't make any sudden movements," Harriet said. Emerald eyes shone in every direction. They were surrounded.

Then Arthur's head buzzed as though a wave of electricity passed through him, and he felt the creature in his thoughts, probing, testing, demanding. Inside his mind were powerful feelings

The creature's lupine face stared down at him, its snout curled with a fierce snarl and its hackles raised. "Do you fear?" Its great shoulders tensed as it seemed to wait for his reply.

Arthur's whole body trembled, but he forced himself to stare back – Dad would have faced it head-on. If this was his end and it was to be the same as Dad, then he should at least try to be as brave as his father would have been. Terrible scenes raced through his head as he imagined these terrible creatures killing Dad and the crew.

The great wolf's head tilted, and then came the feeling inside his head again. Words trying to form. He didn't want it there.

"Fear, you fear," the words said inside him. Perhaps his terror was sending him mad!

"Stop!" he blurted, shaking his head.

"Arthur, don't provoke it!" Harriet urged beside him.

"Look," the voice in his head said. The claws dug into his chest.

"Just kill us and be done with it!" Arthur urged, and squeezed his eyes shut.

Once I was confident that children had achieved comprehension of this particular extract, we began looking at it as a writer. Again, we co-constructed the tools that had been used to create the characters. Children then began to plan their own creatures.

I then used shared writing again to model how to use the tools we had raided from Brightstorm to our own writing. Children followed this up immediately by writing independently.

Again, comprehension was the first priority. Children used the Aidan Chambers' Book Talk headings as a basis for discussion. We always start with likes and dislikes then move on to puzzles and patterns and connections. However, over time, and very much led by the children, we use point of view when referring to likes and dislikes as it reminds everyone to consider the point of view of the author – what do they think? What do they want the reader to think? We have also tagged possibilities to puzzles so that when puzzles are raised children are challenged to consider possible answers to their puzzles. Dependent on the discussion, children might also talk about 'Picture' which is a bit of a catch all. In regards to picture we discuss with children what they are picturing in their head but also use picture as in, what is the big theme/idea/message? Book Talk is used from Nursery to Year 6 so the quality of Book Talk at upper Key Stage 2 is very good and a joy to observe.

Following Book Talk, dependent on AfL, I will either complete some Isabel Beck style vocabulary work (I may have done this before the Book Talk too) and will use active comprehension approaches to deepen understanding. I also give either specific domain or mixed domain sets of questions, dependent on my focus in reading. These may be oral or written but are an organic way of using the language of the SATs tests in lessons. If there are children who struggle with word reading, they will have some extra sessions, which focus on developing fluency of the extract.

Then they heard it: low growling. He listened hard. The noise came. "Did you hear that?" he whispered. She nodded, her face was drained of all of colour. "It's them," he trembled.

Judging by the size of its eyes, the creature was bigger than a person. Three red eyes appeared in the gloom. The growling started again. The creature jumped onto Tom and Emily. One face was in Tom's, another in Emily's whilst the final head was watching them both.

"What is that?" she asked.

He answered, in a hushed tone, "Three headed dog don't move."

Emily started to shake. Tom ignored her. He was trying to stare the triple head down. It was no use. He looked away. The dog pulled him back. Its great white looked like they were about to rip him apart. Something dripped on Emily's ashen face. It was crimson and stained her cheek: blood. She squirmed and looked at her brother. He stared back. The two siblings shared the same thin thought: this is the end. Tom spoke up, "Put us out of our misery. Just kill us already."



Spoiler alert: the thought-wolves are not baddies, totally the opposite in fact! I didn't share this with children until after they had created and written about their own creatures. On reflection, I will share this with future classes as I really like the way Vashti Hardy lulls you into thinking that the main characters were in danger and played on the stereotypes of wolves before actually turning things around and making them heroes – another magpieable idea that can be taken from Brightstorm. I think it would really challenge writers who are able to confidently move away from the model text and have a different ending to their stories: a fake baddy that the reader thinks the main characters have to overcome but in actual fact challenges stereotypes and helps them overcome the real baddies, would be a great tool to add to their writing repertoire!

### **On reflection...**

This work was produced by my Year 5 class last year and as soon as the unit was completed, Brightstorm went into the class library and was always out on loan. It worked really well and demonstrated clear progress, which was transferred to other units of work. It was a pleasure to read the writing they produced.

I would still use the same extracts with other Key Stage 2 classes but would be aware of the potential need to spend longer lingering on the text by planning in more drama and vocabulary work to ensure children have achieved comprehension of the extract before unpicking the writing tools. Unless children fully understand what they have read, the tools will not be understood, and therefore owned by the children and won't be applied to their writing.

The children whose work is included in this article are in Year 6 now. As a result of being exposed to quality texts such as Brightstorm in both reading and writing lessons, they are a class of readers and are adept at identifying extracts from the books they are reading independently, which they can then raid and use in their own writing. In fact, their Year 6 teacher now tells them the focus (most recently they have done suspense and action because they can have more than one toolkit focus now) and alongside the extracts she shares with them, sets them the task of finding their own with the best ones being shared with the class as a whole. The use of quality texts to supplement and support a Talk for Writing unit of work has resulted in truly independent writers who draw upon their reading and have a clear idea in their head of what they want to achieve with their writing and how they can do it.

### **What next?**

In the story, we find out that the wolves have had contact with Eudora Vain (the villainess of the piece). However, we don't get to read those scenes. Therefore, children could write an extra chapter for the story where the wolves and Eudora Vain meet. Similarly, children could write the chapter again but instead switch and write from the wolves' perspectives rather than the children's. Maybe, inspired by Fox Girl and the White Gazelle, get children to split this section up so that it switches between the wolves and children's perspectives. Children could also look at how wolves are depicted in other stories and compare these to the thought-wolves. Use the Wolves of Willoughby Chase, Eye of the Wolf, Wolves in the Walls or even get them listening to Peter and the Wolf.

In regards to non-fiction writing, the obvious choice would be to write an information text about wolves – check out The Ways of the Wolf by Smriti Prasadam-Halls. However, they could also write about famous expeditions, design and write about their own sky-ship, write the newspaper report about the expedition or write biographies about famous explorers. With a quality book like Brightstorm, the ideas for how to use it to inspire and support writing are endless!

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