

Is Plastic Fantastic?



Introduction:

Most children and adults use and see plastic every day. It has become part of our daily life. But plastic causes lots of problems for life on earth and it is having a significant impact on our planet.

Through discussion and creative writing, this Talk for Writing English unit aims to build children's understanding of the problems with plastic so they start to think about what they can do to stop plastic damaging our world.

We recommend letting the children's parents know that you are focusing on the problems with plastic to help build their support for what you are doing.

By the end of the unit, the pupils should:

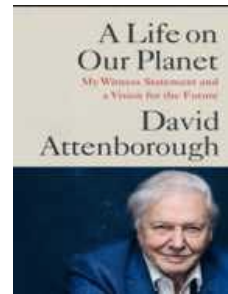
- **know that** plastic is a manmade material which is now everywhere in our homes and all environments around the world and most of it is not biodegradable
- **be able to explain** why plastic needs to be reduced, reused and recycled including having an increased understanding of the problems plastic can cause to wildlife in local environments and the wider world
- **be able to write creatively** expressing the impact that plastic pollution can have on our planet.



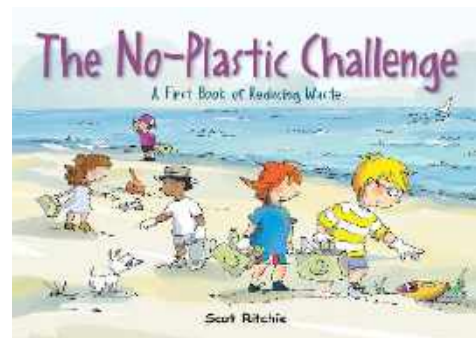
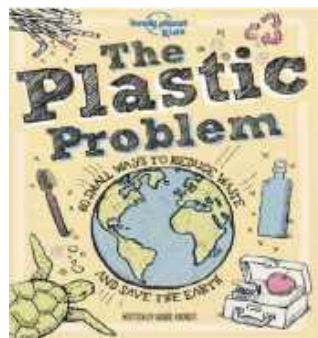
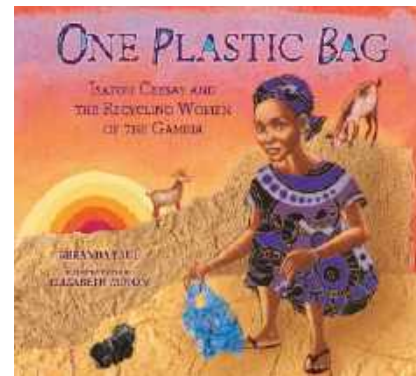
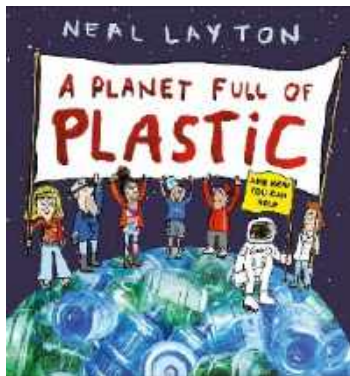
Reading recommendations to support the unit



A Life on Our Planet – My Witness Statement and Vision for the Future written by David Attenborough is the inspiration for this unit. There are several short quotations from this book in this unit accompanied by traffic lights to help get the children talking about the significance of what he is saying.



Additional texts to support the unit



Useful websites:

Plastic Pollution:

- <https://www.kidsagainstplastic.co.uk/learn/>
- <https://encounteredu.com/steam-activities/plastic-bin-weigh-in>
- *Ducks Overboard* a short video by Christiane Dorion (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fjxLIMF2Fq0>)

To generate ideas to repurpose and reuse plastic:

- <https://www.countryliving.com/uk/create/craft/a19861275/how-to-recycle-plastic-alternative-creative-ways/>

To support with acquiring knowledge (children):

- <https://www.natgeokids.com/uk/kids-club/cool-kids/general-kids-club/plastic-pollution/>
- BBC Blue Planet II <https://www.bbc.co.uk/>

Cold task 1:

"We live our comfortable lives in the shadow of a disaster of our own making. That disaster is being brought about by the very things that allow us to live our comfortable lives."

- David Attenborough



Read the quotation to the children and ask them to discuss the question below. Act as facilitator (as opposed to the fount of all knowledge) so that the children discuss the question together and make their own decisions.

1. What disaster do you think he is trying to warn us about?

If the children do not relate the statement to plastic pollution or climate change, leave the discussion open at whatever point they get to and tell them that this quotation will be returned to at the end of the unit.

Cold task 2:

Ask the children to think of something that is very precious to them, for example their teddy bear, and ask them to describe it so the reader understands how precious it is. Discuss the things the children may want to describe so they have an idea of what they want to write about but don't help them with how to write it.

Use this writing to help establish what descriptive writing features to focus on within the unit.

Hook ideas to grab the children's interest

- Before reading *Planet Full of Plastic* by Neal Layton with the class, ask the children to **think of all the plastic things there are in their homes and in the school** and flipchart these and build a display of plastic objects. Ask the children, '*Why is plastic so popular?*'
- Now read *Planet Full of Plastic* to the children to give them the background knowledge they need to be able to understand why plastic is a problem. It introduces some of the key concepts and vocabulary with fantastic pictures to support children's understanding. Here are some questions to help the children discuss what they are reading in pairs before feeding



back to the whole class. You might want to flipchart the key conclusions and display them to support later discussion:

- What is the problem with plastic?
- What is plastic useful for?
- What is the different between plastic and natural materials?
- How could we reduce plastic pollution?
- Do you think plastic is fantastic?
- Can you explain our keyword **biodegrade** using the pictures on pages 9 and 10?

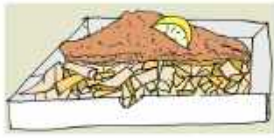
Vocabulary

When using a short powerful text like this or the website examples above, it's often a good idea to read it to the children then ask them to identify any words that need explaining, possibly getting children to discuss them in pairs. You can then create a bank of words and challenge the children to become familiar with them by the end of the unit. A good way of helping them do this is to have planned in advance which words they will need help with so you can provide a child-friendly alternative using the Isabel Beck technique as explained below.



For example, if you selected the word *biodegradable*, tell the children that, **biodegradable** means something that decays naturally. Then spin that round: If something decays naturally, it is ... and pause for the children to say **biodegradable**.

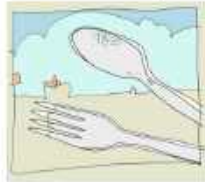
Do this a few times and then ask the children to come up with other sentences with **biodegradable** in them. You might want to break the word down into its parts and ask them for other words including **bio** and ask them to work out what **bio** means. Hopefully, someone will suggest *life*. If they use new vocabulary like this across the unit in a range of contexts, they will internalise all the new words.



Plastic tray for fish and chips



Plastic straw and drink holder



Plastic fork and spoon



Plastic sweet wrapper

Take a trip out to your local area to somewhere that you know suffers from plastic pollution and **go on a plastic pollution hunt**. This will help the children understand why plastic is such a problem because they will be able to see, recognise and identify it in their local environment. You might want to use the simple checklist on the next page to note down what you found.

Be on the lookout for single use plastic like all the plastic pictured above. These are known as problem plastics because they are designed to be used only once and they are not **biodegradable**.

Following your plastic pollution hunt, ask the children these questions:

- How do problem plastics end up in the local area?
- How much of that comes from our households?

Ask the children to complete a problem plastic hunt at home and they could do the same at school – it’s important to recognise that we are all guilty of adding to the problems that pollution is causing around the world. You may want to ask them to use a grid like the one here to record their findings. This is a useful website to support this activity.

What plastic things did you find?	Where did you find them?	How many times did you see it?

<https://encounteredu.com/steam-activities/plastic-bin-weig>

Is plastic fantastic?

Following your plastic outing, read the children this quotation from David Attenborough:

"The natural world is fading. The evidence is all around."



Ask the children:

- Have you seen any evidence of this on your walk in your local area?
- In what ways could the natural world fade?



Flipchart the children's responses so that you can refer them later and explain that they are now going to investigate this question further.



Warming-up activities



Explore the question, **"Is plastic fantastic?"**

Make a list of why plastics are useful to humans on one side of the table and on the other side make a list of why plastic (especially problem plastics) can be disastrous for the environment.

The first one has been done for you.

Fantastic Plastic (Why is plastic useful?)	Problems Plastics (Why are problem plastics disastrous?)
<p><i>Plastic bottles are great for carrying water.</i></p> <p><i>Drinking water hydrates us and helps us stay healthy.</i></p>	<p><i>Plastic bottles are single use plastics.</i></p> <p><i>If not recycled correctly, they contribute to litter and take up to 1000 years to rot away.</i></p>

Observational short-burst writing

Short-burst writing is a great way to get children thinking about what they saw in their own environments and how they felt about it.



Display pictures of plastic pollution. This activity is most effective if you replace pictures like these with pictures of litter in the area your school is in.



Ask the children to select up to five key features to focus on and list them down your flipchart/whiteboard because these will form the spine of the writing, as illustrated below. Begin the writing by establishing the mood, in this case a negative mood, as this will determine every word selected. Then create the writing by collecting ideas from the class and honing the effect of the description, through illustrating specific writing tools.



When collecting ideas, flipchart them and ensure the children are making a note of all the ideas in their magpie books (little notebooks where children jot down words and phrases) so they have lots of ideas when they come to write their own version, using all the writing tools you have exemplified. Keep push-pushing for just the right word so that the children automatically follow the same process when writing themselves. Try out a range of alternative words and use this as a chance to extend the children's vocabulary, for example **rampant**, so they know that this is something that is out of control and spreads rapidly.

During the shared writing, keep reading the writing aloud to demonstrate how a writer regularly reads their work through and edits ideas until they achieve just the effect they want.

Plastic World

Overfilled bins spill decayed food onto pathways.

A wash of multi-coloured plastic smothers the river.

Curdled litter spreads streets like a decayed jigsaw.

Prentice Park is a landfill leaving wildlife perplexed.

Developing the creative writing toolkit

Here you can see that I was focusing on embedding the following descriptive writing tools to strengthen the children's ability to really look at something and help the reader picture what they are describing. Co-construct the toolkit with the children so they understand the different tools.



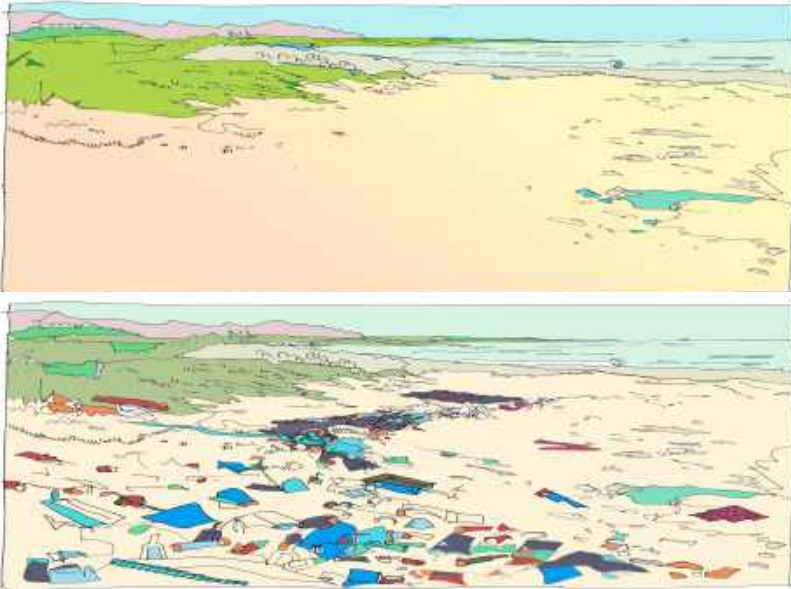
- **Make every word count** in this case by ensuring each word contributes to the negative mood of this text: *Overfilled bins spill out ...*
- Include a **touch of alliteration** to create the right atmosphere: *spreads streets*
- **Add in a simile** to help the reader picture the way plastic pollution is spreading by making comparisons: *like a decayed jigsaw*
- **Name it:** naming a particular place or species makes writing come alive: *Prentice Park*

When the children write their own version, ask them to show that they can use all the descriptive writing tools that you illustrated in the shared writing. Give them 10 minutes for really focused writing and then display some of the most successful work on screen. Ask the authors to talk about the effects they were trying to create before opening the discussion about what works and why.



Extend observational skills by getting the children drawing

Extend the children's interest in their environment by asking them to draw and possibly label a picture of what a polluted area near them could look like without plastic pollution. Beaches that are facing the prevailing wind often look like the second image above because plastic debris from hundreds of miles around washes up on the beach.



This key question could be used to support children:

- If plastic pollution didn't exist, what would this area look like? Visualise the same scene but as a perfect environment for people and wildlife to thrive in.

Now challenge the children to write an alternative descriptive poem of the same place in its flourishing state. Alternately, you could use the two illustrations above to help them do this.

Ask the children to share their writing with their families so all of us start thinking more about the perils of plastic.



The imitation stage

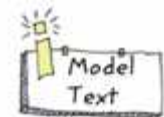
Now they have warmed up their writing skills about the perils of plastic, challenge the children to help protect our world from such problems through their writing skills. Create a display of their short-burst writing and discuss with them the power of what they have written and how we can use this to help people think about the problems plastic causes.

You might want to ask them to discuss this: **How could our writing have the potential to evoke emotions in other people and help them take an interest in being more careful about how they use plastic?**



The model text below is an example of how to create a line poem (a poem where each verse begins with the same phrase) about the Jekyll and Hyde characteristics of plastic which is both useful and disastrous.

Living in a Plastic World



Is plastic fantastic?

Plastic bottles for my refreshing drinks,
How else could I have a drink on the go?
Plastic bags to carry my swanky trainers,
How else would I protect my trainers from the rain?
Living in a plastic world, it's fantastic!

Is plastic fantastic?

Rustling in the wind, I spotted shimmering crisp packets.
Do we enjoy these unintentional kites?
Scattered in the grass, partly buried in soil,
I saw crumpled plastic bottles.
Do we enjoy littered parks and paths?
Living in a plastic world, is it fantastic?

Is plastic fantastic?

Pulsing through the oceans' currents, a blue plastic bag,
Could this be a rare jellyfish - a turtle's delicacy?
Suffocating, indigestible plastic. Is this what you want?
Drifting on the surface, a disused fishing net,
Tangled, trapped unable to carry on. Is this fair?
Dying in a plastic world. Do you really think it's fantastic?



Warming up the vocabulary

Warming up the vocabulary will always be a priority. Without the key words, the children won't be able to talk their way to understanding. It's a good idea to read the text then ask them to identify any words that need explaining.

You can then create a bank of words and challenge the children to become familiar with them by the end of the unit. Below are some activities to build understanding.

What do the words mean?

Below are some simple definitions and examples in context that you could introduce using the Isabel Beck technique as explained on page 4.

Word	Simple definition	Word in similar context
refreshing	to bring back energy	The drink is refreshing and restores energy if you are tired.
swanky	something fashionable, luxurious and showy	He likes wearing something swanky and showy so people will notice him.
spotted	1. covered in spots 2. see or notice something	2. He spotted his friend in the crowd.
unintentional	to do something accidentally	The crisp packets just happen to look like kites so it is unintentional .
littered	a mess of waste or other objects scattered about	The paths and parks are littered with plastic waste all over the place.
pulsing	a movement with a regular beat	The plastic bag was moving like a jellyfish pulsing in the ocean
delicacy	something delightful or rare (often used to describe food)	Turtles see jellyfish as a delicacy – a rare treat to eat.
suffocating	not being able to breathe	The turtle was suffocating because it could not breathe.
indigestible	Something that cannot be eaten easily Digestible is something that can be eaten easily The prefix <i>in</i> means <i>not</i>	The plastic bag is completely indigestible so the turtle will not be able to eat it.

Draw images to represent words

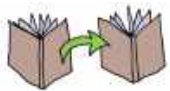
Once the children have been introduced to the words, ask them to visualise what they mean when reading the poem and draw an image to help them remember the meaning of each word.

Recall the meaning

Provide the children with choices as in the two example sentences below and ask them to discuss which simple definition is right in the context of the poem:

1. Does *spotted* in the poem mean 'a pattern made of dots on something' or 'to see something'?
2. Does *indigestible* mean 'to swallow something' or 'to not be able to break food down'?

Challenge them to use some of the words in sentences of their own.



Reading the text as a reader

Once the children have internalised the text and understood the vocabulary, they should all be able to read it because they are familiar with the words:

Now, act again as a facilitator to enable the children to discuss the meaning of the text. It is largely irrelevant what is in the teacher's head when comprehending texts. What is important is that the children have the opportunity to talk about the text and ask and answer questions in pairs (and together as a class) so that they build their understanding. You may want to ask these questions:

1. What reasons has the writer given for plastic being fantastic?
2. What problems could plastic cause for humans?
3. What problems could plastic cause for animals in the ocean?
4. Do you think the writer thinks living in a plastic world is fantastic?

Once the children have developed their understanding of the poem ask questions about the audience and purpose of the poem:

1. Why do you think the writer has used questions throughout the poem?
2. What is the theme of each verse (stanza) and why do you think the writer changes the theme for each verse?
3. What is the difference between how the writer makes the reader feel at the start of the poem and at the end of the poem?
4. What do you think the writer's purpose was when writing this poem?



Bringing the text alive through drama

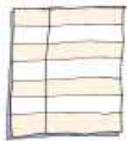
When the children have understood the text, explore it further through drama. Here are a few suggestions for what you could do:

- **Debate:** Should we continue to use plastic products? Give arguments for and against.
- **Conscience alley or Teacher in role:** Take the perspective of all the different people who are affected by this issue, for example, the owners of companies who make plastic products, the owners of shops who sell plastic, people old and young who buy things, wildlife.
- **Hot seating:** Explain if you would be happier in a world that no longer uses plastic or a world which still uses it (children should be able to balance their response based on their knowledge of why plastic is useful and when it can be a problem).



Reading as a writer

Boxing up the structure



The first thing to do when helping the children think about how to write any text is to help them understand how the model text is structured. Boxing up is a great way to do this because all the children have to do is create a grid and fill in each left-hand section with the headings that sum up the structure of the text. Since this is a line poem, each verse begins with the same words but the following content is very different. If the children are not familiar with boxing up text, then co-construct the boxing up with the class getting the children to suggest what to put in the left-hand boxes. With a bit of help, they will probably come up with ideas like those listed below.

Bare bones of each verse	Key content
Positive aspects of plastic for me	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A few ways I like using plastic
Negative aspects of plastic when I look around me	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence of the problem it is causing to the environment
How plastic litter damages wildlife	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The effect of plastic rubbish on one turtle

Then make notes on the right-hand side to cover the key content. Keep this brief and in bullet point form because the whole idea is that this is a short plan for what to write not a first draft of the actual writing as illustrated here. The children will probably come up with ideas like those above.

Establishing the toolkit

Now you've worked out the structure of the content of the model text, now is the time to co-construct a toolkit of the sort of writing tools that have been used. For example,



To make writing powerful you could:

- Use lots of questions to draw the reader in and make a direct appeal: **Is plastic fantastic? Is this what you want? Is this fair?**
- Repeat question stems for effect to draw the reader's attention: **How else ...? Do we ...?**
- Use the emotive language of advertising to show how plastic is associated with the good life: **refreshing drinks, on the go, fantastic**
- Select words carefully to build the range of emotions you want: **swanky, crumpled, pulsing**
- Include unusual images to draw the reader's attention: **unintentional kites**
- Play on words to draw out meaning: **Living in a plastic world ... Dying in a plastic world.**



The innovation stage

Help the children innovate on the ideas in the model text by building a bank of ideas to support children writing their own poem. Revisit the purpose and audience for their written piece. Discuss what is it that they want to achieve from their own poems: what impact they want on their audience. Then flipchart up the main points, for example:

To make everyone rethink how they use plastic.



Then revisit the short-burst writing and demonstrate how you can use ideas from there within your longer poem.

Some of the activities below provide further support

- Revisit a *Planet Full of Plastic* and ask the children to be on the lookout for ideas they could use in their writing. There are also YouTube clips of the text being read aloud and the pictures can be used as starting point for discussions. Encourage everyone to join in and make notes of useful ideas in their magpie books alongside banking ideas on flipchart paper and displaying them.



- You might want to revisit the questions you asked when you first read it (see page 3) and see how the children's responses have developed.

Another way to generate ideas is to use short video clips or pictures. Below are some suggested clips.

- BBC interview with Sir David Attenborough
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p08sq5w2>
- Blue Planet II Plastic Pollution Awareness 2018
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLx4fVsYdTI>
- CBBC Newsround – What's the problem with plastic?
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/42810179>

Once you have created a bank of ideas for the children to write about, model how to use these ideas to write a poem. Begin by using your boxed-up plan (see page 13) and jot down ideas for the opening verse. Then shared write the verse magpieing ideas from the short-burst writing and getting the children to provide lots of other ideas. Push, push for the most effective ways of expressing them.

Explain your thought process when writing so the children understand the thoughts in your head as you pick and choose what to write. Reread and discuss the impact you want to achieve on the audience.



Independent application - the Hot task

Now it's time for pupils to write their own poems about *Living in a Plastic World*. Get them to plan their poem by jotting down bullet points in their 3-part, boxed-up plan and then start writing. Once the planning is over, get them to write in concentrated silence for about 10 minutes and encourage them to keep rereading their work and edit their poems by thinking about the impact of their words on the reader.

Once the poems have been written choose some work to share as an example on a visualiser. Everybody can celebrate the power of the writing and perhaps suggests ways it could be improved. Alternatively, children could work in pairs or groups of 3 to read and suggest improvements. Provide a little more time for everyone to consider how they could make their poem more powerful.

Reflection on Learning



Return to **Cold task 2**:

Ask the children to look at their descriptive writing at the beginning of the unit and the poem they have just written. Hopefully, they will see the progress they are making in being able to write powerfully about something they care about.

Return to **Cold task 1**:

"We live our comfortable lives in the shadow of a disaster of our own making. That disaster is being bought about by the very things that allow us to live our comfortable lives."

- David Attenborough



Reread the quotation to the children and ask them to discuss the question below again in pairs and reflect on any differences between their first response and their final response before feeding back to the whole class. Facilitate the discussion so the class decides how they are interpreting the statement now.

1. What disaster do you think he is trying to warn us about?



Flipchart the children's final conclusions make and compare them with how they initially felt.

Return to the word bank that you have developed across the unit and check that the children are now confident users of these words.



Finally, ask the children to discuss what they can do to reduce the amount of plastic that they and their families use and flipchart all their ideas.



Publishing their work

Discuss with the children how they can publish their writing about the perils of plastic to a wider audience. For example, they could:

- record readings of their work for the school's social media
- publish the writing and drawings on their school websites/display screens or create a display on a corridor
- make a short film of their local area with a voice-over to share with parents
- read their work aloud to a different year group, in assembly or to parents.





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Unit teaching content written by Anita Chahal (Heath Mount Primary School, Birmingham – a Talk for Writing school)

Unit guidance written by Julia Strong

Edited and designed by Julia Strong

Prepared for online distribution by Nick Batty

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