



Rivers of Life



Introduction

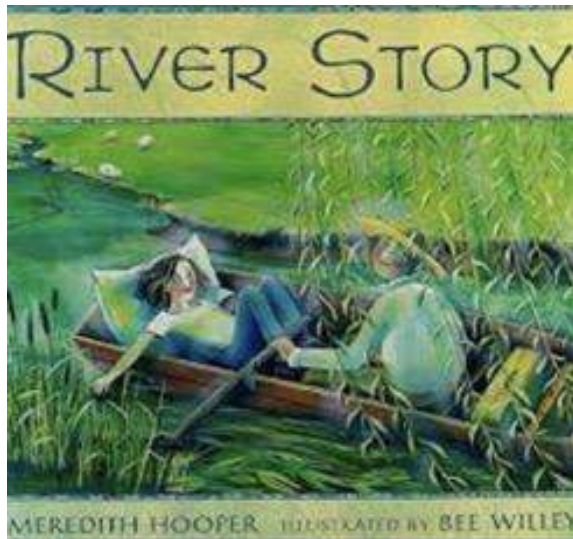
Many children are aware that rivers exist but few will have knowledge of the beauty of a river near them or the famous rivers of the world, let alone how essential rivers are to life on our planet. A key purpose of the unit will be to build children's understanding of how interesting, beautiful and essential rivers are so that they can write about them effectively. It is also hoped that they will want to seek them out within their locality and help to create a world that looks after rivers and the plants, trees and creatures that reside near them.

By the end of this Talk for Writing English unit the pupils should:

- **know that** rivers provide an important habitat for many of earth's organisms and are essential to life on this planet
- **have an increased interest in discovering rivers** in their area and across the world
- **be able to explain** simply why rivers are important to the development of the Earth
- **develop their descriptive and information writing skills** including having an awareness of their reader and knowing how to select the key tools to use plus the appropriate vocabulary to make the information or description effective.



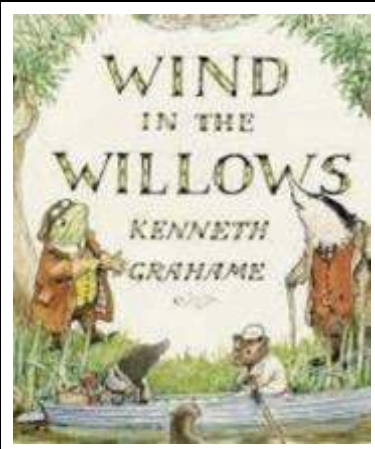
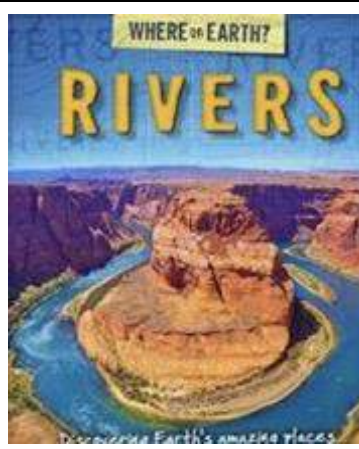
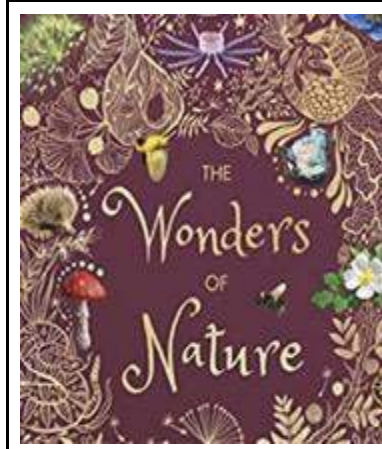
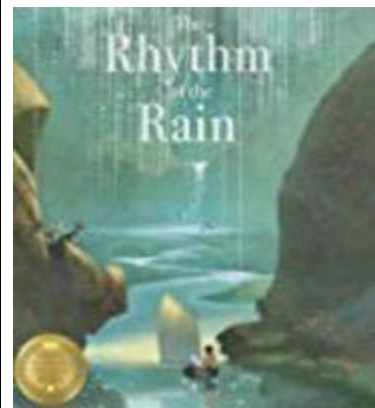
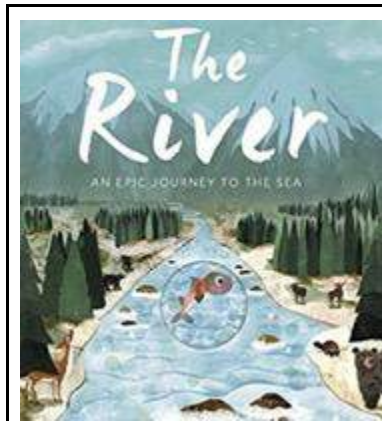
Reading & website recommendations



Key text:

"It begins no bigger than your hand, high in the mountains. Downhill it races, on and on through fields, into the city. Finally, at the edge of the land, it ends. Follow the twists and turns of a river's story, from its source to the sea." – River Story by Meredith Hooper

Additional reads to support the unit



Suggested websites:

- <https://www.wwf.org.uk/updates/why-are-rivers-so-important-and-what-are-we-doing-protect-them>
- <https://www.3dgeography.co.uk/river-facts>
- [https://www.rgs.org/schools/teaching-resources/rivers-\(1\)/](https://www.rgs.org/schools/teaching-resources/rivers-(1)/)

Cold task 1

Ask the children to jot down their answer to **Why do rivers matter?** Use this as a baseline to assess what the children already know about rivers.

Then mind map with the children everything they already know about rivers and why they matter.

<https://www.wwf.org.uk/updates/why-are-rivers-so-important-and-what-are-we-doing-protect-them> is a good website to support this discussion.

Cold task 2

Activate children's prior knowledge of information text (sometimes called non-chronological report). Ask the children to write an information text about a topic they have recently studied or have a focus that is generic and well-known to them such as 'Our school'. Use this as a baseline to assess what the children already know about how to write effective information text.



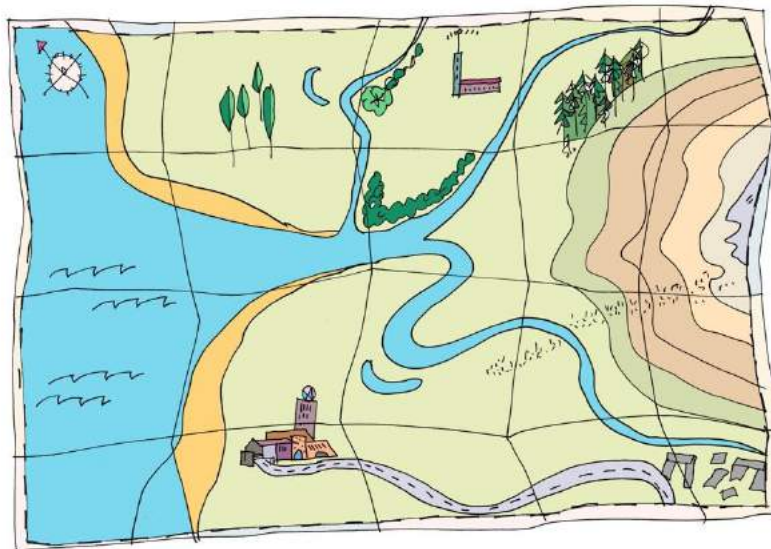
Hook ideas to grab the children's interest

Read *River Story* by Meredith Hooper or extracts from *Wind in the willows* by Kenneth Grahame. In *River Story* focus on the first page:

"Thousands of rivers help to shape the surface of our planet. They bring water and life to the land and all that use it. Icy-cold racing rivers, slow muddy wide rivers, long rivers, small rivers, rivers underground. Each river is different. Each river makes its own exciting mysterious journey. Join us on this one."

What do children think will happen on the journey? What creatures will they meet? Where will the river go?

- Visit a local river.
 - Brainstorm ideas around the senses and use the children's ideas to write a list poem on return to school.
 - What habitats do they spot around the river? Describe these habitats and who they think lives there.
 - Is it looked after? Is it kept clean and tidy or does it have litter scattered everywhere? Design a poster or write a persuasive letter to the council encouraging people to take care of the environment.
 - Encourage the children to draw the river and the habitats near it – or to take photographs that they can use later in the unit.



- Watch video clips of different rivers:
<https://www.pexels.com/search/videos/river/>



Warming-up activities

Understanding the geographical vocabulary in this unit will be imperative. Vocabulary should be identified prior to teaching as well as allowing the children to RAG the vocabulary. RAGging the vocabulary allows the children to confidently discuss

- any words they have never heard of before (Red)
- words that are familiar but they are unsure of the meaning (Amber)
- and words they are confident with (Green).

Any vocabulary discussed should be displayed, with a particular focus on teaching the definition and use of any **Red** and **Amber** words.

The model text can be used as a starting point to identify vocabulary. Read the model text to the children. Whilst listening, ask children to note any words that they are not familiar with. RAG the vocabulary and make this visible for the children. Use this process, based on work by Wayne Tennant and Isabel Beck, to teach new vocabulary.

Select words that are essential to the meaning of the text that the children probably haven't come across before and which are not helped by their context. Focus on those that will be used regularly.

Introduce each word by saying the word and giving it a child-friendly definition. For example, if you selected the word *source*, tell the children that when it's spelt like this (indicate its spelling and show them the spelling of the edible variety – sauce),
source means where something comes from.

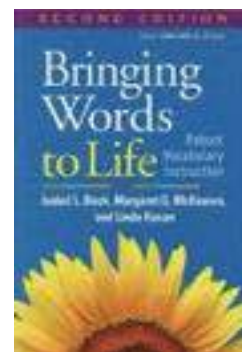
Then spin that round: *Where something comes from means ...* and pause for the children to say *source*.

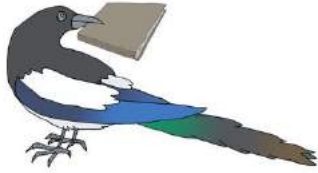
Do this a few times and then ask the children to come up with other sentences with *source* in them.

Explore its origin, any common word parts and word family.

Consolidate: if they use all the new vocabulary like this across the unit in a range of contexts, they will internalise all the new words.

The work of Isabel Beck, *Bringing Words to Life* is a great source for activities to help support the teaching of vocabulary. Drip feed vocabulary activities such as: Would you rather ...? , Have you ever ...? choices; one context for all the words; jeopardy; 3 words into a sentence or vocabulary laboratory. Vocabulary activities such as *Never Heard the Word Grid* and sorting games in *Talk for Writing across the Curriculum* also support the teaching of vocabulary.





Encourage the children to add new words that they like to their magpie books so they develop a real interest in words.

Role play encourages the children to articulate their knowledge and practise using important conjunctions and topic sentences in their work. For example:

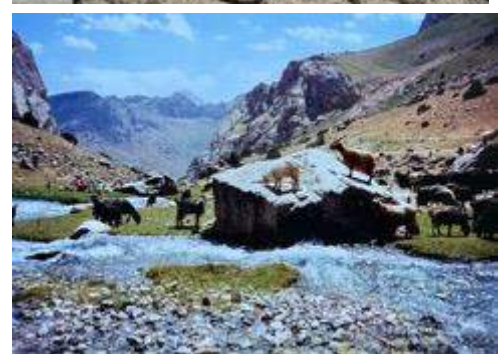
- Hot seat, interview or hold TV news bulletins about rivers. Provide conjunctions, generalisers and technical vocabulary that the children should try to use.
- Be an expert on rivers on a radio 'phone in'
- Create a mini blog on a river-related subject



Short-burst writing



In order for children to appreciate the importance of rivers, they also need to recognise and appreciate the beauty of them and their surrounding habitats. This is a good moment to use short-burst descriptive writing as a chance to revisit and embed specific descriptive writing tools that you have taught in an earlier unit. On page 8 is an example of a list poem that would ideally have been generated during a visit to a river (or if there isn't a river in your local environment then use video clips or images like the ones on the next page – all of these are downloadable from talk4writing.com/rivers). The idea behind the poem is to list what the children can see, hear and smell during their visit. It is important, at this stage, to generate as much vocabulary as possible and then to judge which words will earn their place in the poem. Flip chart all the vocabulary ideas to provide the children with a powerful word bank when they write their own versions.



Images of rivers from UK (top 3), Turkey (next 4), Iceland (2), Peru (1) Tajikistan (2) & Mongolia (final 1)

Example of one class's list poem

In the river of beauty:

*the sun's light illuminates rainbow depths,
clusters of trees lean, tickling the water's surface,
pied wagtails hide amongst shaded reeds,
ripples of water cascade over glistening rocks,
silver minnows dart, as sunlight flickers a warning,
water weeds bleed across the river's skin; predators lurk below.*

Once the children have developed their list poem, they can use these ideas to write a paragraph to describe the setting of the river. During this time, they will be embedding the tools that they have previously learnt about how to create a setting including:



- *Selecting the mood of the poem so that every word counts to build the atmosphere as it develops*
- *Bringing the setting to life by personifying nature*
- *Using unusual play on words to surprise the reader*
- *Using alliteration and internal rhyme to develop the mood*
- *Ending on a note of suspense*

The ideas in the poem might then turn into a piece of prose using a simple formula like the colour-coded example below to scaffold children who need it. The formula is explained beneath the poem.

Dreamily, Sarah gazed at the river. Rays of sunlight pierced through the cluster of trees that leant across, almost tickling the surface. Amongst the shaded reeds, pied wagtails hid. The river rippled, cascading over the glistening rocks. Silver minnows darted as sunlight flickered. At that moment, a cloud smothered the sun, darkening the river. Somebody or something screeched. What was it? Spinning round, Sarah gasped.

Formula for key writing tools:

- **Introduce a character and show the reader how they are feeling and what they can see.**
- **Include ideas from the list poem**
- **Use a dramatic adverbial, change the weather to change the mood and let your character hear a sound**
- **Use a rhetorical question and character reaction to create tension within the setting.**



Another idea to support creative writing, focusing on the beauty of rivers, is to encourage the children to use **sentences of 3** when describing. Following your visit to a river, flipchart all the ways the children felt when they were there and what they saw/heard. Then shared write the

ideas in the following format:

- what you can see
- what you can hear.

The third verse allows the children to experiment with changing the weather to change the mood in the setting before ending on a positive affirmation of the beauty of the river.

Feel the magic of the river ...

Maybe you'll see the sun's rays kiss the clouds, water weeds cling to the slippery surface or the lady of the stream darting along gravel beds.

Feel the magic of the river ...

Maybe you'll hear the ripples of water cascading peacefully, the call of a kingfisher or the splash of children's laughter in the stream.

Feel the magic of the river ...

Even if the fog suffocates the sun, even if the rain thunders, even if nothing happens.

At least you can feel the magic of the river,

When the children write their own version, following the shared writing, ask them to show that they can use all the descriptive writing tools that you illustrated together in the shared writing.





The imitation stage

Internalising the tune of the model text

For those of you who are familiar with the TfW approach, you will know that the best way to help children have the words and phrases that they need to talk and write in the mode of the model text is for them to internalise the text from a text map before seeing it in written form. If you are not familiar with this, but want to know how to do it, then look at this film of Pie Corbett explaining it: www.youtube.com/embed/p_NI2jD-5Es or buy *Creating Storytellers and Writers* from www.talkforwritingshop.com/product-page/creating-storytellers-and-writers-38-online-video-clips.



The model text is an information text about the Amazon River – possibly, the most amazing river in the world.

Before imitating the model text, you may also want to show the children some images of the Amazon, courtesy of Pexels or Unsplash, plus this drawing of the Amazon basin in South America. The river's tributaries flow from the Andes on the west coast right across the continent to reach the Atlantic Ocean – a journey of nearly 3000 miles.

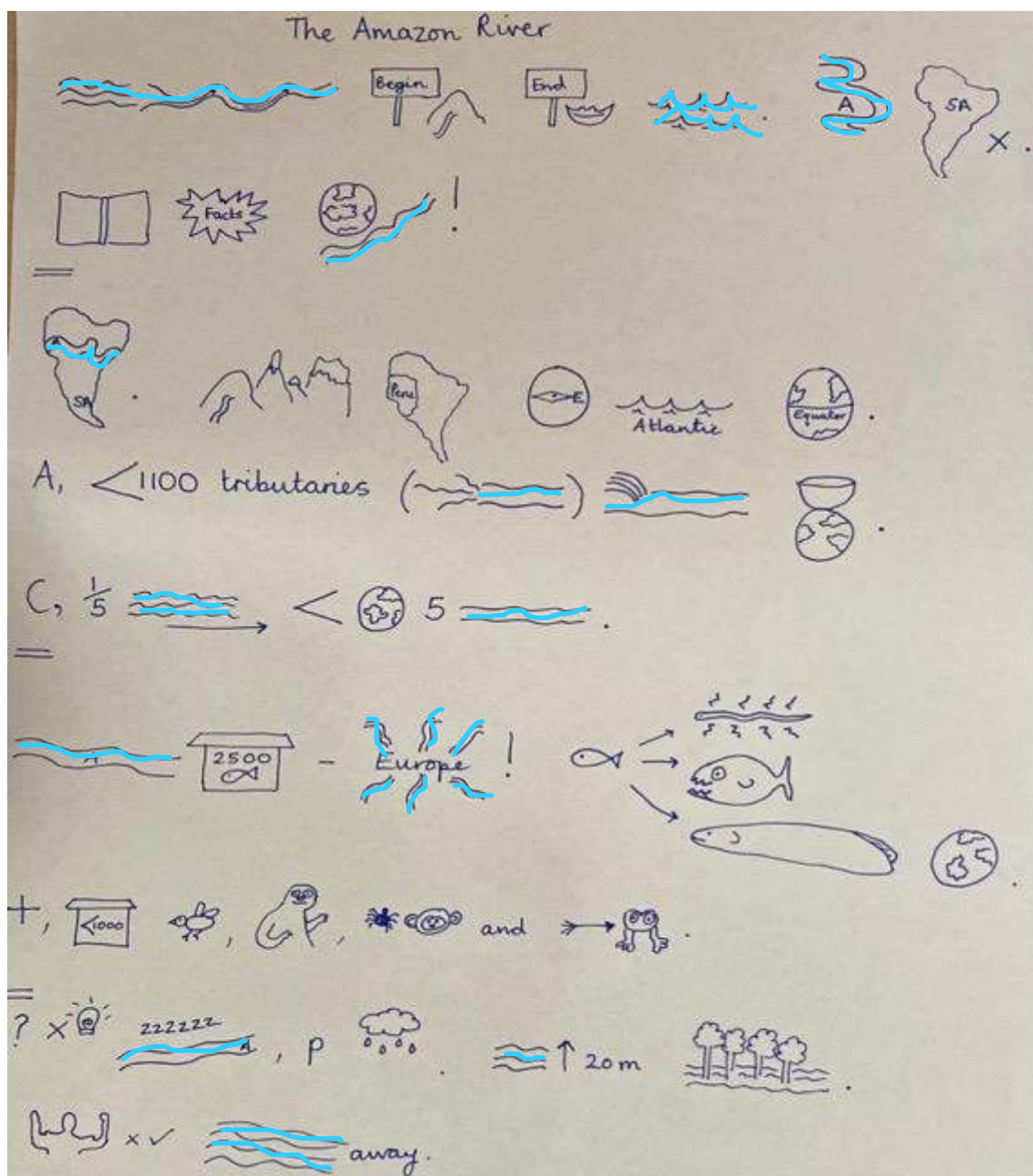
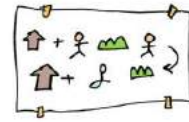


This video gives a fascinating insight into the river in 3 minutes:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUQhNYfzdDE>

A simple text map like the one below, plus related actions to help children remember the text, will be key to internalising the language patterns of this information model text.

To help learn the text orally, children should draw their own text maps using the class text map to help them. They should have multiple opportunities to retell the text. This can be chanted as a class, retold as a pair/trio, held as a race to see who can say it the quickest, said sentence by sentence in pairs or prepared to be presented to children in another class. This will help them internalise the language patterns and structure of the text.





Reading the model text as a reader

Once the children have internalised the model text, now is the time to show them the text, which they should all be able to read because they are familiar with the words:



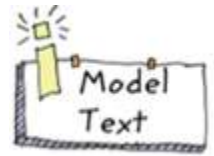
The Amazon River

All rivers follow a similar journey, beginning at their source and ending at their mouth, or delta, where they reach the sea or the ocean. The Amazon River, in South America, is no exception. Read on to discover fascinating facts about the largest river in the world!

The Amazon river is located in South America. The river's source is the Andes Mountains in Peru from where it flows eastwards before reaching the Atlantic Ocean, close to the equator. Amazingly, more than 1,100 tributaries (smaller rivers or streams that join another river) pour into the Amazon and together constitute the biggest river basin on Earth. Consequently, a fifth of all river water rushes along it; this is more than the Earth's next five biggest rivers combined!

This vast river basin has created a rainforest with an estimated 390 billion trees of 16,000 different species! The Amazon is home to at least 2,500 different types of fish - more than all of Europe's rivers put together! These fish include electric eels, razor toothed piranhas and the pirarucu, one of the largest freshwater fish in the world. Additionally, its rainforest is also home to more than a thousand different species of birds, sloths, black spider monkeys and poison dart frogs. It is the most biodiverse region in the world.

Did you know, it is a bad idea to snooze on the banks of the Amazon, particularly in the rainy season? The river rises by up to 20 metres and floods vast stretches of the forest. There is a strong possibility you would be washed away!



The first thing to do when reading as a reader will be to check the children's understanding. Read through the information about the Amazon with the children and get them to identify any words they are uncertain of. Use the technique outlined on pages 5-6 to begin to embed any words the children have identified.

Next, act as facilitator (as opposed to the fount of all knowledge) and ask the children to discuss a range of open questions. 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 discuss what it means. The work of Aidan Chambers on *Tell-Me grids* is one technique that can be used during this section. For example:

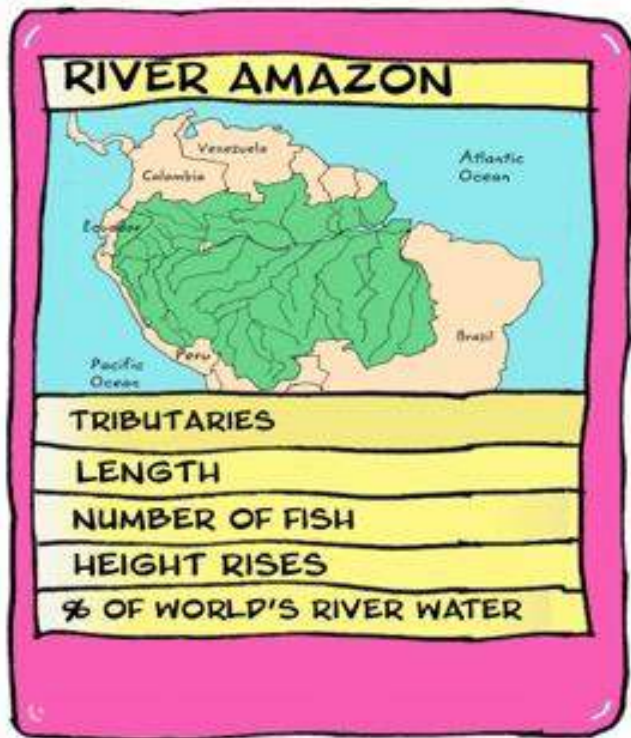


Surprises – What information in the text surprised you?	Interest – What interested you about the text?
Questions – What questions do you have about the content?	Bias – Is the text biased?

Further understanding

To develop their understanding, you might want to show similar content but present it in different ways. This will exemplify that information can be presented in a range of ways: encourage the children to evaluate which one is the most effective and why. This also helps make the link between the reader and the writer explicit as it will enable them to understand why the layout is important and how they will choose to present their information.

Internalising the model text and learning the language and structure patterns enables the children to imitate the style of information writing as well as helping them recall key facts. They can then express what they have learnt coherently. In this instance, an example could be to produce a fact file or top trump card based on their knowledge of *River Story*.



The River Story - Fact file

Where does the river start?

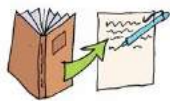
The river featured in this story has its source in the snow of the mountains. The snow melts to form a small stream.

What journey does it take?

The stream forms a waterfall if it descends rapidly and then meets another stream called a tributary to make it a faster flowing river. During its journey, the river races down

narrow valleys wearing away the land, swirls under bridges and, eventually, grows wider forming flood plains. Intriguingly, as it widens, it slows down - meandering its way through the meadows. Next, the river flows through a city that was created on its banks before it reaches the edge of the land and joins the sea.

This type of writing allows the children to choose which tools to use when writing information. In the above example, we have practised how to use questions to engage the reader and technical vocabulary to make the information clear to the reader.

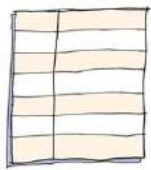


Reading as a writer

The first thing to do when helping the children think about how to write any text is to help them understand how it 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 section on the left-hand side with the headings that sum up the structure of the text. If the children are not familiar with doing this, the boxing up should be co-constructed with the class in front of them (preferably on a flipchart with the model text on screen so that the children can see how the model has been written). This will help them identify the bare bones of the underpinning structure. They can then use a similar structure to write their own information.



Exemplify the boxing up with examples from the model text. 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.



Boxing up the structure of information text on geographical features

Underlying bare bones for each paragraph	Exemplification from model text
Introduce topic to reader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • River Amazon
How is it formed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • source = Andes Mountains • mouth = Atlantic Ocean. • 1,100 tributaries
What lives there	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 390 billion trees • 2,500 types of fish • over 1000 species other creatures
Conclusion – make a final point/amazing fact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rises by up to 20m in rainy season



Once the children have understood how to plan the writing, co-construct with them the key writing tools the writer has used to write effective information. With fiction writing, there is a wide range of possible tools to choose from. With non-fiction writing it is much more a case of providing some key tools that have to be used along with some choices, as illustrated by the Fact File above. Always provide examples from the model text to help the children understand the features, as illustrated below.

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The information writing toolkit

To report information you can:

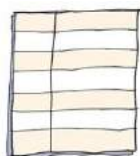


- Use a **topic sentence** to let the reader know what each paragraph is about: *The Amazon river is located in South America ... The Amazon is home to at least 2,500 different types of fish ...*
- Keep your reader hooked with interesting facts: *Amazingly, more than 1,100 tributaries ...*
- Sound like an expert by providing detail or definitions: *smaller rivers or streams that join another river*
- Use **sentence signposts** to add information: *Additionally, ... Consequently,* and to keep the reader engaged: *Amazingly, ...*
- Use **generalisers** to sum up: *all, more than, biggest, largest,*
- Use the **present tense** to inform the reader: *All rivers follow a similar journey ... The Amazon is home to ...*
- End with an amazing or unexpected fact to leave the reader thinking: *Did you know, it is a bad idea to snooze on the banks of the Amazon, ...*



The innovation stage

Now the children have internalised the model text, comprehended it and analysed its structure and key writing ingredients, they can now innovate on what they've learnt and write information about a different river.



First, help them see how to plan their new information. Return to the boxed-up structure on your flipchart and, with the children's help, fill in the planner for a new report. Obviously, it makes most sense to choose a river that is close to your school. For the example below, we chose to write about a river near our school in the local area of Droxford called the River Meon. This report was a result of the initial 'hook' visit to Droxford. During this visit, children made notes for their creative writing as well as studying habitats along the river, collecting items of interest and then researching facts of interest on their return to school.

Underlying bare bones for each paragraph	Exemplification from model text	Plan for information about a different river
Introduce topic to reader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • River Amazon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • River Meon – tranquil village of East Meon in Hampshire • – chalk stream
How is it formed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • source = Andes Mountains • mouth = Atlantic Ocean. 1,100 • tributaries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location: 21 miles through Meon Valley • Source – East Meon, flows in southerly direction
What lives there	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 390 billion trees • 2,500 types of fish • over 1000 species other creatures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • supports a range of different creatures e.g. water crowfoot, brown trout, kingfishers, otters • reed beds at Titchfield Haven.
Conclusion – make a final point/ amazing fact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rises by up to 20m in rainy season 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • renowned for fly fishing particularly at Meon Springs: brown & rainbow trout



Help the children to talk the text so that they take part in applying the information. Help them to talk like experts on the River Meon in role as Professor Know-it-all. Then shared write the text so they can see the writing process in action and understand how a writer makes decisions. Remember to keep reading the shared writing aloud so the children learn to read their work through and correct it as they go.

Independent application - The **Hot task**



As the unit progressed, children would have had the opportunity to research and learn about the wonders of rivers all around the world. Their independent task should be based on a river of their choice. First, flipchart up knowledge that they have gained on different rivers such as The Nile, The Yangtze, The Mississippi or The Congo. Discuss with the children the structure and the tools they can use to be a successful writer of information. Give the children the opportunity to plan their report using the boxed-up plan and retell this to a peer before writing their report. Encourage them to do this in Professor-know-it-all mode to help them think about how they will express themselves as experts who can inform others clearly.

Once their report is complete, ask the children to share it with a partner and self-assess. Start by asking whether it informs clearly and interestingly and then check it against the information toolkit to see which tools were chosen and whether it would benefit from using some of the tools not used. At this point, children can independently edit their work and put the final touches to their hot task.



Reflection on Learning

It's a good idea to go back to the cold task and get the children to compare the report that they wrote at the start of the unit with the report that they wrote at the end (the hot task). Hopefully, they will be able to see a significant improvement in their work.

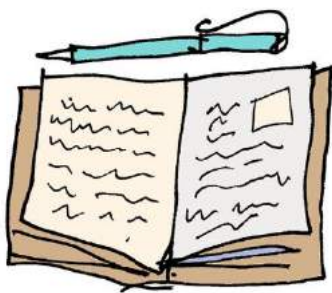
You might also want to return to the question you asked at the beginning: Why do rivers matter? Ask them to write down how they would answer that question now. Get them to reflect in pairs on any differences between their first response and their final response before feeding back to the whole class.

You may want to flipchart up the key points the children make when answering the question and compare them with how they initially felt.



Return to the word bank that you have developed across the unit, and which the children have added to their magpie books, and check that the children are confident users of these words.

Publishing their work



Children should have the opportunity to publish their work. This will give them a true audience and purpose for their writing. In this instance, children could create their own book on rivers which could be published for the school library, public library or for parents, and of course, it will make an excellent display board on the importance of rivers with pictures of the children's trip to the local river and their poems about the local river.



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