



## Love the Natural World



### Introduction

This Talk for Writing English unit focuses on introducing children to the wonders of the nocturnal natural world. It lends itself to a wide range of writing focuses to help embed the writing skills that children have already begun to develop while also demonstrating additional skills. The emphasis is on effective creative writing including looking at engaging ways of changing the traditional story structure, alongside possibilities for persuasive or discursive talk and writing.

**By the end of the unit the pupils should:**

- **know that the natural world is full of activity at night**
- **be able to explain about some aspects of the natural world** in their area, with an emphasis on why these habitats are interesting and need to be protected
- **be able to write effectively about the natural world** using a wide range of descriptive writing tools
- **be able to experiment with different story structures** and discuss their effectiveness.

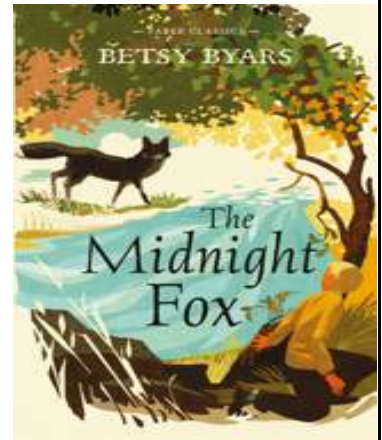


## Reading & website recommendations

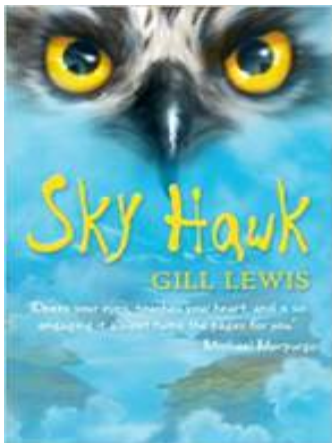
### Suggested core book:

"And then, this afternoon, Uncle Fred said to me, 'You and I'll go after the fox'."

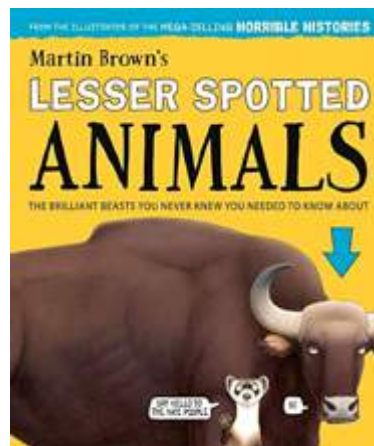
The thought of having to stay at his Aunt Millie's farm when his parents were away had depressed Tom. The reality of it was as horrible as he had feared until he came across a coal-coloured, green-eyed fox with her cubs in the nearby forest. Life immediately became full of interest and adventure - an adventure that was suddenly shattered when his Uncle Fred told him that they should hunt the fox. How could Tom save the fox and her cubs?



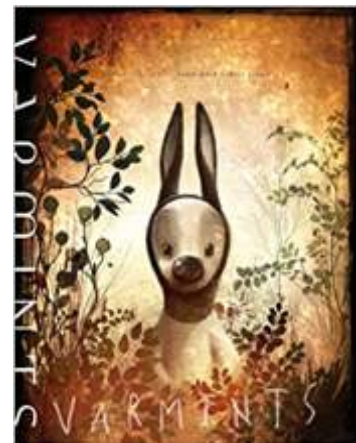
### Supplementary/alternative reads:



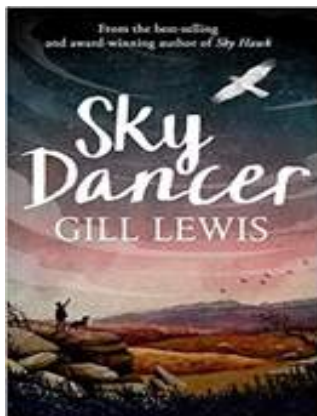
Novel



Non-fiction picture book



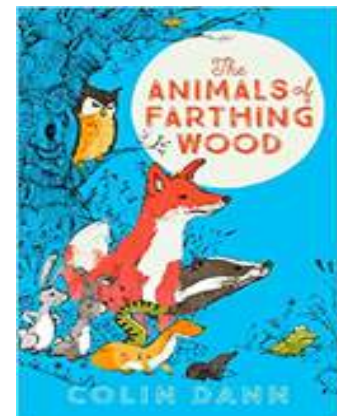
Thought-provoking picture book



Novel



Novel



Novel

## Cold task

Provide a close-up picture of the nocturnal animal you plan to focus on. Discuss the image with the class to warm it up, without giving any hints about the writing tools they might use to describe it powerfully, and then give the children five minutes to describe it in as engaging a way as they can.

When you read through their work, make notes to establish which descriptive writing features will most need strengthening within this unit, alongside any individual writing targets that will need focusing on.



## Hook ideas to grab the children's interest

A creative hook engages the children, acts as a memorable experience and often allows opportunities to warm up the tune of the text.

Here are some hooks for this unit:

- set up a webcam to catch nocturnal animals in action on the school grounds
- search for signs of nocturnal habitation in the school grounds or a local wildlife area. Take the children on a walk and help them know how to look for such signs (see next page)
- visit an RSPCA centre or receive a talk from a nocturnal animal specialist
- show this YouTube video clip of a family of badgers at night:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tJq6KVTfgWo>
- use this Badger Trust website & surveys:  
<http://www.badger.org.uk/content/home.asp>

## Searching for signs

Whichever nocturnal animal you have focused on, arm yourself with the signs to look out for. If your school is in a city area, the chances are there will be lots of foxes as this picture of a fox sleeping peacefully on my shed roof in Brixton, London illustrates. In Brixton, you can see foxes every night and in the daytime too.



I live in the countryside now, so I don't ever see a fox! Badgers like sloping land as that makes it much easier to dig the tunnels that form the setts where they live. There's lots of wooded hills here, so I went in search of images to show signs of badgers. At first sight, this might look like a very narrow pathway but it is a badger track. Because badgers are stout with short legs, their bodies clear neat, little pathways that can often be seen in woods, especially on sloping land.



Help the children see whatever signs the creatures you are focusing on leave so that they learn how to read the landscape, just as they learn how to read a book. The more you help introduce them to nature, to what flourishes where and why, the more interested they will become in

nature. The more things they start to notice, the more they will care about it – and you will have added a life-long interest to their lives.

## Warming-up activities

### Vocabulary

Warming up the key vocabulary of any unit will always be a priority. Without the key words, the children won't be able to talk their way to understanding, let alone write down their ideas coherently.

When writing, adapting or selecting your model texts, it's important to include words that will stretch the children's vocabulary. If you decide which words need introducing before they read the model, 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 most help with so you can provide a child-friendly alternative. For example, in the narrative model text below, *nurture* is harder than *pulp* because it is easier to guess the meaning of *pulp* from the context. *Vengeful* might be another word to focus on as well because the children will *probably* know what *revenge* means but may not have come across *vengeful* before, so it's a good way of extending their understanding. You might want to use this tried and tested routine where you tell the children what a word means:



*Nurture* means to look after and help to grow

Then spin that round: If someone is looking after something and helping it grow, it is being ... and pause for the children to say *nurtured*.

Do this a few times and then ask the children to come up with other sentences with *nurture/nurtured* in them. Introduce the fact that there are a range of words related to this. It can be used as a noun as in *nature not nurture* – where it refers to how someone has been brought up. Its roots go back to Latin where *nutritus* meant to feed or nourish. It's easy to see how this has led to the words *nutrients* and *nutritious*. If they use all the new vocabulary like this across the unit in a range of contexts, they will internalise all the new words.

Display the words you are focusing on to remind yourself and the children to use these words.



## Observational short-burst writing



Given that the key writing focus for this unit is descriptive writing, this would be a good moment to use short-burst descriptive writing as a chance to revisit and embed specific descriptive writing tools that the children have been taught in earlier units and that you want to develop in this unit.

Preferably following a visit or search for signs of habitation (perhaps on the school grounds as suggested in the hooks section above), focus in on a particular aspect. Ideally, take a photo of this to bring back into the classroom like the ones here of fox footprints in the snow at Sandgate School, Folkestone.



The ideas below relate to these pictures but it will be most effective if you use a picture the children can relate to and adapt the questions to suit your picture. In this example, the animal is no longer present so the description will rely on the children's thoughts based on the image. Begin with **questions to deepen understanding and encourage speculation** so you build up the possibilities for what could be described and then turn these into short-burst writing. For example you could ask:

- What can you see?
- What difference does the snow make?
- How do you think the creature felt?
- How do you think the creature moved?
- What does the image remind you of?
- Why does the single track suddenly result in circles?
- What puzzles are there – what do you want to know more about?



Once the children's thoughts have been warmed up by the discussion, begin the short-burst writing which you have drafted in advance so you are clear about the overall features you want to focus on. Begin by asking the children what atmosphere they are trying to create. They have to decide this before they can start to suggest which words to use because effective word choice relies on the context.

The writing should be developed by collecting ideas from the class and honing the effect of the description to illustrate the specific writing tools you want to exemplify – the ones used here are listed below. When collecting ideas, flip-chart them and ensure the children are making a note of all the ideas in their magpie books (personal notebooks where children jot down words and phrases) so they are full of ideas when they come to write their own version.



These pictures raise many possibilities so the children should have lots of ideas about how they want to write their own versions. 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.

Snow reveals the night visitor's tracks,  
Secret routes punctuate a path  
like raisins on an iced cake.  
Its single track transforms  
into a fraught circle,  
intersects the trail of another night visitor  
a frantic encounter,  
a frenzied moment  
As if dancing to a tune that only they could hear,  
Before returning to the dark.



### Focus on specific writing tools

The art of teaching writing rests on helping children develop a wide range of writing tools so they can select the tools they need to create the effect they want. Here you can see that I was focusing on embedding the following four descriptive writing tools to strengthen the children's ability to really look at something, imagine the scene that had led to the image and help the reader picture what they are describing:

- Decide on the atmosphere/mood you want to create and make every word count by selecting each word carefully.
- Add in a simile to help the reader picture the scene by making comparisons and extending them.
- Use tentative suggestions to engage the reader's interest and keep the interpretation open.
- Explore the sounds of words and their effect including alliteration.



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 10-15 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 up the discussion about what works and why.

### Embed understanding of natural habitats & different types of writing

This is a great opportunity to decide which types of writing the children need to practise more to strengthen their writing skills, alongside building their understanding of protecting natural habitats. Here are two suggestions linked to a real-life context:

#### **Badger sett could scupper £13m school plan for 900 pupils**

<https://www.leicestermercury.co.uk/news/leicester-news/badger-sett-could-scupper-13m-484115>

Read this article with the children and draw out their understanding of the problems it raises. You could then ask them to remind you of the key tools they will need to persuade or discuss this issue and co-construct a toolkit to help them tackle whichever writing task below you have chosen to focus on.



Depending on the needs of your class, shared write an example, revisiting the appropriate writing toolkit before asking the class to write their own version.

- Write a persuasive letter to the intended builders of this school, explaining why the school should or should not be built.
- Write a discussion piece weighing up the arguments on whether animal habitats such as these should be moved or 'closed down' to make room for a new school.

### Draw images of the environment

Extend the children's interest in natural habitats and the importance of closely observing things by getting them to draw any local habitat and, perhaps, labelling it with the animals, plants, trees, birds or insects that live there.





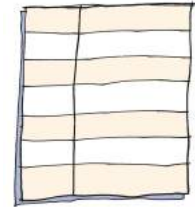
## Imitation stage (innovated from *The Midnight Fox*)

### Moving away from the traditional story structure

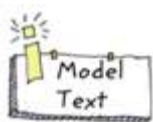
The traditional story structure of **opening; build up; problem; resolution; ending** can be very abstract for children. To make this more meaningful, Talk for Writing augments the approach by providing story patterns for the key story types. These are available in *Creating Storytellers and Writers* (<https://www.talkforwritingshop.com/product-page/creating-storytellers-and-writers-38-online-video-clips>)

For this unit, we are using the typical meeting-story pattern

- Opening: main character (MC) hears/sees something unusual
- Back story
- MC meets someone/something (friend/enemy?)
- MC helps/interacts with/defeats new character
- Ending: MC remembers meeting



The purpose of this creative writing activity is to help the children be adventurous and realise that once you are familiar with typical story patterns you can experiment by innovating on the structure. For example, you could begin with a flashback that flips the traditional structure so the end becomes the beginning.

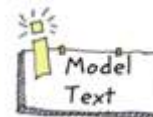


First, provide the children in pairs with the five sections of this model story text cut up on separate cards and ask them to sort it into the standard order below.

Once they have finished, display the story in this order on screen:

- Opening: MC hears something unusual
- Backstory
- MC meets enemy
- MC helps enemy
- Ending: MC remembers meeting





When that first low growl came from the edge of the garden, I thought I'd imagined it. Had I nodded off? No, definitely not. There it was again, louder this time. Before I really knew what was happening, I found myself creeping down the garden, stick at the ready.

And that's where I saw him: two big black eyes glinted as a long head turned towards me, that single white stripe almost seeming to sparkle in the darkness.

---

Enough was enough. For a whole month, I'd tried my very best to nurture the little vegetable patch at the bottom of the garden, only to come out most mornings to find the onions upturned, the lettuce half-buried and the tomatoes squashed to a pulp. It had to be a fox; I was sure of it. Either that or a particularly vengeful ghost with an aversion to vegetables.

And that was why I found myself sat out there one night, late into the darkest hours, with a big stick clenched angrily in one hand.

---

Even in the gloom, it wasn't difficult to see that one clawed foot was planted squarely in the middle of what had been my last good tomato, but it wasn't really that that caught my attention. Rather, it was his back foot, stretched out at a weird angle and caught, unmistakably, in the wire fence I'd installed just a week before.

I should have been happy, really. But I wasn't.

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Instead, I found myself trampling across the vegetable patch, all over my prized lettuces and half-grown marrows. I slipped the end of my stick between one clawed foot and the fence, and then levered it gently out.

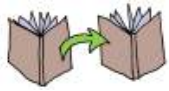
He looked at me with those big black eyes.

And then he was gone.

---

I still see those eyes staring back at me. His eyes. Solemn, understanding eyes. Just before he disappeared into the undergrowth for the final time, white stripe glinting in the moonlight.

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## Reading the text as a reader

Read the text in this standard order to the class and ask the children a range of questions like the ones below. The teacher should act as facilitator (as opposed to the fount of all knowledge) so that the children discuss the questions together and talk their way to understanding.



- Are there any parts of the story that are puzzling? (The class discusses whatever points are raised.)
- What evidence is there that the animal eating the vegetables was a badger?
- Tell me why the writer had set off one night carrying a heavy stick.
- Tell me why he helped the badger.
- Tell me why the writer says that sometimes he still sees the eyes staring at him.
- Tell me which lines/phrases you thought were the most effective and why.
- Are there any lines that don't quite fit because the story was not actually written in this structure?

Now that they have fully understood the story, ask them to flip the story and rearrange it into this order – which is the order it was actually written in:

- **Ending: MC remembers the meeting**
- **Backstory**
- **Opening: MC hears something unusual**
- **MC meets enemy**
- **MC helps 'enemy'**



Display the story in this order (including the structure headings) on screen so everyone can see what is being discussed.

[Ending: MC remembers the meeting]

I still see those eyes staring back at me. His eyes. Solemn, understanding eyes. Just before he disappeared into the undergrowth for the final time, white stripe glinting in the moonlight.

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[Backstory]

Enough was enough. For a whole month, I'd tried my very best to nurture the little vegetable patch at the bottom of the garden, only to come out most mornings to find the onions upturned, the lettuce half-buried and the tomatoes squashed to a pulp. It had to be a fox; I was sure of it. Either that or a particularly vengeful ghost with an aversion to vegetables.

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[Opening: MC hears something unusual]

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---

[MC meets enemy]

Even in the gloom, it wasn't difficult to see that one clawed foot was planted squarely in the middle of what had been my last good tomato, but it wasn't really that that caught my attention. Rather, it was his back foot, stretched out at a weird angle and caught, unmistakably, in the wire fence I'd installed just a week before.

I should have been happy, really. But I wasn't.

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[MC helps 'enemy']

Instead, I found myself trampling across the vegetable patch, all over my prized lettuces and half-grown marrows. I slipped the end of my stick between one clawed foot and the fence, and then levered it gently out.

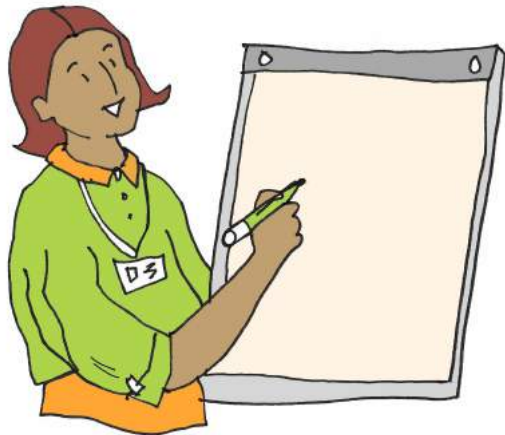
He looked at me with those big black eyes.

And then he was gone.

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## Discussing the flipped order

Read it aloud to the class in this new order (the order the story was actually written in) and ask them, in pairs, to discuss whether the traditional order or this flipped order is better. They must be prepared to give reasons to support their opinion.



Ask one pair to present their ideas and then facilitate the discussion so the class shares their views on what works better and why, and doesn't rely on you, the teacher, to provide all the answers. Flipchart their conclusions.

Now get the children to think about whether the story would work if they changed the order of the paragraphs in any other way. Ask them to try to rearrange the sections into a different order and see if that would work. Remind them to be prepared to justify their view by providing evidence for why this could or could not work.

Allow a few minutes for this activity and then ask the children to present their findings and see if they can agree as a class. Help the children to express their ideas coherently by providing them with sentence stems, for example:

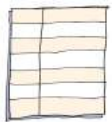
- I don't think any other order is possible because ...
- I think it could work if you ... because ...
- I think it works really well if ...
- I don't agree with x because ...
- I'm not certain but I'm wondering if ...
- If you changed the wording slightly so that instead of ... it said ..., then ...
- The trouble with that is ...





## The innovation stage

Display the class's initial short-burst writing and discuss with them how it could be extended into a short story in standard structure. Discuss various ideas and talk the text prior to the shared writing so the class can find out what works by hearing the text.



## Planning the new story

Here is one example of the structure of a story based on the short-burst writing

Bare bones of each section	Plan for new story based on earlier shared writing
<i>Opening: MC searching for something</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MC (fox) out looking for prey on snowy night</li> </ul>
<i>Backstory</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe hunger and hopes for catching some prey</li> </ul>
<i>MC meets someone</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sees the most beautiful bird it has ever seen</li> </ul>
<i>MC engages with 'enemy'</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dances in the snow with bird</li> </ul>
<i>Ending: MC remembers the meeting</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Walks back to lair with mind full of dreams</li> </ul>

Shared write the story in the traditional order using a separate sheet of flipchart paper for each section and display the finished story on a washing line or pin it to display boards.



Now ask the class to turn their short-burst writing into a story in the same way. Or, if they prefer, they could use the class's shared short-burst writing and create a different story from the one outlined above. For example, the dancing could be replaced by the fox attacking its prey.

Once they have finished, ask them to share their story with a partner and discuss how it could be improved.



## Independent application

### Hot task

For their **hot task**, challenge the class to flip their story in some way to see if they can apply what they have learnt independently.

First, discuss the ways in which the shared-written story could be flipped to try to make it more engaging. Rearrange the sections visually in whatever order the children suggest and get them to read it out aloud to see what works. Let the class decide the most effective alternative order and discuss any text changes that would make this order more effective. Edit the text in a different colour so the amended text is clear.



**Choice A:** For confident writers, you may want to set this challenge: plan a different story concerning an animal at night and decide how to write it starting at the end of the story and then filling in the backstory.

**Choice B:** If choice A seems too challenging, some of the class could focus on altering the order of their story, perhaps by following the order of the flipped text on pages 12/13 above and decide which parts of the text may need amending to make the flipped text more effective.

Alternately, they could choose to flip the class's shared-written story in a different way and decide how to alter the text to make the new order effective.

When they have finished their story, ask them to share it with a partner and write a brief comment on whether their flipped story worked and, if it did, why it worked.



## Reflection on Learning

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

Ask the children to briefly reflect on all that they have learnt from this unit and to jot down the key things that they think they have learnt.

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



## Publishing their work

Make a display of the most successful work that has resulted from the unit including what the children have learnt about nocturnal animals in their area and their drawings.







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