



An introduction to the *Talk for Reading* planning process

Talk for Writing consultant Jamie Thomas talks through the Talk for Reading planning process, discussing the importance of working with high-quality texts and using strategies that enable children to develop deep, meaningful understanding.

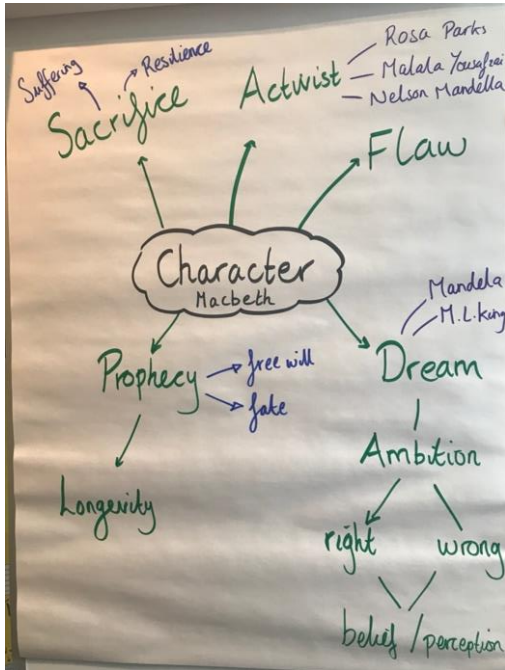
I like to ask teachers the question: *What is reading?* The discussion that follows is always full of passionate opinion and rich intent. That is because teachers know the importance of reading. Reading is an entitlement that should enable children to connect with some of the finest words ever written. It should open up the world of possibility, interest and intrigue, rather than being reduced to a series of comprehension-based questions and activities.

At Warren Road Primary School, I have been fortunate enough to work with teachers that share this vision of reading. Our collective aim is to encourage rich, meaningful discussion around texts, where all children feel that they are able to contribute and are not constrained by test-style questioning. This approach teaches children to spot clues and apply strategies in order to understand texts at an extremely deep level: *Talk for Reading* encourages children to be lifelong readers.

The following article explores a recent planning discussion I held with the two English leaders at Warren Road, Lucy Aldridge and Jane Learmouth, in designing their recent Year 5 *Talk for Reading* unit.

The initial brainstorm

At Warren Road, each half term looks to develop one element of narrative so that children immerse themselves in the tools and language that enrich their writing. Through the *Talk for Writing* approach, the units explore the role of settings, character, suspense, action, dialogue, description and openings/endings.



The focus of this unit was character. We therefore began by brainstorming the world of opportunity in our reading, writing and wider curriculum subjects. The discussion began with the literature at the heart of our *Talk for Writing* unit (*Macbeth*) and then explored the themes and ideas that lie at the heart of the story.

Through the brainstorm, we uncovered the key themes we wanted to explore, including free will, fate, resilience, suffering and perseverance. These led us to our big questions that lie at the heart of the entire unit:

- How are the themes of free will and fate explored in literature?
- How can circumstance influence a character or a person's future?

Choosing the texts

As teachers of reading, it is essential that we avidly read great children's literature. As a child, I remember studying the poem *Invictus* by William Ernest Henley and discussing the themes of suffering and resilience. This poem turned out to be the strength that Nelson Mandela drew upon in his hours of greatest need. Alongside *Macbeth*, it provides a rich contrast into the themes identified in the unit.

The unit synopsis

Off the back of our discussions, Lucy wrote the following synopsis:

Throughout this unit, the children will explore the themes of free will and fate in a range of literature, particularly focusing on the poem Invictus. They will look at how this poem influenced Nelson Mandela's life and draw parallels with Macbeth as a character. The idea of how circumstance can shape a person's future will also be explored. The supporting texts are used to deepen the children's contextual understanding/ widen their frame of reference/ knowledge base, and they should be drawn upon during the independent understanding reflection.

Planning the unit of work

The *Talk for Reading* teaching sequence **introduces** children to a text in order to achieve a basic understanding. It then **investigates** the text through dialogic talk and reading strategies so that children develop a deeper, richer understanding of the themes that lie at the heart of it. The final phase then gives them the opportunity to demonstrate their **independent understanding**.

The following teaching sequence gives an overview of the lessons Lucy planned for her Y5 class at Warren Road. The planning represents a thinking framework, plotting out the steps that will enrich the learning. Clearly, this would need to be adapted to suit the children in your class.

Introduction to the texts (*Macbeth* and *Invictus*)

Throughout the introduction phase, read *Macbeth (A Shakespeare Story)* by Andrew Matthews and explore the main events and key themes that lie at the heart of the story. Co-construct a mind map with the class.

- Listen to a reading of *Invictus* and encourage children to jot down their initial responses. They could respond through drawing, jotting down words or mark making, although they should be able to articulate their ideas. Discuss their initial impressions as a class.
- Read through *Invictus* line-by-line, exploring the meaning of the vocabulary in context.
- Rehearse reading the poem as a class, exploring intonation, expression and fluency.
- Read about William Earnest Henley's life and discuss how the key events in his childhood inspired the poem *Invictus*.

1. Investigation of the text (*Invictus*)

- Re-read the poem and, through dialogic exploration, discuss the main ideas of each stanza. Model how to summarise the themes explored in each stanza.
- Using a 'role-on-the-wall' template, explore which lines in the poem reveal the speaker's internal thoughts and feelings, compared to his external circumstance.
- Write a short piece of outside/inside shared writing using the ideas of *Invictus* as inspiration. For example, *Outside, the taunting of the night*

oppresses and covers all hope. Inside, my unconquerable soul remains unscathed.

- Discuss the words 'suffering' and 'resilience' and explore how these themes connect to the poem.
- Introduce the BIG QUESTION: **How are the themes of free will and fate explored in the poem, *Invictus*?** Re-visit the text line-by-line and engage the class in dialogic discussion, enabling them to collectively deepen their understanding. Form a shared response, drawing on the class discussion.
- Discuss the question: **Can you now connect the two overarching themes of 'Suffering and Resilience' and 'Free Will and Fate', in *Invictus*?** [I deleted the word together 3 words from end of this as it seemed to muddy the meaning]
- Watch the interview with Morgan Freeman. In this video, he discusses how instrumental the poem *Invictus* was in Nelson Mandela's life.
<https://youtu.be/d3dZngCraqs>
As a class, explore the following question: **Why did *Invictus* give Nelson Mandela what he needed to keep going?** Form a shared response together.

2. Independent Understanding (*Macbeth*)

- Discuss how the themes of free will and fate are explored in *Macbeth*. Brainstorm initial responses and collect on flipchart paper.
- Children write a short discussion based on the prompt: **Mandela was a servant to free will. Macbeth was a servant to fate. Discuss ...**
- As a class, write a short poem using the format and style of Henley about Mandela's life.
- Children then write their own short poem, in the same style, about Macbeth.

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Talk for Reading unit planner (Learning to comprehend)



Initial planning: select text for unit (highlight choices: fiction, non-fiction, poetry)
Analyse for potential, select focuses below & annotate accordingly

Select key comprehension focus:

- **Fiction:** theme; character development; how stories work; figurative language; viewpoint/purpose
- **Non-fiction:** purpose & audience; gaining language; read & think critically about text; explore ideas; how non-f texts work; viewpoint
- **Poetry:** theme, imagery, figurative language, mood & viewpoint.

Quick assessment to guide planning: what do children already understand? 'Cold task' linked to the focus plus vocabulary, literal retrieval and inference

Decide what vocab in text to focus on
Decide on useful stems given focus
Plan activities to ensure access to text focusing on dialogic comprehension – understanding through discussion. Decide which key reading strategies to particularly focus on

- comprehension self-monitoring
- prediction
- clarifying (includes ability to infer)
- questioning
- imagining (which includes visualising) summarising
- using prior knowledge
- using an understanding of text structure.

Introduction to the text

By end of phase, children can access and read the text aloud with basic understanding

- Prior to reading: hook & context**
1. Read and reread
 2. Vocabulary
 3. Decoding/word recognition
 4. Teacher models reading with **fluency**
 5. Prediction
 6. Initial responses
 7. Literal retrieval

Investigation – deepen understanding

By end of phase, pupils can read text aloud with fluency & expression, & understand at a deeper level

Deepen understanding of comprehension focus through:

- dialogic talk
- response activities.

Summarise what's been learnt.

Independent understanding

By end of phase, pupils mastered core text & can independently demonstrate understanding

- Can children **identify** focus?
- Can children **demonstrate** understanding of the focus?
- Can children **apply** focus?

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Jamie is an accredited Talk for Writing and Talk for Reading trainer and works both nationally and internationally in developing the core systems and practices that lead to sustainable improvement.

Jamie currently leads all elements of Talk for Writing and Talk for Reading training and is available for inset, consultancy and individual school support. He is passionate about supporting schools and individuals through implementation, offering insight into his own school's leadership, development and outcomes.

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Warren Road Primary School is a Talk for Writing training centre in Kent where you can visit to see all elements of the methodology in action.

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