

Talk for Reading at KS1

How to plan a unit

Talk for Writing and Reading consultant Jamie Thomas talks through the Talk for Reading planning process at KS1, discussing the importance of working with high-quality texts and using strategies that enable children to develop deep understanding.



An introduction to *Talk for Reading*

In the words of children's author, Katherine Patterson: "It is not enough to simply teach children to read; we have to give them something worth reading. Something that will stretch their imaginations – something that will help make sense of their own lives and encourage them to reach out towards people whose lives are quite different from their own."

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, not be reduced to a series of comprehension-based questions and activities. *Talk for Reading* helps children to appreciate and enjoy whole texts, developing them as effective, critical and appreciative readers.

The following article talks through the thinking that lies at the heart of a *Talk for Reading* unit of work. My thanks goes to Nicole Piper and the fabulous Y2 children at Warren Road Primary, Orpington, who have provided worked examples and written outcomes.

Choosing the text

Echoing Patterson's words above, it is essential that we think carefully about our text choice. When choosing a text, we need to ensure that there is sufficient complexity and challenge so that the children have to read strategically. Strategic reading is not the same as exam reading or skills reading. Dialogic talk - those back and forth conversations - is essential to support the deepening of understanding. Over time, this will support children to appreciate texts of greater complexity and gradually develop the criticality they will need at KS2 in order to understand key literary concepts across a wider range of texts. A challenging, quality text will demand strategic reading, which in turn will demand quality teaching, resulting in greater learning.

The following slide shows the text we will explore through this article, entitled *Overheard on a Saltmarsh* by Harold Monroe. Read it carefully and thoughtfully and ask yourself:

- **What is at the heart of this text/what is it really about?**

You may like to read it out loud, thinking about representing the different characters' voices appropriately. Think about how the words help you to imagine the characters, their expression and intonation.

Overheard on a Saltmarsh

Overheard on a Saltmarsh

Nymph, nymph, what are your beads?

Green glass goblin.

Why do you stare at them?

Give them me.

No.

Give them me. Give them me.

No.

Then I will howl all night in the reeds.

Lie in the mud and howl for them.

Goblin, why do you love them so?

They are better than stars or water,

Better than voices of winds that sing,

Better than any man's fair daughter,

Your green glass beads on a silver ring.

Hush, I stole them out of the moon.

Give me your beads, I desire them.

No.

I will howl in a deep lagoon

For your green glass beads, I love them so.

Give them me. Give them.

No.

Harold Monroe (1879 - 1932)

The initial brainstorm around literary concepts

It is the initial thinking and brainstorming that drives the success of the unit. One of the absolute joys of reading is that many texts mean slightly different things to different readers. This means that there is often not a single, 'correct' meaning – there are many shades of meaning for different readers.

When asking ourselves what is at the heart of the text, or what it is really about, it helps to consider the literary concepts that underpin it. These might include:

- **Structure of text – how the text works**
- **Role of characters/issues/information**
- **Role of setting/mood/tone**
- **Use of language, including figurative language**
- **Perspective/viewpoint – writer/narrator/character/reader**
- **Main themes/ideas/arguments**

It is through the exploration of some or all of these elements that we are able to get to the real purpose of what we are reading. Here are some notes on the poem linked to the literary concepts above:

Structure of text – how the text works

- The text is a poem that explores a conversation between two characters: a nymph and a goblin. Children need to be able to identify the different characters in order to build an impression of each. In the example above, italics have been used to support this understanding.

Role of characters/issues/information

- There are clearly two characters in the poem: the nymph and the goblin. Children should be given the opportunity to explore each character's personality and behaviours. Comparing and contrasting the two characters would be a key discussion. This will also help them to perform the poem with meaning.
- The title of the poem hints at a third character – the person who overheard the discussion. Time should be taken to explore this additional character and consider the significance of the discussion being overheard.

Role of setting/mood/tone

- Given the title, it is important to explore the setting and consider the significance of this. Children may not have ever seen or heard of a saltmarsh, so immersion in this through visualisation or experience will be essential. Children may like to consider whether the poem would change in meaning or significance if set somewhere else. How central is the setting to the overall purpose of the poem?

Use of language, including figurative language

- Both characters have a very distinctive spoken voice. Time should be spent looking at performance to assist the children in bringing these characters alive.
- The imagery developed around the beads enhances the goblin's desire for them. These lines need to be explored to help the children understand what the goblin does and why.

Perspective/viewpoint – writer/narrator/character/reader

- Whilst the majority of children will still be at the concrete stage of appreciating their own perspective, they would benefit from exploring how different characters behave and why this is. Using drama and performance will be a supportive way into this consideration.

Main themes/ideas/arguments

- Underpinning the poem are the themes of desire and jealousy. Children should be given time to consider these and use their own vocabulary to express these feelings (such as 'really wanted' or 'wanted something that someone else had' etc.) Once they understand these themes, they should then reflect on how they fuel the way the characters act.
- Connections could be made with other texts that replicate the themes explored.

As you can see, the initial brainstorming opens up the vast potential of the poem. As a teacher of reading, I am now fully prepared to explore the poem with the children. All that it now requires me to do is to clarify what I want the children to have learned by the end of the unit. To do this, I like to write a brief unit synopsis:

The unit synopsis

By the end of the unit, children will be able to talk about different characters in a text. They will be able to compare and contrast characters and justify their opinions by making reference to the text. They will also be able to talk about what motivates a character and how this may impact their behaviour.

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 strategic reading 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 Nicole Piper planned for her Y2 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 and is reliant on a core understanding of the *Talk for Reading* approach.

1. Introduction to the text

- To hook the children in, present them with some green glass beads to hold and explore. Generate some initial language around the beads, identifying their beauty and value.



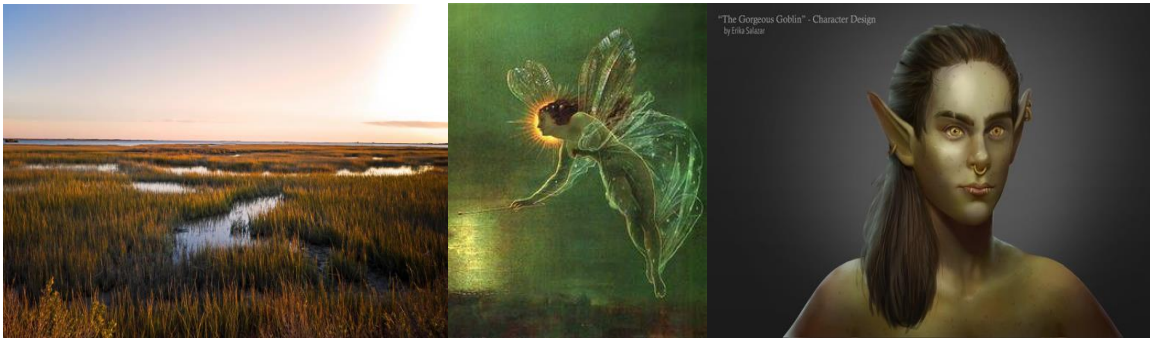
Introduction

- achieving basic understanding

Prior to reading: hook & context

- teacher models reading with fluency
- prediction
- initial responses
- rereading
- decoding/
word recognition
- vocabulary
- literal retrieval
- establish focus

- Support the children by exploring the context of the poem. You may like to show them some visual images to support their initial understanding of the saltmarsh, the nymph and the goblin (see pictures below).

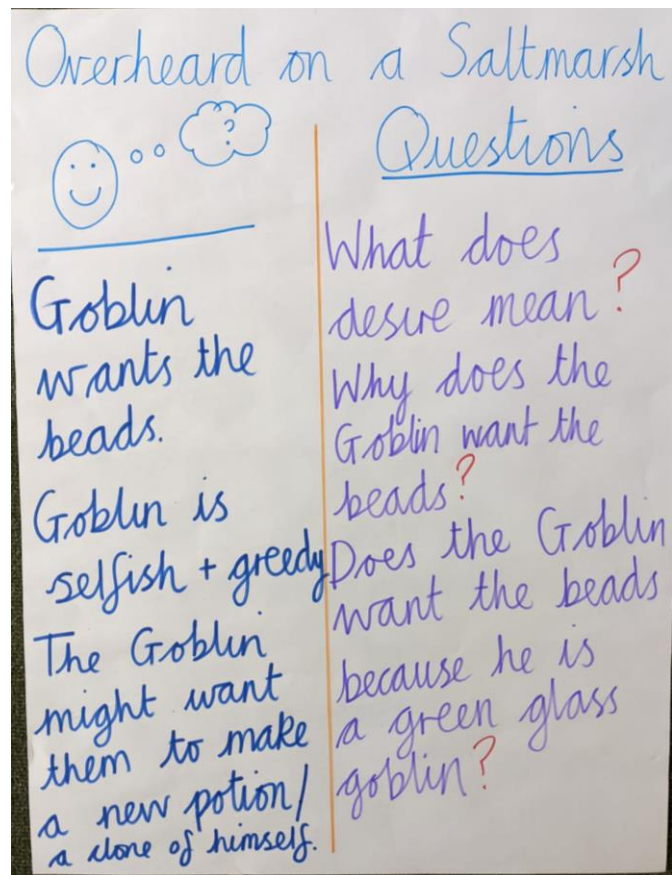


- Model reading the poem to the children, focussing on expression and intonation. Use your voice to demonstrate the different characters in the poem.
- At the end of the poem, ask the children what they think has happened? Whom have we met in the poem? Gather some initial responses with the class.

In the example shown, Nicole has captured some initial thoughts linked to what the children initially think and what questions they have that remain unanswered.

This line of enquiry promotes genuine intrigue and exploration into the text. It is important that there is no perceived right or wrong – all ideas are welcomed and are captured through the shared discussion.

- Re-read the poem line-by-line, pausing to discuss any unfamiliar vocabulary. Support children with visual aids and child-friendly definitions to clarify meaning.



- Depending on your line of enquiry, pause and pose questions that will challenge thinking. Link this back to the synopsis of the unit where relevant. One of our objectives was: *By the end of the unit, children will be able to talk about different characters in a text. They will be able to compare and contrast characters and justify their opinions by making reference to the text.*
- In the example depicted, Nicole has started to generate and bank ideas about the nymph and the goblin. You may like to use a simple questions to generate discussion, such as: **What can you tell me about the two characters we have met in the poem?** Allow time for children to offer suggestions and collectively form a shared response. In order to discuss the characters in this way, children will need to revisit the text and justify their opinions.

Nymph difference Goblin	
The Nymph is...	The Goblin is...
- <u>irritated</u> *both	- ugly inside + out
- much more beautiful on the inside + outside.	- jealous
- a little bit in the wrong as she stole.	- a little bit rude as he has no manners
- greedy a bit greedy as she won't share.	- resilient
	- desperate
	- impatient
	- <u>irritated</u> *both

- Once the brainstorming has taken place, you may like to demonstrate to the children how to write a explanatory response to the text. This will be reliant on key sentence stems that support the structure of a written response. Provide a clear scaffold so that all of the children can have a go at replicating your answer.

Here is an example, with the sentence stems highlighted in bold: ***I think that the goblin is a very greedy character. I know this because he keeps telling the nymph to give them to him. He also says that he desires them. This shows that he is only thinking about himself.***

The children could then have a go at writing their own answer, or using the scaffold to discuss the other character in the poem.

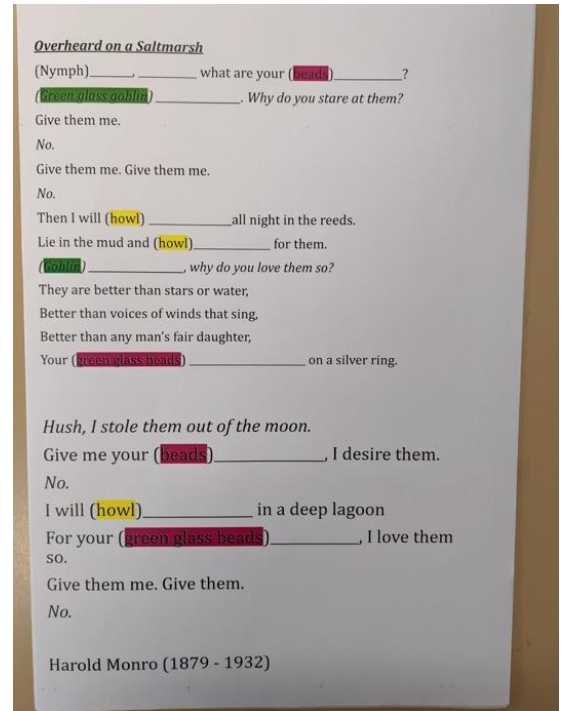
- As children begin to form opinions about the characters, it is important that they are given the opportunity to explore the poem through drama. Initially, you may like to hotseat the characters, encouraging the children to come up with questions that would help to find out about their motives and actions. In pairs, children could then act out the conversation between the nymph and goblin, either using the poem as a script or retelling the events through their own words. You may also encourage the children to act in role as eyewitnesses to the scene, asking what they heard and saw, or how the characters were acting at the saltmarsh.
- Where themes are uncovered, such as the topic of jealousy seen in the example, pause to clarify meaning. This is a great opportunity to find connections to wider reading, drawing in characters from other books that are familiar to the children. Again, all of this links to the unit objectives: *Children will also be able to talk about what motivates a character and how this may impact their behaviour.*

- In addition to the discussions around some of the themes explored in the text, you may like to help the children to develop their understanding of the themes of desire and greed by writing in the style of the author. You could use a scaffold or writing frame to support the children in their task (see example below).

- Once the children have had a go at writing in the style of the author, ensure that there is time for them to read and perform their innovations. Discuss the choices they made and explore the themes that lie at the heart of the new poems.

See an example of a Y2 child reading their innovated poem here:

https://youtu.be/b0_58iCWWEI



- By the end of the Investigation phase, children should be able to demonstrate a rich understanding of the text. A great way to explore this is through performance. Consider how children could interpret and perform the text. This could be through dance, with groups of children putting movement to gentle music. Alternatively, children could work in small groups to rehearse a choral performance of the poem, deciding how they should use their voice to demonstrate the characters and their emotions.

Click on the link below to see three of the Y2 children at Warren Road retelling Monroe's poem. Consider how their performance demonstrates the depth of their understanding.

https://youtu.be/-ADn6srre_I

3. Independent Understanding

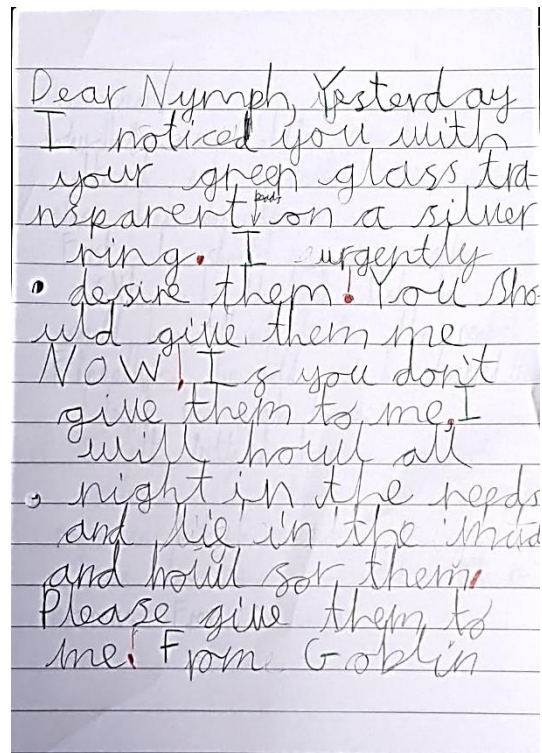
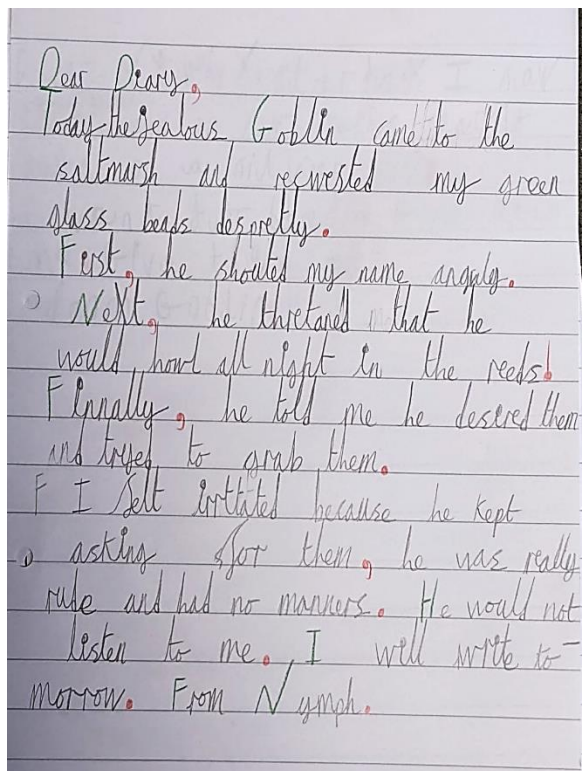
When considering independent understanding, we may ask ourselves:

- Can children identify the key focus in another similar text and explore discursively?
- Can children demonstrate their understanding of the core text through discussion or writing as a reader?
- Can children apply what they have learnt by drawing on their reading to write something similar?

You may like to brainstorm ideas around each of these three bullet points in order to identify opportunities for children to demonstrate what they have learned. Perhaps there is a picture book that explores contrasting characters. Perhaps there is a text that shows how desire can fuel a character's actions. Perhaps they could try to justify the nymph's actions, or those of the goblin. Perhaps they could write a short narrative of their own that explores similar themes and characters.

In the examples below, the Year 2 children were asked to write in role as either the nymph or the goblin, showcasing their personality and characteristics. Evidently, these examples demonstrate that they have fulfilled the core objective:

By the end of the unit, children will be able to talk about different characters in a text. They will be able to compare and contrast characters and justify their opinions by making reference to the text. They will also be able to talk about what motivates a character and how this may impact their behaviour.



Examples of Y2 children writing in role, demonstrating their independent understanding of the literary concepts explored across the unit.

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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.

<https://www.talk4writing.com/train-with-us/warren-road-primary-school-orpington/>

Our thanks to Nicole Piper and her Year 2 class at Warren Road for the planning and worked examples.