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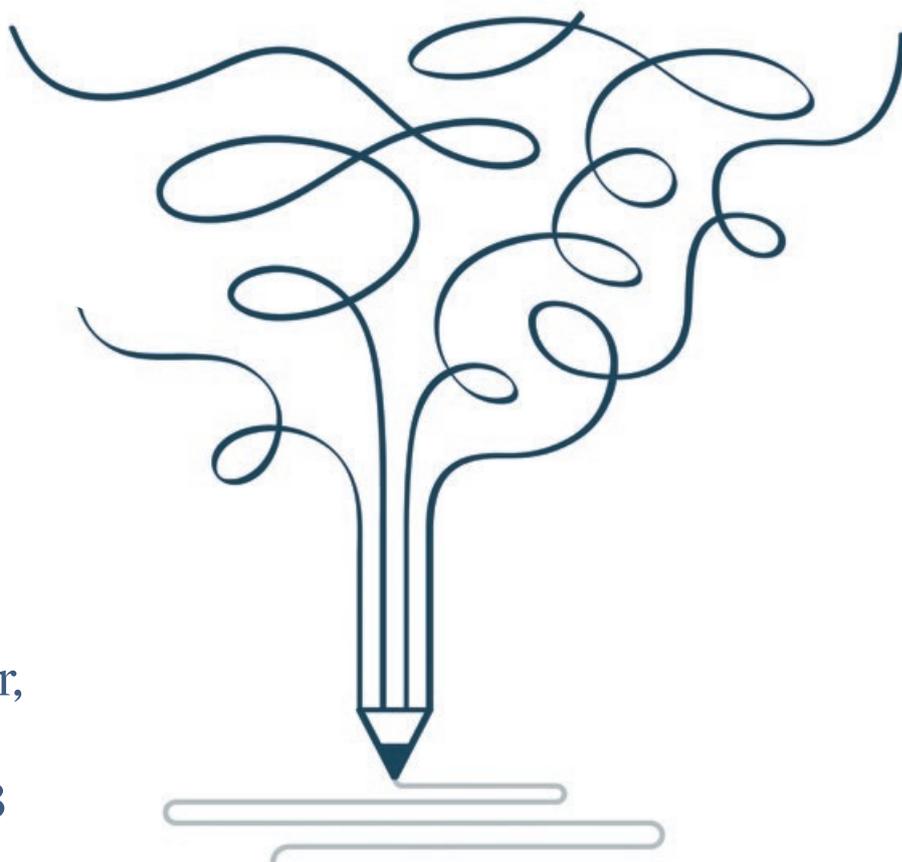
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‘Mr Brown is feeling down...’

‘*In medias res*’ story openers: meeting the challenge of a ‘low floor, high ceiling’ creative writing activity for KS3



One of **Clare Lawrence’s** trainee teachers challenged her to show him what her differentiation advice looked like in practice. Here she explains what happened.

‘How does it work?’ he asked. ‘This low floor, high ceiling idea – what does it look like in practice? Give me an example...’

Recently one of my English trainee teachers, seemingly fed-up with hearing my mantra regarding ‘low floor, high ceiling tasks’ as the way to provide challenge for all pupils in the English classroom, set me a challenge of my own. His placement is at one of the few schools that have retained mixed ability non-setting. He has two pupils in his Year 7 class who have arrived in the country recently and have very little English (nor do they share a common language); he has an autistic pupil who needs definite, structured tasks and who struggles with open-ended activities; he has several pupils he describes as ‘rocket-fuelled’ for whom not even the sky is the limit; and he has the rest of the class, who range in age across 12 months, have different backgrounds, interests and dispositions, and bring to his lessons the usual range of experiences, enthusiasms and concerns.

‘How does it work?’ he asked. ‘This low floor, high ceiling idea – what does it look like in practice? Give me an example...’ He was working on a Language SoW on story writing, so I positioned my response to his challenge within this. As is my usual practice I tried it out with the trainees before asking for their analysis and feedback. This was largely enthusiastic as they felt that the activity had potential to be both accessible and far-reaching. Therefore, I reproduce it here. Please feel free to use the idea if it seems to you to ‘have legs’ – and I would love to hear your feedback.

***In medias res* story openers**

1. Individually, pupils think of/jot down verbs that have a ‘downward direction’ –
e.g. fall, drop, sink... In pairs/small groups, pupils share and combine their word lists.
Collect downwards verbs from whole class as brainstorm onto the board. Add in your own as necessary. *Examples might include: fall, drop, sink, cascade, descend, sag, droop, slide, slump, lower, collapse, plunge, subside...*
2. In their group, ask pupils to decide what nouns they might use to describe a person. *Character element examples: eyes, eye-lids, face, hair, hands, cheeks, head, feet, hat, shoes, moustache...* (N.B. These will probably start as physical, but pupils can be encouraged to move on to other elements such as voice, posture and gait.)
3. Ask pupils to use their words to describe the appearance of Mr Brown, who is feeling down, using a simple noun + verb present tense format. They need to agree three sentences as a group. *Example: ‘Mr Brown is feeling down. His head droops. His shoulders slump. His hands hang by his side.’* Encourage pupils to justify their choice of each downward verb to go with each noun.

- Hear some of these, and amalgamate onto the board into an agreed, three sentence description of Mr Brown.
- Ask pupils – working individually or collectively as they prefer – to extend this to describe the scene around Mr Brown, using the semantic field of downward motion to create a feeling of melancholy.
- When they are fully engaged with task 5 (above), refocus the task as needing a ‘top and tail’ to give it context. Give the following examples, or ones of your own, on the board and add their examples as they are produced.

Example 1: *The news was bad. Mr Brown’s head drooped, his shoulders slumped and his hands hung by his side. “Is there no hope?” he asked. The doctor lowered his gaze. “None, I’m afraid” he replied.*

Example 2: *Mr Brown stooped to collect the envelope from where it had fallen on the mat. Tearing it open he let the envelope flutter to his feet. His head drooped, his shoulders slumped and his hands hung by his side. What had he expected? Of course her answer was ‘No!’*

- As required to extend or refocus some pupils, introduce young Miss Gifted, who feels uplifted! Encourage them to describe Miss Gifted and her situation, using the semantic field of upward motion to create a feeling of optimism. Prompt to include a narrative context from the start.

Example: *Miss Gifted’s heart soared as she watched the plane take flight into the sky. She raised her head to gaze up until sight of it was lost in the lidless blue. The corners of her mouth lifted and she raised her arm to in one last gesture of farewell. Her eyes were moist but no tears fell.*

Summary of learning: feedback from the trainees on the activity.

- Recall of vocabulary (at whatever level); development of vocabulary*
Downwards verbs can be as simple or as advanced as desired, with ‘fall’ as valid as ‘plummet’. The pupils using translate to access the lesson can be fully involved in creating these simple sentences. The prescribed format gives structure for the pupil with autism. The accessibility of the vocab idea encourages pupils to develop their vocabulary through sharing.
- Evaluation of word pairs (higher level thinking)*
The pairing of the verb with the noun, although utterly basic at its core, requires evaluation and comparison. For example, tears fall, but do arms (they are fixed on at the shoulder!)?
- Justification (metacognition)*
The need to eliminate and pare-down the sentences to three, and the further paring down of these to a class collection requires a conscious awareness of process.
- Knowledge development: concept of semantic field*
Without mentioning the term, the concept of a semantic field within a piece of writing is being explored. This is rich for development in future literature lesson, where pupils should be quick to understand how to ‘collect’ words that share a commonality.



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- Development of both writing and reading skills*

Awareness of the way a writer may use a semantic field should enrich pupils’ reading, and is a useful skill to introduce to enrich their creative writing. The step-by-step process demystifies the sometimes daunting concept of ‘creativity’.

- Concept of description within narrative writing*

Again, without using the term ‘*in media res*’, you are introducing the concept of starting a story in the middle of the action, whilst still encouraging descriptive content within narrative. Pupils are being guided to create character and narrative context, and to understand how to present each swiftly to the reader, without these learning objectives being overt. The low-floor access (‘*Mr Brown’s toast fell butter side down*’) and high ceiling potential (‘*A flake of Mr Brown’s desiccated skin settled on the skin of his warmed milk*’) enable understanding of character description, in particular, to emerge organically.

Clare Lawrence

is Senior Lecturer in Teacher Development at Bishop Grosseteste University in Lincoln, where she is the English subject lead. She can be contacted at clare.lawrence@bishopg.ac.uk