

Josephine off the Rails

by Diane Miller, Illustrated Sheryl MacLeod
New Zealand picture book

Teacher's Literature Resource Unit – English Literature Study / Narrative writing activity (Mid-Upper Primary School)

Objectives: – children learn how to study, use and enjoy language and literature by studying a picture book story
– children develop communication skills (oral, visual and written) by writing their own stories.

1. **Group discussion** – Why do people write?

Identify different types/genres of writing and discuss their purpose e.g. – lists for shopping/jobs, etc – memory aids – newspaper articles – sharing facts – non-fiction books – providing information – recipe books – explain how-to-do – diaries, journals, poems – expressing personal thoughts, feelings – letters, “Facebook” – keeping contact with friends – internet “Blogs,” “Twitter,” etc – sharing ideas with public – narrative writing (stories) – to entertain, sometimes educate...

2. **Narrative writing – Pre-writing activities**

- * Listening to and reading lots of good stories (just for enjoyment) is the best way for children to learn about writing stories.
- * When planning a writing activity, teachers can also play an important role – by selecting suitable stories and discussing some interesting features.
- * Avoid the “I don’t know what to write about!” wail ... by helping children to actively look for story ideas beforehand – finding photos/pictures that may inspire a story – by encouraging children to get a notebook, call it “My Story Ideas,” keep it handy and use it to collect ideas for possible story topics – Story topics could be a true event, something funny, or a quite ordinary event (such as Margaret Mahy’s “Spider in the Shower” story). Troublesome/ mischievous/curious animals can lead to a good adventure story – Children could be encouraged to look through books in the library (picture books are easiest) to identify some common themes and ideas that they could adapt with their own characters and plot.

3. Use a picture book to illustrate the craft of storytelling – Study a story

* Read “Josephine off the Rails” (show illustrations, they also tell their own story).

* Discuss their first overall response to the story.

* Look for some storytelling techniques that could be useful for their own writing: Every story has to have a **basic idea / issue** that develops and drives the story and needs to be resolved – e.g. Josephine is bored and wants to have an adventure / Ralph is lost – will he find his family?

3A Plot – (what happens in the story) – Stories need to be **planned...**

– **Start** by grabbing the reader’s attention from the first page. (Josephine is sad – why?) Slow starts lose readers.

3B – Middle – then keep the reader turning the pages to find out what will happen next. Trouble is always interesting!

Problems that need to be dealt with can keep the pace and tension going. Problems work well if they can be linked with a logical flow, and have a cause and effect connection.

They can be – small or easily-resolved challenges – (what challenges did Josephine have to face? – lost dog/escape from museum, possible breakdown/finds water, running off the rails/ignored...)

– or build up to a larger seemingly-insurmountable obstacle – (Ralph refuses to carry on and go through the last tunnel.) Solving a problem in a children’s book should come from the character’s own cleverness, effort, bravery, etc.

Authors can use questions or “hooks” on the right hand page (like a fisherman uses bait on his fishing line) to get the reader to turn the page to find out what will happen next? e.g. “Don’t look now!... Oh No!... Suddenly...and...”

3C – Endings – should be satisfying –

– sometimes an ending may take a surprising twist – or it can be just as satisfying to have things resolved (little dog finds family, Josephine home and happy). Discuss ending/make predictions – (e.g. Do you think Josephine will be bored again? How does Ralph feel about himself now?....)

3D – Characters

People are often the characters – or authors may use animals, boats, trains, etc. to act, talk and feel like people. We all relate to people, so character is everything in a story. It is easier for your readers to like your story if they care about and like your main characters. Even if the characters are naughty, you want them to win and overcome their problems. Animals are easy to like.

Sometimes characters can become more important than the author had planned. (Ralph, the little dog was not planned as a main character in Josephine’s story, but the illustrator made him look so cute and vulnerable that his problem of being afraid became quite important – so the story changed.) Don’t be afraid to change your story.

Discuss – How would you describe Ralph’s character at the start?... at the finish?

What kinds of things frightened him (p.8 truck, P.13 dark, P.14 heights, p.25 tigers)

Did his character change/ develop as the story progressed? Do you think Ralph would have felt brave if Josephine had not discussed this with him? How would you describe Josephine's character? Do you think she wanted to just help Ralph find his family... or did she have her own needs too?

3E – Vocabulary

As it is a train adventure, the rhythm often reflects a train journey. To make it enjoyable to read aloud to young children there are lots of “noisy” words in Josephine's story. (“Onomatopoeic” words reflect an actual sound that is made) – “Clickety-clack! Huff-chuff!...”

(What other noisy words can you find in the story?)

Verbs (action words) can also be chosen to emphasize what is happening...

“wheezed, slithered...” (Can you find other interesting verbs in the story?)

Words or groups of words (phrases) can be repeated like a chant to give a sense of rhythm and continuity... “Chuff-a chuff...” “...on they go ...”

3F – Pictures

Illustrations enhance a story. They can show the scenery/setting without words. At a glance the reader can understand the character's feelings. Can you guess the characters' feelings on each page? The pictures can carry a sub-plot /story of their own that is different to the text – e.g. When Josephine goes “off the rails” Ralph is oblivious to the people around him in the story.

Discuss – Is Ralph right when he assumes the animals running across the valley are having a race?

3G – Setting

The setting can add excitement to the story. Use a map to find the setting for Josephine's story and the trail they followed in her Otago adventure – Dunedin, Middlemarch... Can you find Daisybank (near Hyde) or Tiger Hill (near Omakau) on your map?

WRITING A STORY

* Once you have decided on your story and thought about a plot, jot your ideas down – characters, setting... (You may want to try making a “**mind map**” first, briefly setting out the events in a visual sequence from beginning through to the end.)

* Write your full story – (this should be your **first** draft!)

* It is a good idea to leave a wide margin at the side of the page, so afterwards you can jot down any ideas/changes beside the words you need to adjust. Most authors rewrite their story many times, changing words, cutting out words that are not needed – as well as proof reading and fixing spelling.

Check it to see if you can **improve** any words. Every word counts and should be chosen carefully, so avoid using over-used “tired “ words.

Walk away and leave your story for a while – you may have some good ideas about it while having a break.

Some things to think about when you check your story:

* Think about whom you are writing the story for. Can the words be understood or the meaning guessed easily by the **target age**? (But it is good to extend a child's vocabulary.)

* **Show** feelings rather than tell – e.g. instead of “Johnny was angry...” it is more powerful to let the reader work this out – e.g.... “Johnny’s face went bright red. He stormed out of the room and the whole house seemed to shudder as the front door slammed...”

* **Beginning** your story – does it hook the reader in to reading on? – Try looking at the beginnings of some library books (look at your favourite books or picture books) and judge how effective they are. Which beginnings do you like and why?

* **Middle** of your story – Stories need definite **ups and downs in energy**, so keep up the action/ things happening throughout your story. Too much description can slow down a story – if you are planning to illustrate your story you don’t need to describe everything, they can see what is happening in the picture.

You could try drawing a “**line graph**” – the “ups” showing the peaks of action or interest – are they spread out through your story?

* **Ending** your story – don’t solve problems too early – keep suspense going for a triumphant finish.

* Everyone likes to laugh, so some **humour** is good.

* Try reading your finished story aloud to yourself – it helps you to hear if the words flow nicely or if anything “jars.” Does it fulfill your intentions – i.e. is it scary... funny...sad...?

* Choose a **title** that sounds interesting – but doesn’t give the plot/ending away from the start.

Book Details

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– Selected bookshops throughout New Zealand

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