



SESSION 18 - TEACHING NOTES - Non-chronological report – writing an entry for The Book Of Wonders – choosing something that is wonderful and creating a report – either real or imagined.

Monday 21st June 2021 11.00 – 12.00

Today's Game – playing with collective nouns.

I thought of this game one day, while I was looking through the thesaurus and came across a list of words to use instead of 'group'. I listed all the different types of insects I could think of and wondered what it would sound like if the two lists were combined. To play the game, work in pairs. One partner uses the list of synonyms for the word *group* (see grids below) while the other writes a list of -

insects,
animals,
cars,
characters,
buildings,
flowers
trees.... Or any other noun.

Then bring the two lists together to create a new combination. To demonstrate this game, here is my list of words to use instead of 'group' and David and I will model the game:

Partner A - choose a collective	Partner B - choose a creature starting with same letter	Combination
<i>Band</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>A band of a</i>
<i>Bunch</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>A bunch of b</i>
<i>Choir</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>A choir of c</i>
<i>Circle</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>A circle of c</i>
<i>Clan</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>A clan of c</i>
<i>Club</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>A club of c</i>
<i>Company</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>A company of c</i>
<i>Crowd</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>A crowd of c</i>
<i>Family</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>A family of f</i>
<i>Galaxy</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>A galaxy of g</i>
<i>Gang</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>A gang of g</i>
<i>League</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>A league of l</i>
<i>Library</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>A library of l</i>
<i>Party</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>A party of p</i>
<i>School</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>A school of s</i>
<i>Swarm</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>A swarm of s</i>
<i>Team</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>A team of t</i>

Here is a list of 'group' words for other options.

Flock	Swarm	Harvest	Convoy
Herd	School	Stash	Covey
Litter	Class	Assembly	Flock
Team	Clump	Muster	Gaggle
Gang	Packet	Rally	Hoard
Tower	Bundle	Round	Host
Band	Suit	Sum	Pack
Bunch	Chest	Assortment	Pride
Heap	Collection	Mass	Orchestra
String	Stack	Pile	Posse
Crowd	Pile	Set	Rabble
Amada	Bouquet	Stockpile	Ring
Fleet	Mob	Company	Society
Cover	Cluster	Congregation	Squad
Shoal	Gaggle	Gathering	Troupe
Flight	Clutch	Battery	Throng
Troop	Suite	Brood	Shiver
Army	Library	Clump	Descent
Pack	Array	Constellation	Streak
Wake	Pod	Universe	Parliament

The Objective – to enjoy the creative challenge of creating new collective nouns.

Padlet – children have a few minutes to complete one or more ‘post it notes’. The blog challenge is to write an entry for a Book of Wonders, in the form of a non-chronological report – like an encyclopedia entry. The entry has to be **an insect** – but it can be an invented and amazing creature.

On the padlet, name your insect and tell us:

The most amazing thing about.... is that

The most amazing thing about the scar-crawler is that it can flatten its body and hide under carpets, inside clothing or squeeze into drawers!

Amazing or - exciting, wonderful, weird, peculiar, alarming, powerful, stunning, extraordinary, frightening, bewildering, bedazzling, spectacular, sensational, etc

The most sensational thing about the scar-crawler is that it lays over a hundred eggs at a time.

The most frightening things about the scar-crawler is that its sting can burn its way through steel!

The most extraordinary thing about the scar-crawler is that it will disappear if frightened by a cat!

Objective – writing information sentences that intrigue the reader.

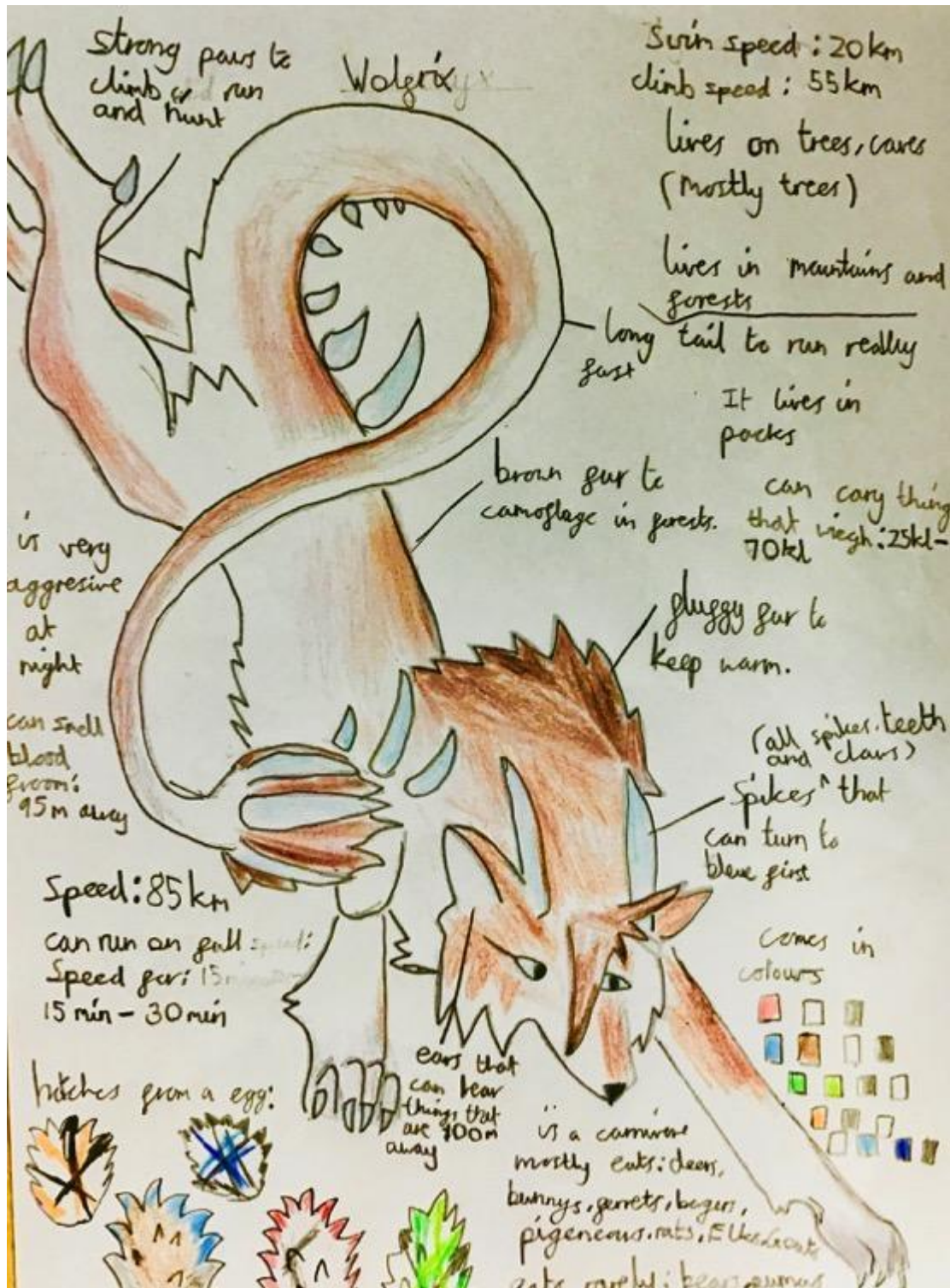
Children’s Audio – *Objective – to listen attentively, enjoy and reflect on what makes effective writing and performance.*

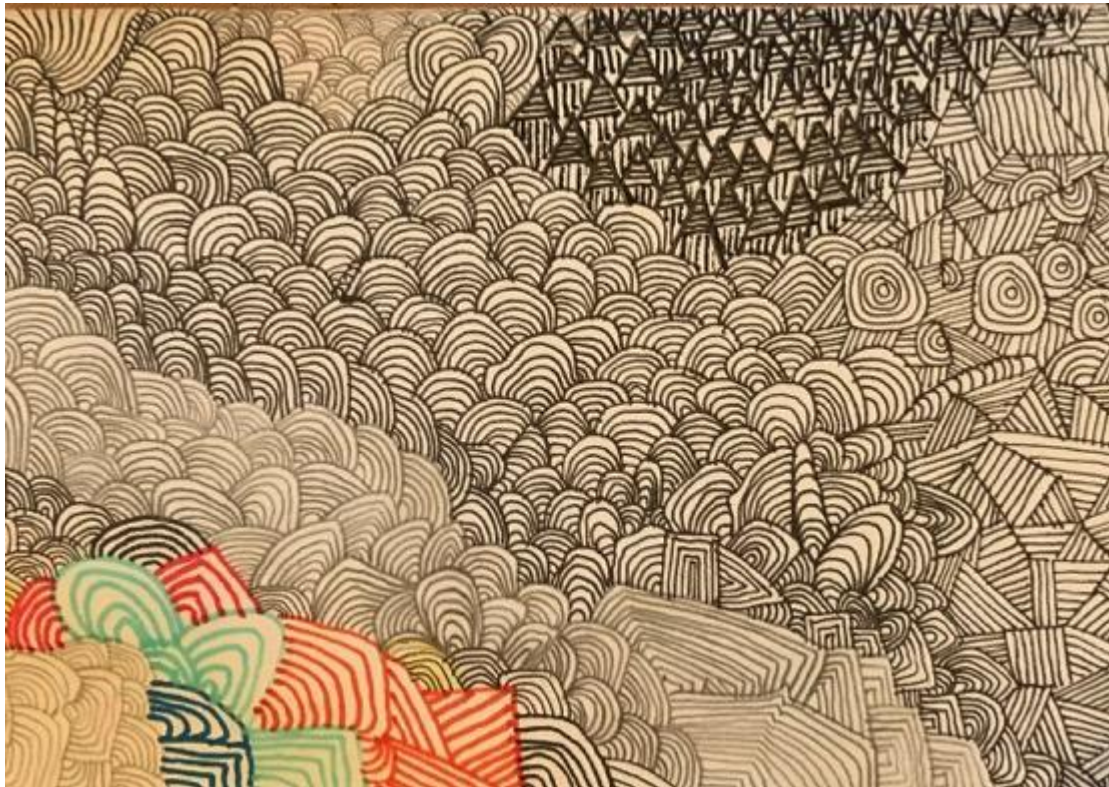
Jotcast activity – describing a creature – write sentences using generalisers, adverbials, etc, **to describe** your insect.
Think about:

Body part	Details
Wings	
Legs	
Thorax	
Scales	
Eyes	
Mandibles	
Antennae	
Feelers	
Abdomen	
Tail	
Sting	

Words to add on more information	Adverbs to interest the reader	Generalisers	Change of direction	Other helpful words
additionally	amazingly	generally	however	
also	surprisingly	most/many	contrary to popular belief	
furthermore	interestingly	some/a few	on the other hand	
moreover	weirdly	several	perhaps	
it is thought that	curiously	the majority	unfortunately	
in addition	similarly	the minority	despite....	
many people believe that	unusually	almost all	alternatively	

Gallery Challenge – This week the challenge is to create a pencil or ink drawing of your insect, using a careful design, and to label its parts descriptively, adding as much information as possible. Here is a design from the Emporium, posted last term.

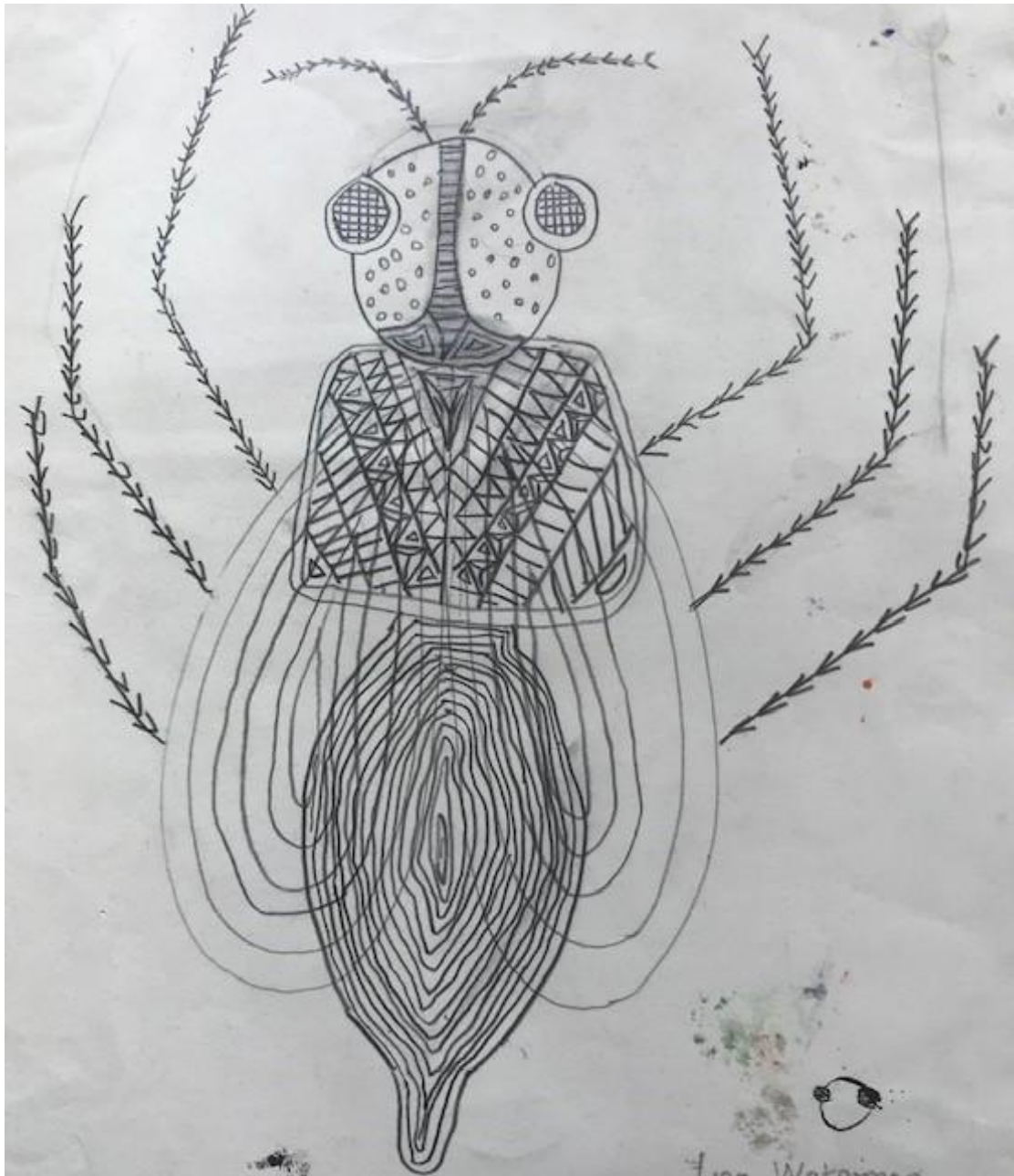




Simple patterning can be used to good effect on the body.



Here is an insect design without labels.



Blogging Activity – Non-chronological report – The blog challenge is to write an entry for a Book of Wonders, in the form of a non-chronological report – like an encyclopedia entry. The entry has to be **an insect** – but it can be invented and amazing creature.

Objective – write an information using appropriate structure and language features to inform and engage the reader.

Audio Challenge – Remember - read it slowly and clearly with expression.

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The Scar-Crawler

The scar-crawler is an extraordinary form of insect that has only recently been discovered. Its abilities have made it renowned amongst the scientific community. Would you even recognize one and is there anything crucial that we need to know about this new creature?

It is like most insects in as far as it has legs, wings and is similar to the classic appearance of an insect. The majority of the scar-crawlers possess eight wings which enable them to fly at very rapid speeds. However, a minority have been seen with as many as sixteen wings and this variety is especially nimble, flying at great altitudes. In the main, they are the size of a large dragonfly and have rather similar eyes that bulge. Amazingly, they have the capacity to see in all directions at the same time.

The scar-crawler's body is multi-patterned and covered in tiny scales that shimmer like a rainbow as it flies. Weirdly, they can flatten their glittering bodies and this means they have access to all sorts of places. They can squeeze under locked doors and even into boxes! This is concerning because when cornered or frightened, they will attack humans with an especially savage and potent venom, that is stored in their tail. Alarmingly, their venom is so powerful that it can burn its way through metal! So - beware.

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Non-Fiction Reading into Writing

Some children read plenty of non-fiction. My own children spent many hours scanning websites and finding out information – and Daisy used to enjoy flicking through factual books and dipping into information. Of course, the various topics that are studied in different year groups should be supported by a store of non-fiction reading resources – books, leaflets, fact cards, web-based information, posters, booklets, letters, magazines.

It is worth considering whether:

- a. there is enough quality non-fiction in each classroom;
- b. it is accessible to all children;
- c. it is a regular part of the children's reading diet;
- d. and whether non-fiction is read to classes in the same way that one might have a daily class reader.

Most schools are now used to the idea of planning which non-fiction 'types' to study in literacy each year to ensure a balance over time. The next step is to make links into the rest of the curriculum so that the language patterns that have been introduced in literacy become transferrable across the curriculum. Once, let us say, non-chronological reports have been taught, appropriate places in the rest of the curriculum are identified where this can be revisited and applied. In this way, literacy time is devoted to teaching different text types and then these are practised and applied in the rest of the curriculum.

Writing journals are essential if a school is to help children capture and then revisit what they have been taught in non-fiction writing. In the journals, a section is needed for each text type. Add in samples that demonstrate the expected features for the relevant age groups as well as writing toolkits, lists of useful words and phrases that the children have gathered. Writing tips and reminders may also be useful.

The big challenge of teaching non-fiction remains the same as narrative – how can the teacher help the children to internalise the language patterns? This means loitering with the text, listening to it being read aloud, reading it aloud and studying its patterns carefully and interactively. It helps if you:

Activity

- read non-fiction aloud to the children;
- children orally learn and perform sections or whole texts as a class or in groups;
- colour-code key language features;
- imitate grammatical patterns that will be needed;
- innovate on those grammatical patterns;
- chant sentence patterns to percussive backgrounds;
- role-play situations reusing grammatical patterns, eg as an ‘expert’ called Professor Know-it-all who knows about a topic;
- identify words and phrases that will be needed and invent sentences using them;
- list words, phrases and sentence patterns as part of displays, on reminder cards and in journals;
- put grammatical features onto cards and use these for oral and written games;
- use particular sentence patterns as part of everyday activities in other contexts.

Younger children probably benefit from having one model text as a focus. Older children may benefit from reading a range of

samples with one core text so that they can see how different writers tackle the same sort of problem.

Audience and purpose drive non-fiction – more so than narrative. Most children write poems and stories just for the satisfaction of creating something pleasing or finding out what happens to their characters. Whilst for many children the main audience will be themselves, gradually the idea of communicating to others in order to explain, instruct, persuade or inform has to become a driving force behind non-fiction writing. The audience and the purpose then determine the content, how it is organised and the style of the writing. The task shapes the writing in a very obvious manner and it is worth remembering that whilst many children are proficient at informal speech, much non-fiction requires formal use of language. This has to be taught and will need more effort than may be expected, especially if children do not read avidly!

Of course, we can teach children how to gather information and sort it into a shape – but the actual tone or ‘tune’ of the writing has to be learned through internalising the language patterns. Whilst we constantly use non-fiction in our daily lives to ‘get by’, the patterns we use are often informal speech patterns. Compare these two brief examples of instructional language, first of all used informally in everyday speech and then the same points written formally.

“Yea that’s right. That one there. Just turn it a bit. No, t’other way. That’s it. Kinda don’t go too far, right.”

First find the green handle.

Next turn it to the left by one turn only.

Of course, instructional language does not present too much of a challenge to children because they are instructed from birth!

However, the formal language of 'report' writing may well be unfamiliar to many children unless they have plenty of reading experience ... or have listened attentively to many informative wildlife programmes. Again, compare the informality of speech with a written version. To create these examples, I asked Ched who is painting the outside of the house, what he knew about foxes, recorded him and then turned what he said into a formal report.

"Well, foxes like are thin and a sort of red colour and their tail's bushy, 've got a pointy face 'cos they can smell real good. You see them at night like, roamin' around in the bins. They've got good eyesight and can hear you coming from a mile off."

The large majority of foxes are easily recognisable because they have lean bodies covered in long, thick fur. Nearly all types are a reddish brown colour though some species are yellow, white or black. Typically, they have a bushy tail, or brush, and a pointed muzzle for they have a keen sense of smell. Additionally, they have excellent eyesight, which allows them to see at night. Furthermore, they are famous for their sharp, pointed ears, which they use to hear both their prey and enemies.

Reading activities

First of all, we read information to find out and think. We enjoy what we learn and relate it to what we already know. We may search for more information or compare with other sources to build on previous knowledge.

Help children become familiar with the main text and deepen their understanding through such activities as:

- interviewing children in role as experts;

- using drama games such as role-playing;
- hot-seating and interviews in role as journalists seeking information or opinions;
- telephone phone-ins or panels of experts;
- using puppets to inform, instruct or explain;
- model-making or art work to describe;
- filming broadcasts or retelling information as news ('Good evening. The pyramids were built ...');
- holding class debates;
- advertising or 'cat-walking' information;
- producing pamphlets, posters or fact sheets for others to read.

Specific comprehension activities might include:

- Booktalk (see Aidan Chambers book 'Tell Me') – discussing the texts, considering such aspects as viewpoint and bias, target audience, linking facts, fact and opinion, writerly techniques;
- Generate own questions for discussion;
- Investigate paragraphs and decide 'sub-headings';
- Annotate and summarise key points;
- Transform texts into bullet points of key facts, views or ideas;
- Cut up a text and muddle the order so children can re-sequence;
- Read and draw so that the information is presented pictorially;
- Use cloze procedure to omit key language features or information;
- Provide a poorly written example for children to discuss and improve;
- Compare several examples to discuss which is most effective and why;

- Use the text to extract information and make a group presentation.

Writing in response to non-fiction can be an effective strategy for helping children not only deepen their understanding but also begin to internalise the information, making it their ‘own’ by re-processing, transforming and communicating. Facts and ideas might be reprocessed in various guises:

- postcards, invitations, menus, ‘wanted’ posters, news bulletins, interviews, diaries, letters, news reports, magazine articles;
- poems might be written in response to information but also creative discussions, TV scripts or using information within stories.

Noticing the Big Patterns

To build a bridge into writing, the class need to shift into ‘reading as a writer’. This involves considering how the information has been presented in an interesting and engaging manner – how was it organised and how did it communicate powerfully? Always reading with the notion in mind that, in a short while, we will be attempting the same sort of thing ourselves.

It is worth bearing in mind that just about all non-fiction writing shares the same sort of underlying pattern, based on the shape of three – *opening, middle, ending*. There are variations on this idea but it stands good for nearly all situations:

Opening – nearly always non-fiction begins with the writer telling the reader the topic in hand. This acts as an ‘orientation’

to the reader, tuning them into what is about to be explored. Often, openings try to tempt the reader into reading on – perhaps by giving reasons why a reader might need to read the information. In this way, the reader becomes ‘hooked’.

Middle – the opening is followed by chunks of information that are clumped together in a logical order using paragraphs, sections and possibly sub-headings to organise information, making access easy for the reader. Information may be numbered, bullet-pointed or organised alphabetically. It may be written in logical steps, stages or in sections that build an argument or describe a process or procedure. Some non-fiction may need sections with headings that describe or inform. This may be helped by diagrams, drawings, photos and illustrations or by using tables, graphs and lists.

Ending – generally speaking, non-fiction ends with some sort of ‘rounding off statement’ or section. Often this saves up a punchy ending or amazing fact. Sometimes it concludes an argument, makes a final persuasive point or generalises. Often, endings relate to the reader by talking directly, e.g. *‘having considered all the information, you may still be wondering ...’*

Children benefit from plenty of experience of ‘boxing up’ texts so that they can begin to think about how writers organise writing into chunks as well as the function of paragraphs and sections. Teachers are familiar with the basic ways in which non-fiction is organised, as described by the original National Literacy Strategy. This sort of information is helpful for teachers but may make the whole business of writing more difficult for children as they struggle to remember 6 different types of writing, 6 different ways to plan, 6 different patterns of organisation and 6 different registers with their attendant lists of connectives and features. Viewed this way, writing may appear to become a memory test – a matter of ‘getting the

formula right' – rather than an enjoyable way to capture, shape and share what we know about something.

'Boxing up' texts involves trying to summarise what each section of a text is about:

Sharks – the deadly fish?	Title – to interest the reader
Have you ever stepped into the sea and wondered whether a shark will attack you? Most people live in fear of sharks and believe that they are cold-blooded killers. However, only a few different types are actually dangerous. Sharks are a sort of fish. There are about 450 different types.	Opening – to draw in the reader. Defines what a shark is.
The large majority of sharks are easily recognisable because they have pointed snouts, staring eyes and sharp teeth. They range in size from the Lantern Shark that is only 20 centimetres long to the Whale Shark, which can be longer than 12 metres. During its lifetime, a shark grows and loses many thousands of teeth. Their skin is made of scales that feel rough to touch. Nearly all sharks have a long tail. They move this from side to side to help them swim.	Description – what they look like
Sharks live in the sea and are found around the world. A few live in fresh water. For instance, Bull Sharks swim up and down the Zambezi River. Some sharks live on the seabed and tend to have flattened bodies. These have what are known as ‘barbels’, which they use to disturb sand in order to find food. However, the majority live nearer the surface and their fins can be seen as they glide through the water. Basking sharks drift along the surface with their mouths wide open as they ingest plankton.	Habitat – where they live
Everyone knows that sharks are meat-eating fish. Many hunt fish and squid whilst those who feed on the seabed eat lobsters, crabs, shrimps, mussels and sea urchins. They use their teeth to crush, slice and chew their food. Tiger sharks will also eat jellyfish as well as turtles. Sharks have been found with cows, horses, dogs and chickens in their stomachs. The Great White will even feed on the carcass of a whale!	Feeding habits – what they eat

In the above example, you can see how the reader has ‘worked out’ what each paragraph or section is about. This could act then as a pattern for the children to use when writing their own text about a deadly creature. Let us imagine that they were going to write about an adder. Use a basic pattern:

Title – to interest the reader
Opening – to draw in the reader. Defines what an adder is
Description – what they look like
Habitat – where they live
Feeding habits – what they eat

Of course, the children may also think of other ‘sections’ that need to be included. For instance:

Title – to interest the reader.
Opening – to draw in the reader. Defines what an adder is.
Description – what they look like.
Habitat – where they live.
Feeding habits – what they eat.
How to avoid being attacked.
What to do if you are bitten.
Why adders need protection.

In other words, drawing patterns from reading can be helpful but children need also to think carefully about the topic that they are writing about and their purpose in writing. This should then help them to generate their own ideas for 'sections' or 'chunks' that will need to be included. This writerly planning needs to begin in Reception and be an ongoing feature of teaching non-fiction right across a school.

Activity

Try using the following approaches:

- Use a flipchart to model thinking through what sections of information might be needed;
- Involve the children in deciding what chunks might be needed;
- Paired or group planning;
- Children draw up their own boxed plan – deciding on the sections needed;
- Practise planning/boxing in a fairly rapid manner, eg: 'well, we've looked at sharks, done one together on 'adders' – how about now in pairs working on a plan for another dangerous creature – what about 'wasps'?
- Use reference books to gather generic ideas for the sort of things that might be worth including.

Activity

Discuss underlying common patterns for different types of writing, eg instructions, report, etc.

Develop a generic sense of an underlying pattern for all types of writing that includes the idea of opening and ending with information 'clumped' into helpful sections for the reader.

Use boxes, flow charts and grids to show non-fiction patterns from reading – and to sketch out possible plans for writing.

Draw ideas for sections from reading but also involve children in deciding what should be included.

Practise gathering and sorting facts into chunks/boxes so that facts are not muddled but organised together logically.

Noticing the Building Blocks

Non-fiction differs from fiction in many ways. Because you are trying to communicate information or ideas, considering the way in which the information is set out is crucial. For instance, if you were trying to explain the water cycle to someone, paragraphs of writing would probably not necessarily be the best way to effectively and memorably communicate – a drawing showing the cycle, accompanied by labels might be more effective. Indeed, a PowerPoint using drawings and photographs with an explanatory voiceover might be better than chunks of writing.

The key building blocks of non-fiction involve the following:

- **Opening** – to introduce the topic and draw the reader in;
- **Middle Sections** – in which information is organised and presented in a way that engages and interests the reader, making them want to read on. It is worth remembering that some sections may be best presented as diagrams, graphs, drawings, photographs or in some other graphic manner;
- **Ending** – that concludes, often relating the topic to the reader or summarising a key point that the reader needs to know or remember.

Begin to draw up **writing toolkits** which contain the main features needed for different text types as well as writing techniques for bring information alive and communicating effectively.

Engaging openings

Look at a range of examples within a text type to begin to find out different ways to both introduce a topic and grab a reader's attention. Instructions often begin by addressing the reader and suggesting that the information is crucial. For instance, consider this sample from a handyman's guide:

Have you ever watched a tap drip and wondered how on earth to change the washer? Have you then had to call out a plumber at great expense? If so, then read this simple step-by-step guide to changing a washer because dealing with a dripping tap is not difficult. So, save yourself that large bill – and read on!

The writer uses questions to directly address a common concern of most readers. In fact, the opening hook is actually more persuasive writing than instructional!

Openings generally orientate the reader. They will introduce the reader to the topic in hand but may also contain strategies for engaging the reader to ensure that they continue reading. A sift through non-fiction texts will find these sorts of strategies. Find examples and list others as well:

Definition – *Oakridge is a typical Cotswold village.*

What the text is about – *This explanation describes how car brakes work.*

Question to draw in the reader – *Do you want to live a healthy lifestyle?*

Relating to the reader – *You may often wonder...*

Making information sound amazing – *One of the most incredible ... It may seem incredible but ... Amazingly,*

Making information sound mysterious – *Not much is known about ...*

Use fronted adverbials to draw in the reader – *Amazingly, the Blue whale is the largest mammal ...*

Making information sound special – *Bats are unique creatures ... Nothing else is quite like ...*

Make it personal – *I have often asked myself, what is so intriguing about snakes?*

Strong endings

Again, it is worth reading a range of endings and discussing what is happening. Often the ending summarises or draws the readers' attention to a key point or argument. Generally, the writer concludes and may well have saved up some sort of striking piece of information to make a strong ending. Often, the writer relates the facts in some way to the present day. Consider this ending to a factual piece about bees:

Recently, there has been a dramatic reduction in the number of bees sighted. This has caused alarm because of the key role that bees play in pollinating plants. If this decline is not reversed, the implications for vegetables, fruit and all plant life could be

serious. Indeed, some scientists predict that without the bee, all known life might be threatened!

The writer manages to relate the topic to the reader in a dramatic fashion. Interestingly, the writer is no longer so much concerned with facts but has now begun to enter a more persuasive mode.

Topic sentences

A simple way to organise information is to gather facts that go together and put them into chunks. Young children find it helpful if they use sub-headings, eg:

What cats eat

Most cats are fed on a diet of wet and dry cat food. Wet cat food is a mixture of either fish or animal meat. It can be bought in tins or pouches. The meat is covered in a flavoured jelly. Domestic cats may also be fed dry food, which is rather like crunchy biscuits. This is a compound derived from meat or fish. If cats eat dry food, they should drink plenty of water. Cats also supplement the diet that their owners feed them by eating insects like spiders and some may even catch mice and birds.

The heading can be turned into a 'topic sentence'. The topic sentence tells the reader what the paragraph is going to be about. It introduces the other sentences. So I could turn the heading above into a topic sentence with which to open the paragraph:

Cats eat a range of food. *Most of them are fed on a diet of wet and dry cat food. Wet cat food is a mixture of either fish or animal meat, etc.*

When teaching topic sentences, it can help to begin by deciding the sub-heading and then turning that into a topic sentence. It is also important to spend time reading samples and imitating them. For instance, many non-chronological reports begin with some sort of definition (*A palomino is a type of horse which ...*). This type of opening can be imitated (*A whale is a type of mammal which ...*).

Topic sentences are usually found at the start of paragraphs – but may also fall in the middle or at the end. Of course, this is more sophisticated and not generally something young children should need. Here are some topic sentences from different types of writing. It should be obvious what the rest of the paragraph is going to be about. In the main, they are statements but can also be written as questions:

Topic sentence used to start the paragraph	Subject of the paragraph
<i>In the village there is a school.</i>	Information about the school.
<i>Otters are hard to find.</i>	Where otters are found.
<i>Next, you will need to assemble the tent.</i>	How to assemble the tent.
<i>Lions have a limited diet.</i>	The Lion's diet.
<i>There are many reasons why a new supermarket should not be built.</i>	The reasons why the supermarket should not be built.
<i>Not much equipment is needed to be a scuba diver.</i>	Equipment needed for scuba diving.
<i>Bicycling makes a good activity.</i>	Reasons for bicycling being a good activity.
<i>After lunch, we visited the Butterfly House.</i>	The Butterfly House.
<i>Have you ever wondered what a Blue Whale looks like?</i>	Description of the Blue Whale.

When a question is used, the rest of the paragraph answers the question. In non-fiction, paragraph changes are made when a new topic or section of information is started or to make a new point or argument.

Building up information in the paragraph

Once the overall plan has been decided, then the children need to become experienced at gathering information, thinking through ideas and sorting these onto the plan so that each section is not muddled but contains relevant information and ideas.

Most paragraphs begin with topic sentences that introduce the topic. The rest of the sentences are the information that follows on from the topic sentence – they will add in information or provide explanation, making key points or providing facts. So, if a paragraph begins with the words '*lions have a limited diet*', one would expect that the rest of the paragraph would be about their diet.

A close look at non-fiction will soon help children begin to build different strategies for adding in more facts. In some cases, the writer needs to organise the information by order and will therefore need temporal/time connectives, eg *first, next, later, after that, finally*. These are useful in writing recounts, instructions and explanations where a logical order may be important. They can also be used to list reasons and establish an argument for something:

First, next, after that, meanwhile, subsequently, finally.

On other occasions the writers may need to add in extra facts:

also, additionally, furthermore, moreover, as well as that ...

Reasons may need to be organised or explained:

some people think that, another reason, it could also be argued that, another key fact is that ... so, because, therefore, if.

Other views or ideas may need to be introduced:

on the other hand, however, although, in contrast, whereas, similarly.

Non-fiction is often about specific events, creatures or objects. However, it may also be written in a more general fashion about a subject such as 'whales' or 'foxes' or 'baby birds'.

Baby birds are born in all kinds of places. Most are born in nests that can be found in trees. For instance, rooks build their nests right at the very top of tall trees. Some birds build their nests inside trees. Woodpeckers use their sharp beaks to drill holes into the tree trunks where they lay their eggs. A few baby birds live on the ground. Skylarks disguise their nests in tall grass so that predators do not find them. A very small number of baby birds live on or near water. Birds like swans and moorhens build their nests at the water's edge.

The writer has used generalising words and phrases such as 'most, some, a few, a very small number' to talk about different places where birds nest. This allows the writer to refer 'in general'. These words and phrases may be very handy in such writing, eg: *the majority, the minority, most, many, nearly all, all, some, generally, a few, a handful, several, a small number, they tend to, they, their, ...*

Activity

- Read, collect and experiment with ways to ‘hook’ a reader’s interest, for instance by using questions to draw in a reader.
- Find ways to powerfully open and end non-fiction.
- Focus on reading to see how to create topic sentences and then link information into a section.
- Practise writing paragraphs/ sections, especially openings/ endings and weaving information together.
- Read, collect and use **connectives** and **generalisers**.
- Create with the children ‘writing toolkits’ which clearly show how to create different effects in writing.

Using the detail

In non-fiction writing, it is often the extra detail that enriches and makes writing more interesting to read. Otherwise it might become a stark list of facts. It is probably worth reminding ourselves that to write well, we need to be both fascinated by the subject but also to be experts – to know plenty. If we do not know plenty then how can we ever hope to inform and interest our reader? For instance, when I was at school we ‘did’ the Egyptians. I can still recall that one pharaoh was buried mummified alongside a model brewery so that he could drink beer in the next life! For non-fiction writing to be effective there has to be some emotional commitment by the writer. Good non-fiction writing is a form of storytelling – it is ‘fact telling’, complete with the same urgency, passion and excitement as a good yarn.

Making information your own so that it is something that you genuinely know about, is made easier if the children engage with the information in many different ways:

Activity

- Re-draw information as a chart, plan, illustration, labelled picture, poster, flow chart;
- Prepare a presentation using PowerPoint;
- Visit another class to present information as a group or pair;
- Hot seat someone in role as expert;
- Role-play a television interview with an expert;
- Read a section of information and challenge children to find the key facts within a time limit;
- Play 'just a minute' in which children talk about a topic for one minute;
- Play 'the odd one out' in which children have to select a piece of information that does not 'fit in';
- Read a section and turn it into a sort of story map. Then retell in pairs;
- Use highlighters to locate information;
- Write a section which contains five true facts and one that is untrue – 'spot the false fact';
- Cut up a simple model of a text type into sections and ask the children to sort it into the right order;
- Cut up a paragraph sentence by sentence and ask the children to sort it out into the right order;
- Provide an illustration and a paragraph – the children use the information to label the picture (e.g. a picture of a roman soldier and a paragraph about what soldiers wore);
- Use cloze procedure – prepare this by copying out and information passage but omit the facts, leaving blank spaces for the children to fill;
- Turn information into a newspaper item;
- Turn information into a letter or diary entry;
- Create posters using information;
- Make 'Amazing Fat' lists;
- Design 'Fact Buildings with different rooms holding different sections of information on a topic;
- Interview the word expert on a topic;

- Change a piece of non-fiction into another format, eg turn a report on an animal into a news bulletin;
- Turn a report into a web of information, illustrate and design as a poster for other children;
- Role-play being a 'Fact Robot' which can tell you anything;
- Rewrite a piece of non-fiction changing the viewpoint, eg rewrite a report about a pet by someone who hates animals;
- Use facts and create an advert, eg of a favourite animal, or sell off the pyramids;
- Role-play a 'phone in' in which children pretend to 'phone in' to a radio programme and ask questions about a topic for an expert to answer;
- Hold a 'cat walk' display where children walk down the 'cat walk' and present pieces of information.

Help children write engaging non-fiction by ensuring that they:

- are interested in the topic;
- are experts and know a lot of information;
- have drawn, discussed, acted out and engaged with the information in many different ways;
- become used to finding, recognising and using intriguing facts to make their writing memorable.

Noticing the tiniest bits

Non-fiction writing is not just matter of connectives. Children also enjoy finding other sorts of words that non-fiction writers need, including technical vocabulary as well as formal language. Such words can be collected, listed and re-used. For instance, in more formal writing, the word 'happens' might be dropped in favour of 'occurs'. Savouring such language is an important part of both reading and becoming a writer. However, this is made even more powerful if the teacher remembers to revisit and

use the words in different situations so that the children hear language that is probably not part of their everyday vocabulary being used repetitively.

Non-fiction vocabulary often hinges around nouns and noun phrases. You have to have the right term – ‘shark’ rather than ‘fish’, ‘Alsatian’ rather than ‘dog’. Furthermore, non-fiction may require precise details that require noun phrases, eg not ‘turn the thingy’ but ‘turn the blue, protruding handle’ or even ‘turn the blue, protruding handle on the right-hand side’.

Of course, at the heart of engaging non-fiction you will find nuggets of information. It is this that brings the writing alive. These fragments need to be gathered, enjoyed and used in the writing. *For instance, did you know that bumblebees are actually aerodynamically impossible and should not really be able to fly?*

Children enjoy quirky information. Whatever topic is being covered, it is worth the teacher spending time making sure that such interesting, factual nuggets are there to be alighted upon.

Encourage children to use their reading for whatever they need – from finding spellings to punctuation to special words and factual nuggets.

Resources

Jumpstart! Literacy by Pie Corbett – this one has lots of spelling and sentence games – also writing, drama and learning games.

‘Talk for writing across the curriculum: how to teach non-fiction writing 5 – 12 yrs’. By Pie Corbett and Julia Strong (Open University Press).

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