

Visual Images: Stimuli for Creative Writing

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By using evocative visual imagery, Amy Newsham found that young 'reluctant writers', were easily transformed into 'engaged and enthused writers'.

Writing creatively

Creative Writing underpins everything that we do as teachers of Literacy and English. It develops a lifelong love of stories, both in creating and reading them. It allows students to explore brand new ideas, which are sometimes beyond their current perspective or experiences; imagine the unknown; it fosters creativity, engagement and enjoyment of stories; and it develops students' empathy skills and their ability to see from different viewpoints. All the while doing so, it advances writing skills: descriptions, character creation, developing perspective, paragraphing, whole sentence construction and cohesion, engaging the reader, use of punctuation for effect and vocabulary.

Creative Writing is vital and it supports everything that we want to achieve in the classroom. We want students that think innovatively and imaginatively. We want students who enjoy reading and creating stories that are exciting to read. We want students to think about others and their perspectives. We want students who understand the technical processes of writing and the impact it has on the reader.

What is Creative Writing?

I asked my Year 7 class to define Creative Writing and quite surprisingly, we came up with similar ideas. This is what they said:

'Creative Writing is where you make up a story or an idea using your imagination. It can be about anything that you like!'

'It is where you can show somebody something that is quite personal to you. It can be something that you have never told somebody before.'

'You can make up anything by using your imagination and words.'

Here, my Year 7 class have echoed the very same views that I have mentioned previously. Catching students' imaginations and enjoyment has to come before they can actively start learning about the technicalities of the writing process. That is the natural order of things: we get interested in something and *then* we will learn the intricacies of it. You don't learn different swimming

strokes before you have been in the water. What happens first is a love of splashing about – playing with the water. And this is exactly the same with stories – we need to develop a love of playing with language and stories first, and then the writing processes can be taught and learnt.

Do we have to?



Despite the importance Creative Writing has in the classroom, it can be difficult to get students to actively enjoy the writing process and spark up their 'think tank'. We are too often met with the moans of 'Awww! Miss! Do we have to?' or the particularly famous 'How long does it have to be? Is this long enough?' Hearing these whines can be quite de-

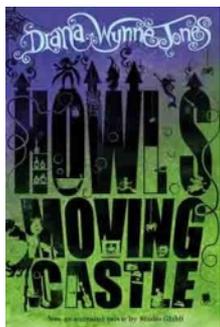
moralising for any teacher and there is a clear way that we can eradicate them from our classroom – we can focus on the Visual Image and its many forms.

I have used the Visual Image to inspire my current Year 7 class' writing and it has proven to be extremely beneficial and successful. My Year 7 class are small group of 15 students and their attainment levels range from L3c – L4a - six of these students are just hitting the Level 3 Assessment Criteria. So, as you can see, they are a mixed ability class and some students are struggling to attain the Governmental 'National Averages'. Despite being a class in a Secondary School, attainment and abilities are quite similar to that which you would see and expect at KS2. The strategies and main concepts that I am going to discuss can easily be transferred and adapted to suit any Key Stage.

Starting from images

ENGLISH 4-11: ONLINE ARTICLE

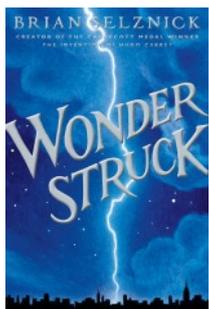
At the beginning of the school year, it was a struggle to get this class to write for sustained periods because they simply detested any form of writing. This is primarily because they struggle with some, or most of the key skills that are needed. If I wanted the students to write and to do it well (which, of course, I did!); I would have to tap into something that spoke to them, a stimulus that would fire their imaginations. I decided to do this through the Visual Image looking at film artwork, Graphic Novels and picture books.



To begin, I decided to look at extending students' use of vocabulary in their writing. To do this, I used the artwork of 'Howl's Moving Castle.' 'Howl's Moving Castle' is a Japanese animated film inspired by Diana Wynne Jones' book of the same name. I chose this artwork because, quite simply, the illustrations are mind-blowing – they are beautiful, other worldly

creations, filled with a mystical surrealism that entrances any audience. I got students into mixed ability pairs and I gave each pair an image of a setting. I gave them thinking time to just sit and look at the image and all of its details, and then I asked them to talk about the image using specific discussion points: what do you think is happening and why? Where is this place? Why do you think this? Would you like to visit this place? Why? This discussion generated lots of ideas and the classroom was awash with positive creativity. From this, students then had to work together to write some words on post-its to describe the setting. To begin with, their vocabulary choices were fairly simplistic and uninspiring, for example: 'freaky', 'scary' and 'big'. After they had done this, I asked students to use a thesaurus to look for more imaginative words and they came up with: 'daunting', 'unusual' and 'gigantic'. Their vocabulary choices had greatly improved and most importantly so had their confidence. From doing this simple activity, students were actively thinking about their language choice and how it effects reader's enjoyment; they were beginning to *play* with language.

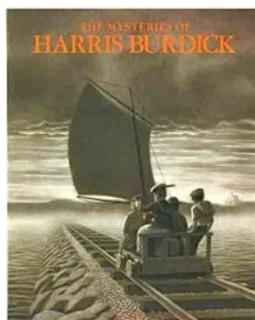
Developing narratives



To get students to start analysing the purpose and significance of structure, I decided to look at Brian Selznick's *Wonderstruck*. In the widely-acclaimed *Wonderstruck*, Selznick combines the written word and the visual image beautifully through a series of elaborate illustrations, which are supported with a timeless narrative. I gave students a selection of illustrations

from the same sequence, and in groups, they had to put them in order. This activity allowed students to discuss

the plot and how the structure of the images altered the plot's events and outcomes. These are high level and perceptive skills, which the students did with ease, due to the tangibility of the visual image: they could see the story; it was there in front of them. It was also very interesting to watch and be a part of, as each group had a different selection, and therefore came up with a different narrative. When we discussed this, students were able to analyse and comment on the significance of structure, again, another high level skill and a difficult skill to grasp and understand. Students could also understand how to manipulate the structure of a narrative in order to alter the events and reader's perceptions; again, another high level skill, which even some established writers fail to grasp.



After we had done these activities, we thought about whole text construction and creating a sustained piece of Creative Writing. I got students into groups of four and gave each group an image from Chris Van Allsburg's *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*. These images are beautiful and they really inspire and spark up the imagination.

They depict a character or a situation, and they are particularly ambiguous and open up to interpretation. Therefore, they are brilliant for discussion and Creative Writing. Again, I gave the students discussion focuses and time to talk about the images in detail. Talking about writing is essential, as it allows students to talk through their ideas with peers; gain and adapt other ideas; *play* with the stories that they can see in front of them, and have independence and authority of their writing and ideas.

Once students had discussed their ideas, I asked them to plan their narrative. I gave them the ultimate freedom of how they planned their work – it was entirely up to them how much or little they planned and how they went about it. There were models available for those that wanted them, and the lower ability students used them out of free choice.

However, some students relished in the responsibility and freedom they were having.

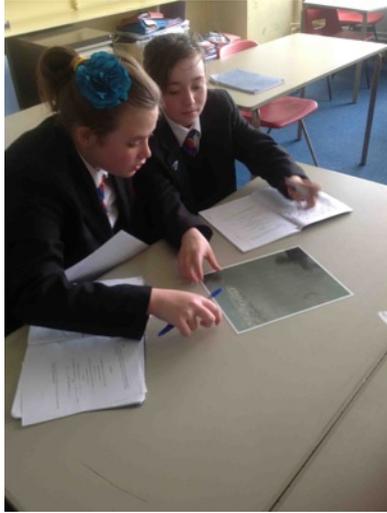


I then asked students to write their narratives based on their *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* image. The classroom turned deadly quiet, as all students were entirely focussed on their narratives and the writing process. You could literally hear a pin drop; it was brilliant! All of these students previously could be classified as 'reluctant writers' and now they were

ENGLISH 4-11: ONLINE ARTICLE

utterly transformed: they were enthused, budding writers and they didn't want the lessons to end. Hooray – this is what we want as Literacy teachers!

Transformation



Below, are some extracts from students' narratives, which they typed up on computers after they had drafted them by hand:

'I was trying to run but I couldn't, I was too scared. There in the middle of the room, stood the scariest thing I had ever witnessed.'

'It was more terrifying that all of my nightmares put

together. Its teeth looked sharper than a kitchen knife. Everytime it took a step closer my heart started to beat harder and harder. It had long green eyelashes, longer than my finger.'

'The pitch black old rugged cave was enormous. It didn't look friendly. I slowly tiptoed in, petrified of what I might find, bones with. Old mangy flesh still attached. It was freezing suddenly. SNAP! CRUNCH! CRACK!'

'I was eating my first child. I was getting full of the young peasants. I wanted royal blood but I was having so much fun making the children scream for their life.'

These examples truly highlight students' positive engagement with the Visual Image, and as a result of this, they have written sustained, tense and exciting narratives. Students who originally could be termed as 'reluctant writers', were easily transformed into 'engaged and enthused writers'. This was achieved by using the Visual Image to foster enjoyment and creativity, and using it as a tool for language development, structure analysis, creative ideas and whole text construction.

All of these resources and ideas can be adapted and used through all Key Stages.

References

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