

**Scottish
Book Trust**
inspiring readers and writers



Creative writing for secondary pupils

Activities to support writing in school

Age 12-18

CFE Levels Third, Fourth and Senior Phase

Resource created by Scottish Book Trust

scottishbooktrust.com



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About this resource

This resource supports teachers wanting to build on writing skills with their pupils and includes activities for use individually, with a partner or as a whole group task.

The activities in the resource are designed to give ideas for story writing with pupils in ways that are authentic to fiction writers.

Differentiation may be required for different levels but it is hoped the activities and approaches will prove adaptable. Included are tasks involving partner working, providing scaffolding, stimulus and use of feedback providing opportunities for pupils to develop their own critical skills.

The activities are designed for use in a way that suits individual settings and you may find it appropriate to only do certain tasks depending on your focus of development at a particular time.

Tasks include ideas created by writer, Linda Cracknell.

This resource has several aims:

- To introduce pupils to important features that will support their writing.
- To consider and use techniques used by writers of fiction.
- To give opportunities for pupils to develop writing skills and create their own work.

Useful links to inspire

- [Authors Live](#)
- [Live Literature](#)

- [The Young Writers section](#) of Scottish Book Trust's website
- Scottish Book Trust's monthly [50 word fiction competition](#)

Getting started

LIT 3-25a

Writers usually need to key into 'real life' for their ideas, using observation skills and trusting their intuition when they sense a story unfolding. Watching Authors Live as well as applying for funding through Live Literature can be excellent starting points to inspire and get started.

Pupils can be supported to develop writing skills using some of the following ideas:

Activity 1: Notebooks

Writers will tell you they use notebooks in order to train themselves as observers and to record thoughts and observations of daily events before they are forgotten. Having a notebook on hand, or being able to make notes on a phone can support pupils develop a bank of material and sharpen observational skills at the same time.

Overhearing a conversation or witnessing an event can be a great starting point for a story and making notes will support memory of details witnessed.

Activity 2: Provide a stimulus

It can sometimes be difficult getting started so offer pupils a stimulus to respond to:

- a photograph or painting
- an object to handle, a piece of music
- a letter or other document
- a smell
- a short walk

- or use the opening passage of a novel or film clip
- you could also consider using [story sticks](#).

[Poetry stones](#) are also a great way to spark ideas. They can be used as an impetus for writing, or as a starter activity for a lesson. They are versatile, can be used with any age group and made complex as required.

Activity 3: What if. . .

In pairs, ask pupils to consider '*what if . . .*' using their imaginations to generate discussion as well as some story ideas or a possible list of options around the stimulus.

Activity 4: Timed writing

We don't often know what we want to write until we start, so sometimes it's helpful to generate short pieces of writing without having too much forethought.

This works well as a warm-up activity at the beginning of a writing session, encouraging confidence in generating words on a page while subconsciously developing creativity.

Teacher modelling here is supportive and short bursts of intense writing like this can often generate the key scenes in a story.

Activity 5: Free writing

Give pupils the first few words of a sentence central to a story idea, or the beginning of a published story. Ask them to free-write for five minutes without stopping.

If stuck, they can write 'I'm stuck, I'm stuck, I'm stuck,' until some other words materialise. The aim is to produce content/amount rather than making sense in a limited time!

Sometimes words run freely, or a small unexpected idea or image will emerge direct from the intuition. These can be underlined on re-reading and shared with the class.

Once comfortable with five minutes, the time limit can be increased gradually to extend.

Characters

ENG 3-27a, ENG 3-31a

Creating characters is fun and knowing your characters will help understand their reasons for doing things, saying things and behaving in a certain way. Characters can be completely made up, based entirely on someone you know, or a mixture of both. (Discretion is needed if writing about someone you know!)

Writers use character descriptions to highlight personal qualities that are important to that character's individuality. Thinking about characters and what makes a good character can support your writing.

Activity 6: What were they like?

In pairs, groups or as a class, take a few minutes to think of other characters you know who have been portrayed in a certain way, can you think about how they were described by the author?

The aim of a fiction writer is to create emotion in the reader and the writer should have a clear idea of what they want their reader to feel – shock, humour, sadness.

Activity 7: Circle of influence

This exercise can help develop a technique for creating new characters or reminding yourself about characters you already know - family members for example.

Start with a small circle in the middle of your page, write your character's name and age inside the circle e.g. Nadim, 16. Now draw a larger circle outside your first circle.

In this circle write where your character lives. Is it a city or a village? A house or a flat? If it's a flat, how many storeys up is it?

Now draw another circle around the outside. In this next circle write who they live with, if anyone. Keep drawing more circles and for each circle include the following details:

- What they do/did for a living. Are they at school? If so, which year?
- Two things they like to do.
- Three good qualities they have.
- Three negative qualities.
- What they want or ambitions they might have.
- What is stopping them getting what they want?
- A person? A lack of something i.e. money? An external obstacle i.e. all trains are cancelled? An internal obstacle i.e. lack of confidence?
- Any other details you would like to add.

You will now have a good idea of your character's personality, desires and personal circumstances. More importantly, for storytelling, you have something that the character wants and a reason why they can't have it – a great basis for drama and tension.

Follow-up activity:

You could write a letter or a speech or monologue in your character's voice telling someone about their situation. What do they want and why can't they get it? Who are they talking to? Are they able to resolve the conflict? Think about how they speak, are they older, younger? Words they might use. What's the tone of their speech – is it urgent, excited, feisty or angry?

Activity 8: Creating complex characters

Central to a good story almost always lies a great character (or two) who stand out from the rest. Writers spend time crafting characters who are strong, controversial, perhaps having flaws, hoping they are unique and memorable.

For writers the story can come from knowing the character really well. Stories are often made from the collision of a character with the circumstances they find themselves in.

In groups, think about, discuss and record findings to share with class.

Circumstances where a character is in a situation that develops as a story.

- What was the character like?
- How did the situation affect them?

Activity 9: Building on internal features of a character

Using photographs of a wide range of footwear from magazines: Pupils can choose a pair of feet and build their character upwards, considering features such as age, name, what they wear and then gradually include internal features with prompts like:

- A favourite place/food
- What they are afraid of
- What they are good at
- The worst/best thing that's ever happened to them
- An ambition

Remember to check the character's pockets, could there be anything that leads this character into a story?

In pairs, take turns to ask about and then discuss each other's character.

What assumptions might there be about this character? Are these based on how the character looks? Discuss why each of you have decided on certain character traits.

Consider: 'what would your character do if ...?'

- They witnessed someone shoplifting,
- They knew someone was being bullied?
- They overheard an interesting/important conversation in the local store

Now write a short paragraph involving their character in one of these situations.

Consider the effect of the character's emotional or mental state on their observations at this point in the story, e.g. if they are escaping from something they will notice different things to if they are desperately hungry.

Follow-up activity:

Now knowing their characters better:

- Pupils might write short scenes in which they place the character in different situations to see how they respond.
- In pairs, write a scene in which their two characters meet and interact with each other. (a less complicated story can often be created purely from the interaction of two complex characters when word use is limited)

Setting

LIT 3-26a, ENG 3-31a

Creating a sense of place

Writers often find it difficult to make convincing settings of places they don't actually know and will visit a place to research for their writing, involving direct observation.

Pupils can find this difficult too, they may require support to sharpen their

observations and research involving Google Earth, maps, photographs and films can help with this.

A vividly described setting will help bring the story alive for the reader and pupils need to imagine they are taking a video of everything happening and include detail.

The reader needs to feel like they are actually there, feel that they are physically there and this involves drawing on all of the senses not just the visual.

Activity 10: Using senses

Involve pupils in experiencing a place through different senses and if they can de-familiarize themselves from what they know it helps to sharpen observations. Consider being in a museum at night or school in the holidays. What would be different?

With eyes closed:

- Experience *film* trailers, discuss sound and how this made them feel.
- In pairs, take turns to lead each other somewhere blindfolded and note sensory findings from a familiar setting.

Listen to audio clips of different places, for example the seashore or perhaps make digital recordings of different settings to discuss.

Teacher led: Select a passage from a book and highlight the use of a character's senses to evoke a place, think about sensory imagery and discuss:

Editing

LIT 3-23a

Language for impact

Thinking about the use of words and how they are used in sentences can add to the interest of a story. Considering exactly what they wish to convey and how best that

can be delivered using: metaphor, similes, onomatopoeia, adverbs, adjectives and even using verbs with metaphorical weight for effect!

For example, if my character is like a cat, how would she move? Compare:

She walked like a slinky cat across the room.

She slinked across the room.

Or in a dramatic situation:

The Janitor let out a loud noise at me which sounded a bit like thunder.

The Janitor thundered at me.

Encourage pupils to review first drafts and in key places, for example at the introduction of a character, or where there is drama (a thesaurus can sometimes be handy).

Activity 11: What's the story?

When limited to story length, pupils need to focus on what is important in the story and it may be more useful to think of the story as having a shape with some kind of change happening by the end rather than focussing on a 'plot'. Storyboards can be useful to consider key movements through the story either in advance of writing or to rationalise a first draft. Often pupils require support with starting their story and considering how it will end. Storyboards allow insight on whether the story could 'Come in later, leave earlier', tailoring writing to the specific purpose (filmmakers will use this technique to tell the story through the most active scenes). Partner working on drafts to give feedback would support this idea.

Useful first steps to guide writers are:

1. Try to summarise your story in one sentence of no more than 20 words.
2. How many scenes does it have? Too many can be difficult to include.
3. Who's the main character and how well does the reader get to know them?

4. What has changed by the end? What has your character learnt or realised or what has happened to them? How will this be clear to the reader?

Professional writers know that 'most writing is re-writing', a task which is difficult to schedule within school, meets with pupil resistance and can often become a tweaking of words rather than considering the effectiveness of the entire story. Being ruthless and allowing an interval of time between drafting and subsequent re-reading and editing can be helpful and using a revision checklist when editing work can support. Consider:

- Detail: be exact so your reader can see, hear, feel, taste each scene.
- Adjectives and adverbs: treat them as precious coins. You only have a few to spend!
- Padding: have you said the same thing in different ways, repeated the same idea, or gone off the point? CUT!
- Clarity: is there something vital the reader must know in order to understand the story? Have you made this 100% clear?
- Accuracy: are your facts correct, or do you need to do some research?
- Subtlety: are you telling the reader what to think or feel when it's already quite obvious?
- First line: does it hook the reader in and make them question what's going to happen? Does it establish the tone of the story?
- Last line: does it feel satisfying and trigger the reader's imagination to continue the story?
- Read it aloud: are there repeated words, sentences that make you breathless, or you stumble over? Does the dialogue sound unnatural?
The writer should find the best way of saying it and say it powerfully ONCE.

Finding an audience

LIT 3-20a

When working on revision of written pieces, having an audience can be hugely motivating, especially as an encouragement to proper revision and completion of a story. Consider peer/class retelling of a final draft or possibly discuss class publication of stories for department or parents adding authenticity to the piece. Inviting a published author into the school or organising an internal 'Book Festival' with readings can establish a sense of occasion at the end of the project.