

Text selection

When preparing to teach literacy through literature, text selection is the first step. We work with texts from well-written children's literature, exemplifying the children's literary canon. The texts should be age-appropriate, even if they are beyond the independent reading level of the students. They should also offer the potential to open students' worlds, expanding the scope of their knowledge and experience.

Most importantly, the books must have language features that we call 'literate'. We want students to think and act as literate people, and for this to happen, the texts they study need to contain literate resources. The language needs to be complex enough for us to be able to explore the wording with students, to talk about how the writer put these words together to create an engaging story and ultimately to show students how they too can be a writer, using these resources in their own writing.

In the early years, we will likely study entire stories in detail, as picture books are mostly short and the language brief. As students travel through the primary years, they can move on to short novels or chapter books written for young children, and then to longer novels and well-developed short stories.

Longer texts do not lend themselves to a detailed study of the entire text, and so we select focus passages from within the text for close study. Within these focus passages we discuss the specific language choices the author has made: the literary devices and the grammatical and word choices that make the text effective. These are the language resources that work to give structure to a story, to move the story along and to create emotional impact on the reader.

In this chapter we examine what we look for in a text, and then how we choose focus passages. Within each passage, we give an idea of the various kinds of literary devices and language choices that provide us with rich material for study

WHAT KINDS OF BOOKS?

We choose stories that we think will affect students in positive ways. They should have engaging themes, and characters with whom students can identify. Themes such as adventure, resilience, friendship, loyalty and acceptance of difference all make for enriching discussions in the classroom. We look for strong characters who are proactive and react in positive ways in the face of adversity, and who find, in the course of the narrative, that they have other people on their side.

Bearing in mind that many of our most marginalised students already experience serious challenges in their lives, we also choose stories that have uplifting endings. We want them to be inspired by the characters they're reading about and receive the message that they too have agency in their lives.

We look for quality literature that represents the lives of our minority students, because we want all our students to be able to identify with characters in stories. However, some kinds of stories may be unsuitable to work within the context of this teaching sequence. For example, even though it's important for the interests of Indigenous students to be included in our literary repertoire, we don't select Dreaming stories because our purpose is to move to writing. We can't compose a new 'Dreaming' story any more than we can add another book to the Bible. We read traditional Indigenous stories at other times.

Ideally, we should choose books that we love ourselves, because it's our job to convey the excitement and pleasure of the book to the students. The text has to have the potential to engage all students in our class, usually over several weeks of daily study (but we do a lot of work to create this engagement). It may be that the books are not entirely to our personal taste, but as teachers we recognise their value as 'mentor texts' (Marchetti & O'Dell, 2015; McDonald, 2017), as exemplars of literate language that we can make enjoyable, that challenge and extend students in their reading, and will also serve as models for writing.

We avoid using simplified, 'high interest–low level' texts designed for struggling readers. This is because the very language and literacy resources that we want to teach have generally been omitted from such texts. Instead we identify rich, literate texts and use our pedagogy to support the engagement of students with these texts.

Below are examples of the sorts of texts that are suitable for different age groups. For a more detailed account of the different types of texts appropriate for class study, see Lorraine McDonald's *A literature companion for teachers* (2017).

Picture books

In the early years there are many kinds of texts we can study. We can choose realistic stories, folk tales, fables and fairy tales, or fantasy stories. In many picture books for young children, characters engage in everyday activities, so that children can easily identify with the relationships or the settings that are portrayed. Many books feature animals with human characteristics. Animal stories are often humorous, and may have the potential to let children confront serious events or emotions; young children can empathise with the animal characters vicariously, at a safer distance than if the characters were portrayed as human.

We select books with illustrations that extend and enrich the text, sharing the load of meaning-making. This way young readers have fewer words to process, reducing the cognitive load. At the same time, through the illustrations, we can teach about literary devices such as foreshadowing, conveying characters' emotional reactions and personification. Examples of suitable texts are *Rosie's walk* (Hutchins, 1968), *Handa's surprise* (Browne, 1994) and *The pig in the pond* (Waddell & Barton, 2011), as well as *Big rain coming* (Germein & Bancroft, 1999), discussed in depth in this book.

As their decoding skills strengthen, students rely less on illustrations to help them make meaning from the text, and we begin to shift to texts with words that carry more of the meaning-making load.

Because the quality texts we choose will become models for student writing, rhyming books are not generally suitable for this teaching sequence. For marginalised students, developing vocabulary is a high priority. If we use rhyming books, we narrow the choice of vocabulary appropriate for our writing goals. Of course rhyming books are important for developing phonemic awareness and prosody, and they're fun for students too, so we find other times to read them to and with our classes.

Short stories and longer texts

As children progress through the year levels, we continue working with picture books, but the plots may become more involved and there may be more characters in the story. By Year 2 we may be using short novels or chapter books, which still provide the support of illustrations. In the middle to upper primary years, short stories are useful because we can read the whole text together and study its whole structure.

WHICH FOCUS PASSAGES?

Once we have chosen our text, we search for useful passages within the text for close study with our class. Typically we choose passages for two reasons: first, because we can clearly identify their purpose within the longer text; and second, because they exemplify particular features of narrative writing. These features might include:

- an orientation to a story
- an event that sets up and expands on a problem (which may also be part of an orientation)
- a description of a setting
- character descriptions
- suspenseful action sequences
- an event that has an impact on a character or demonstrates relationships between characters
- a character's reflection (often as part of the resolution to the narrative).

Once we have identified the broad purpose of the passage, we look within it to see what literary devices and language resources are available for us to work with.

When we study the literate resources in texts, our goal is not simply to get the students to appreciate the quality of the writing and recognise the literary devices, although this is certainly part of what we do. We can take our students much further than this. We want students to appreciate the writer's intentional language *choices*, to understand that the writer has chosen their words carefully. Of course we cannot know for certain what was in the mind of a writer when they crafted their text, but we can recognise that they have used specific techniques with intent. Writers choose specific literary devices because they can create an impact on their reader: they can bring the reader along with the story, and they can make the reader feel particular emotions.

To appreciate this, we need to be interested in *why* a writer would make certain grammatical choices and understand *how* a literary device works to achieve its effect. We need to appreciate the purposes of the literary writing – or the ‘So what?’.

We can identify many, many kinds of literate resources in literate texts. Here we touch briefly on just a few techniques that we know will provide rich sources of conversation and practice in classrooms:

- building imagery
- creating suspense
- reflective writing.

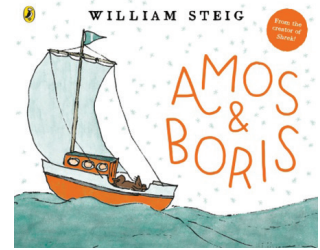
In the following section we present three books that are suitable for study: *Amos and Boris*, a picture book by William Steig (2018), *Rowan of Rin* by Emily Rodda (2004) and *Blueback* by Tim Winton (2009). We highlight focus passages within each book that we might select to explore with our class. We explain their broad purpose, and then identify the literate resources that make each passage a rich subject for study, demonstrating how we might go about selecting other books and focus passages.

Selecting focus passages from *Amos and Boris*

Amos and Boris is a heart-warming fable from William Steig. Because it contains many illustrations, this is a useful transition text as students move from reliance on imagery. It also contains many lovely passages, including dialogue to show the relationship between characters.

The orientation to the story shows us how a character can be introduced through their relationship with a setting. This passage, from the first page, both describes the setting (the ocean) and tells us about a character (Amos) through his response to that setting:

Amos, a mouse, lived by the ocean. He loved the ocean. He loved the smell of sea air. He loved to hear the surf sounds – the bursting breakers, the backwashes with rolling pebbles.



Steig develops Amos's character through his relationship to his setting.

He uses two senses (smell and sound) and expanded noun groups to build lovely imagery in our heads, without the need for illustrations (*the bursting breaker, the backwashes with rolling pebbles*).

The next two-sentence passage teaches us how to use expanded noun groups to create imagery and contrast features. Steig does this with one long descriptive, flowing sentence:

One night, in a phosphorescent sea, he marvelled at the sight of some whales spouting luminous water and later, lying on the deck of his boat gazing at the immense, starry sky, the tiny mouse Amos, a little speck of a living thing in the vast living universe, felt thoroughly akin to it all. Overwhelmed by the beauty and mystery of everything, he rolled over and over and right off the deck of his boat and into the sea.

Steig foregrounds time and place at the front of the sentence, the time phrase to mark the beginning of a disruption and the place phrase to begin this sense of euphoria. He carefully chooses mental verbs to let us into Amos's thinking (*marvelled, felt, overwhelmed*). He contrasts Amos with his surroundings through expanded noun groups (*the immense starry sky, contrasted with Amos, a little speck of a living thing in the vast living universe*). He then juxtaposes this reflection with the second sentence, which contains no beautiful adjectives, and brings Amos's euphoria to an abrupt and cold end, describing Amos's path with a string of 'where' adverbs and phrases (*over and over and right off the deck of his boat and into the sea*).

Selecting focus passages from *Rowan of Rin*

An example of a focus passage that sets up a problem is the opening four paragraphs of *Rowan of Rin* by Emily Rodda (2004, page 1):

One morning the people of Rin woke to find that the stream that flowed down the Mountain and through their village had slowed to a trickle. By nightfall even that small flow had stopped. The mill wheel lay idle. There was no water to turn its heavy blades. The bukshah drinking pool on the other side of the village was still. No bubbling stream was stirring it into life and keeping it topped up to the brim.

There was no change on the second day, or the third. By the fourth day the water in the pool was thick and brown. The bukshah shook their heavy heads and pawed the ground when they went to drink in the morning and the evening.

After five days the pool was so shallow that even little Annad, who was only five years old, could touch the bottom with her hand without getting her sleeve wet. And still the stream failed to flow.

On the evening of the sixth day the worried people met in the market square to talk.



Unlike the more familiar narrative structure of Orientation–Complication–Resolution, Emily Rodda includes the initiating problem right on the first page. From the reference to the stream flowing down

the Mountain in the first sentence, we can infer that the solution lies in negotiating a route up the Mountain and that this will be a quest story of some kind. This is a sophisticated narrative structure, one that's worthy of study.

Within this passage we can teach how to elaborate on a problem. Emily Rodda foregrounds with time phrases at the beginning of her sentences to worsen the problem over six days. Examples of how Rodda then emphasises the problem include rhythmic repetition (*no water ... no bubbling stream*), reactions of characters to the problem (the bukshah, little Annad, the worried people) and the use of a comparative (*so shallow that*).

At the same time, Rodda is introducing the characters and the setting. We enter a fantasy place from the past. It is populated with the people of Rin, the bukshah and later little Annad. Expanded noun groups build the imagery (*the stream that flowed down the Mountain and through their village, the bukshah drinking pool, the worried people*).

The next focus passage, from early in *Rowan of Rin* (page 16), is the description of Sheba the witch:

Sheba hunched her shoulders and stared at Rowan. In the firelight her eyes looked red. Her forehead was bound with a purple rag, and her hair hung like thin grey tails around her face. She smelt of ash and dust, old cloth and bitter herbs. Rowan reached her chair, placed the round yellow cheeses on her lap and backed swiftly away, holding his breath, trying not to look at her.

We use this passage because the character descriptions provide us with rich material to study. We can explore how writers construct their characters, making us respond to them as likeable, unlikeable, frightening or inspiring.

Rodda describes Sheba through her actions (*hunched, stared*), through the powerful use of colour (her red eyes suggest madness or at least restlessness, the purple rag brings to mind the occult, her grey hair tells us that Sheba is old) and through smell (Sheba *smelt of ash and dust, old cloth and bitter herbs*, and we can imagine the old woman in an airless cottage, the description hinting at a witch's cauldron). Finally, Rodda implies Sheba's fearful persona by describing Rowan's reactions (he *backed away swiftly*, held his breath and tried *not to look at her*). From this we can infer that Rowan didn't dare turn his back on her, she smelt unpleasant and he was afraid to hold her gaze.

A final rich passage from *Rowan of Rin* is the homecoming at the end of the book. It is a reflective passage that typically (but not always) occurs towards the end of a narrative text, as part of the resolution, and helps to comment on the action by representing a character's thoughts. Here we are privy to Rowan's thoughts as he reflects on his safe return to his village (page 135):

It seemed unbelievable that he was here, safe in the valley with the grass beneath his feet and the morning breeze in his face. He screwed his eyes shut, suddenly afraid that this was a dream, and he was still on the Mountain top with the fire, the ice, the terror and despair. But when he opened them again, the green fields of Rin were still there, and Star, and the stream bubbling beside him. It was true. They were home. They were safe. The water had come back to Rin. And they had come with it.

If we identify the verbs in this passage, the only observable action is in Rowan's eyes. And at the end of the passage we read a verb in past perfect tense to show completion (*had come back*). Remaining verbs are 'relational': there is no action; they describe states of being (*seemed, was, were*).

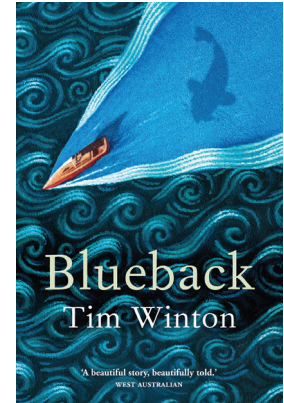
Rodda uses a clever contrasting device so that Rowan can compare his terror of the Mountain with his homecoming. Rowan shuts his eyes to think about the Mountain, with a vivid noun group used to describe it (*the Mountain top with the fire, the ice, the terror and the despair*). And when he opens his eyes, we get such a contrast in noun groups (*the green fields of Rin, the stream bubbling beside him*).

Rodda finishes this reflection with a series of emphatic short sentences to drive home to the reader that all's well that ends well (*It was true. They were home. They were safe*).

Selecting focus passages from *Blueback*

The following focus passage is an example of suspenseful writing from *Blueback* by Tim Winton (2009, page 9). The passage comes from Chapter 1 in the story, when we meet the groper, Blueback, for the first time through the eyes of the main character, Abel.

On the deepest dive, at his limit, Abel was almost at the end of his breath when he felt a rush in the water behind him. It felt like something big, like his mother passing. But at the corner of his eye he saw a blue shadow that blocked out the sun. He whirled around to see a huge mouth and an eye the size of a golfball coming at him. The mouth opened. He saw massive pegs of teeth as it came on in a terrible rush. Abel screamed in his snorkel and pushed hard off the bottom but the big blue shadow suddenly had him by the hand. The abalone he was holding came tearing out of his fingers. Abel thought he was about to die. He felt pain shoot up his arm. A vast flat tail blurred across his body. And then it was gone.



Words that tell us about senses can be powerful in narrative writing because they allow us, the readers, to experience events vicariously through the perspective of the story's characters. Note how Winton helps us experience Abel's first encounter with Blueback using sensing verbs (*felt, saw*):

- *he felt a rush in the water ... It felt like something big*
- *he saw a blue shadow*
- *He saw massive pegs of teeth*
- *He felt pain shoot up his arm*

Winton's action verbs also help to create our mental image of the scene. The actions (*whirled, screamed, pushed hard, blurred*) are enclosed in short sentences to tell us that they happened quickly. He builds the image with the use of simile and metaphor, which are two examples of figurative language, or 'figures of speech'. In both simile and metaphor, writers emphasise a particular feature of the thing they're describing by likening it to another thing that's familiar to readers. In a simile they do this explicitly, usually with 'as' or 'like' (*like his mother passing*); in a metaphor the comparison is implicit, and one thing 'is' another (McDonald, 2017, pages 117–118).

In creating a frightening image of Blueback, for example, Winton emphasises particular features as though they were behaving on their own (*a blue shadow that blocked out the sun, an eye the size of a golfball coming at him*). He invites us to see the groper as having not just large teeth (instead *massive pegs of teeth*). The metaphoric *pegs* suggest something dominating the mouth, something that might snap of their own accord. His similes and metaphors are constructed from vivid noun groups that include carefully chosen adjectives.

This emotionally engaging passage contains two important literary devices for building suspense: first, the gradual revelation of the thing (from a *rush* to *something big* to *an eye the size of a golfball*, and so on). Second, Winton intersperses the action of the scary creatures with character responses that engage the readers' emotions, letting us know just how terrified we should be (*Abel screamed in his snorkel and pushed hard off the bottom*).

Note the different kinds of verb (process) that help us empathise with the characters. In this short extract there are sensing processes (*he felt pain*) and mental processes (*Abel thought he was about to die*).

This first introduction to Blueback stands in sharp contrast with the next descriptive passage, in which the terror Abel felt on that first encounter has been transformed to a subsequent sense of wonder, as Abel and his mother return to take a second look at Blueback (page 11):

Abel and his mother slid down into the deep again and saw the fish hovering then turning, eyeing them cautiously as they came. It twitched a little and edged along in front of them to keep its distance. The big gills fanned. All its armoured scales rippled in lines of green and black blending into the dizziest blue. The groper moved without the slightest effort. It was magnificent; the most beautiful thing Abel had ever seen.

In this focus passage the eye and teeth metaphors have gone, replaced by noun groups (*armoured scales, lines of green and black blending into the dizziest blue*) and verbs (*hovered, turning, eyeing cautiously, fanned*) that emphasise the creature's splendour. The reader's orientation changes too, from perceiving Blueback as a threat (the groper is now *the most beautiful thing Abel had ever seen*).

Teaching these two passages in succession enables us to help students gain control over their own written descriptions, so that they can influence reader perceptions of characters, events and settings.

The final passage from *Blueback* is chosen as a description of a setting, in this case a beach after an environmental disaster (pages 103–104):

Abel had graduated from high school and was home on the holidays when all the pilchards died. There was no storm, no warning, no oil spill, no explanation. One morning he stumped down to the jetty to see the whole beach blackened with dead fish. The air roared with flies. Gulls hovered uncertainly over the stinking mess. Abel walked along the beach trying to understand it. He helped his mother load the truck with mushy piles of the fish and for hours they spread them on the soil of the orchard and the gardens.

'Something's wrong with the sea,' said his mother. 'This isn't right. It's not normal.'

We can use this passage to teach how to describe a setting powerfully. Winton brings multiple senses together to construct the scene. He invokes sight (*to see the whole beach blackened with dead fish*), sound (*The air roared with flies*) and smell (*the stinking mess*). There's even a textural reference (*mushy piles of the fish*).

Winton completes the description with a comment by an authoritative person, in this case Abel's mother. The comment leads the reader to know the stance we should take.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Where can I find books to study?

You can follow recommendations from school or state syllabus documents, as well as from the Children's Book Council of Australia, Premier's Reading Challenge and local librarians.

Can I let students choose the stories they prefer?

As a teacher, you have the skills to analyse the language of a text and determine whether the literate resources in a book are adequate, and interesting enough, to sustain study over time. Many students enjoy 'easier' formats of age-relevant text, such as comic-style presentations. These may be complex

multimodal texts, but they do not necessarily provide the rich language resources that students need if they are to engage with more academic texts and make their own writing effective.

Students can read their preferred books in free reading time and at home. Reading ‘easier’ books can be useful for encouraging students to practise reading and come to perceive the activity of reading as a satisfying way to spend their own time.

Won't the more advanced students be bored if they have to study just one story over several weeks or even a whole term? They already know how to read these books.

More advanced students may already know how to read and comprehend a story, but they are unlikely to have mastered the literary techniques that the writer has skillfully used, or even to be fully conscious of them. They are unlikely to know how to write like William Steig, Emily Rodda or Tim Winton.

All students can be involved in class discussions about a text, with the more advanced students having plenty to learn about the writer’s technique to apply in their own writing.

Should we choose books that let students read about their own culture, rather than other cultures they don't identify with?

We should vary the books we choose across the school year. We can find books that represent a huge diversity of cultures, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, the cultures of the many immigrant groups in Australia and cultures of people around the world.

It’s important that students do get the chance to see themselves reflected in the cultural lens of the characters they read about. It is equally important that we take the opportunity to use literature to explore cultures and contexts (both contemporary and historical) from outside our students’ own experience. This helps them to become members of a global literature culture.

Should I work on a book that I like? What if I don't absolutely love it?

Liking a book is necessary, but not the only criterion for choosing it. The book must also have literate resources that you can study and emulate.

Think about what a book offers you as a teaching resource, and how you can talk it up and sell it to your students. You certainly want to avoid working with a book that you dislike. But if a book has rich resources, you should be able to appreciate the techniques used and what the writer has achieved. You may find a particular writer’s style irksome, but know that your students will enjoy the characters.

Some books have themes that might be inappropriate for some of my students. They might be culturally inappropriate, or they might trigger trauma, for example. Should I avoid these books?

As with all choices in teaching, use your professional judgment. Follow school and curriculum/syllabus guidelines, knowing that not every text is appropriate for classroom study with every group of students.

IN SUMMARY

In Chapter 2 we have touched on the different kinds of literate resources we can find in literate texts. Our list is a starting point that we can add to as we build our repertoire of literate passages. For further detail on specific literary devices, refer to *A literature companion for teachers* (McDonald, 2017). Remember that our job as teachers is to go beyond simply teaching literary devices as technique and to help our students experience the impact that good writing can have on readers. In this way literary technique is no longer an object of interest restricted to the intellectually or academically capable, but a real resource for everyone to express and understand their human and emotional worlds.