

Using the *i-read* fiction shadow texts

“I’m bored, miss! Can’t we read something else?”

Many of us may remember that wearisome feeling as pupils, returning to a text again and again long after all interest has drained away. Or maybe as teachers we’ve been faced with the conflicting demands of consolidating children’s learning on the one hand and the need to keep them fully engaged as readers on the other.

Shadow texts – an intriguing name that catches the reader’s interest – provide an answer.

The basic idea is that your class will work on a substantial main text over a week or two of shared sessions, but when the children practise the skills introduced during these sessions, they will use a different, parallel, shadow text. Some may need the reassurance of working on the text they have already read with the teacher, and this extra support is provided in the consolidation task. But for many, the shadow text used in the extension task will inject new interest and challenge.

The shadow text is shorter than the main text, divided into sections which will fit into the literacy hour’s ‘independent activity’ slot, but linked to the main text through genre, structure, and theme. It is an easier read, aimed at matching children’s independent rather than shared reading level.

The shadow text faithfully ‘shadows’, or repeats, all the key teaching points, while at the same time providing the stimulus of a new text. Often it will capitalise on the interest generated by the main text – for example, the Year 4 historical story, set in a Victorian workhouse, arouses the children’s curiosity in some minor characters, who are then filled out in more detail in the shadow text. Not only does this connection provide support for the independent work; it also allows the reader to experience the story from other viewpoints. A unit for year 5, which focuses on legends, links two ‘loathly worm’ stories from the north of England, offering plenty of opportunities for spotting similarities and differences.

It’s an ideal mix – enough familiarity to give a sense of confidence in the task, and to encourage comparisons, but enough new material to engage the reader. We all know how difficult it is to achieve that balance; to find independent texts which build satisfactorily on shared work. Here it’s done for you. It also encourages children to make connections as they read, and, of course, since the author of the main text writes all the shadow texts, it provides room for studying individual authors.

Recently, criticism of the Literacy Strategy has focused on the failure to use whole texts; there seems to be a growing habit of using ‘bite-size’ snippets to teach key points. Although this is nowhere suggested or encouraged in the Strategy guidance, the sheer pressure of covering targets and objectives – let alone trying to fit the whole curriculum into a primary school day – can squeeze out quality texts. To quote Mike Rosen in a recent lecture:

“We are full of anecdotal evidence of classrooms where whole books *are not being read*; where books are chopped up into fragments which are then turned into worksheets; and these fragments are then used as examples for exercises on spotting verbs and similes.”

We worry about covering all the literacy objectives, but it doesn't help to cut down on text length in an attempt to save time. Children need a text that will involve them; a text that is cohesive enough to really get their teeth into, and interesting enough to stimulate discussion.

i-read uses whole stories so that children benefit from this 'real reading' experience. A single text read over a substantial amount of time is far more likely to 'take' than a diet of isolated exercises. I'm sure you can remember enjoying listening to serial stories, especially if you had a teacher with a sense of the dramatic. *i-read* replicates the 'class story' through its main text read over a week or two.

But when we're teaching fiction, we also need quality 'shorts' – and they are notoriously difficult to find. Shadow texts of 1000 words can be read at one sitting; they stand on their own as gripping reads as well as playing their part as independent follow-up to shared reading. And some are even shorter: for example, in the year 6 revision unit, there are shadow texts for four different genres, each one only 500 words. Children can enjoy the satisfaction of reading a complete historical, sci-fi, traditional or 'familiar setting' story in a few minutes.

Shadow texts are very clearly a useful support for developing readers who need to 'overlearn' in order to consolidate new skills; but what about support for developing writers? Just as children need the experience of reading whole stories, every so often they need the experience of writing whole stories. Although *i-read*'s main emphasis is on reading, each unit ends with a writing session. Teachers may want to develop these further, so that children can spend longer on producing a polished piece of work.

Here, shadow texts really come into their own. Their manageable length makes them a gift as writing models. You can use them flexibly in many different ways to develop different aspects of narrative writing. So often children struggle to replicate something too ambitious, particularly in length. We're all familiar with their attempts – stories that start well and then tail off lamely through lack of steam. Children often find it difficult to grasp the basic plot structure of longer stories, losing their sense of shape in the richness of the detail. The shadow texts provide invaluable 'short shorts' written by experienced writers, where the 'bones', or plot framework, can be easily identified as a guide to creating their own story outline.

Some of the shadow texts can be manipulated in other interesting ways. For instance, the children could turn them into adventure texts, by devising alternative outcomes for each chapter, as demonstrated in the adventure stories included for each year. You could also use the idea of shadow texts to challenge high-fliers in your class to write their own shadow text for a longer story they have enjoyed. They would need to start by analysing the structure of the plot so that the overall shape of their own story matches the original. Hopefully they will have experienced different approaches to extracting the basic plot: they could make a flow chart, story map, simple storyboard or 'story steps' diagram. Then the basic rules could be: make it half the length of the

original, create hero/heroines out of minor characters, or use the same main characters in a new situation.

The *i-read* teacher's notes suggest that only the above-average children work independently on the shadow texts, while the rest of the class return to the shared text that is already familiar. Don't forget, however, to make the most of shadow texts' potential for everyone: in paired or group reading sessions, for example, where once again their shortness can fit into the limited amount of time but still provide a whole meal.

Personally, I found the shadow texts a fascinating challenge to write. I do hope you have as much fun using them.

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