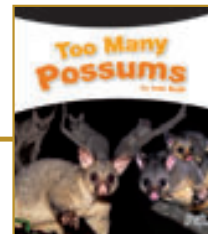


Too Many Possums

by Kate Boyle



This text is levelled at Gold 1.

Overview

In New Zealand, unlike Australia, possums are pests and much effort and expense are put into trying to control their numbers. This report explains why possums, although seemingly cute and cuddly, have become such a problem. There is an audio version of the text on the Ready to Read CD *Readalong 2011*.

Related texts

- Texts about possums: *A Very Clever Possum* (RTR, Orange); "Possum Pie" (a play, in SJ 1.1.2006)
- Texts that present a particular point of view, for example, at Gold: *Extraordinary Earthworms*, *Sun Bears Are Special*, *The Greatest Race on Earth*, *The White-tailed Spider* (all RTR).

Cross-curriculum links

- Science (levels 1 and 2, life processes) – Recognise that all living things have certain requirements so they can stay alive.

Text characteristics

Key text characteristics as described in the reading standard for after three years at school are shown in the boxes with a solid outline. Other boxes indicate additional characteristics.

Some unfamiliar contexts, for example, the concepts of pests and pest control and the information about possums as pests which may be surprising to some students (because possums look cute and cuddly)

Shifts in time, for example, the historical information about why possums were introduced to New Zealand and the before and after photographs on page 8

A mix of explicit and implicit content within text and illustrations that requires students to make connections between ideas in the text and their prior knowledge to make simple inferences. Explicit information includes the comparisons with possums in Australia and New Zealand on pages 2–5; the use of examples on pages 4 and 8 and the vocabulary related to quantity (for example, "thirty million", "nearly eight possums for every person", "over a hundred years", "Many", "increased", "fewer", "a lot of"). Implicit information includes the unlabelled photographs on page 4, requiring students to match them up with the animal names in the text, and the black background for all of the possum photographs as a reference to the fact that possums are nocturnal (and therefore harder to catch than if they were active during the day)

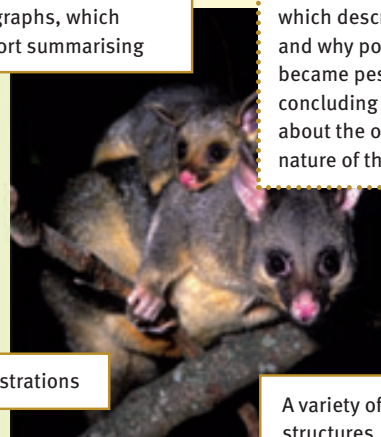
Ideas and information organised in paragraphs and the clear topic sentences or key statements in most paragraphs, which support summarising

The structure of the text as an explanation (an introduction that describes the situation, a series of linked points which describes how and why possums became pests, and a concluding statement about the ongoing nature of the problem)

Some people think that possums look cute and cuddly, but in New Zealand, possums are pests. New Zealand has about thirty million possums. That's nearly eight possums for every person!

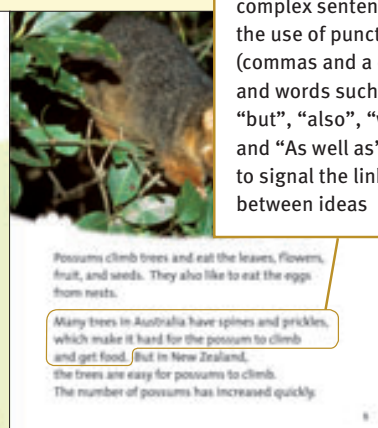
Possums were brought to New Zealand from Australia over a hundred years ago. People had thought it would be a good idea to make clothing out of possum fur.

But now there are too many possums in New Zealand, and they are a danger to plants, birds, and some animals.



Some pages with no illustrations

A variety of sentence structures, including complex sentences and the use of punctuation (commas and a dash) and words such as "but", "also", "which", and "As well as" to signal the links between ideas



Visual language features, including headings, a footnote, and photograph captions that are clearly linked to the body text

Some unfamiliar words and phrases, the meaning of which is supported by the context or illustrations, for example, "possums", "pests", "Australia", "fur", "predators", "dingoes", "snakes", "seeds", "spines", "prickles", "increased", "problem", "berries", "young chicks", "farmers", "disease", "pass onto", "cattle", "deer", "solved", "poison", "traps", "protect", "forest", "farmland", "scientists"

Suggested reading purpose

- To find out why this text is called *Too Many Possums* and to say if we agree with the author

Setting a learning goal

(What opportunities does this text provide for students to learn more about how to “read, respond to, and think critically about” texts?)

To meet the reading purpose, students need to draw on a range of comprehension and processing strategies, often simultaneously. The strategies, knowledge, and skills below link to *The Literacy Learning Progressions*. Select and adapt from them to set your specific learning goal. Be guided by your students’ particular needs and experiences: who they are, where they come from, and what they bring (*Reading and Writing Standards for Years 1–8*, Knowledge of the learner, page 6).

This text provides opportunities for students to:

- summarise the main points in each paragraph or section of text
- make connections between the main points in order to understand why possums are pests
- make connections between the information in the text and their prior knowledge or experience in order to form an opinion about possums
- use word-solving strategies to decode and/or work out the meaning of unfamiliar words and phrases
- use knowledge of punctuation and syntax to track ideas within sentences.

Introducing the text

- Show the students the cover. Discuss the possible reason for the title – *How can there be too many possums?* Ask the students to share what they know about possums and what they think of them. You could refer to the Ready to Read text *A Very Clever Possum*.
- For students who might need more support with the unfamiliar vocabulary, especially English language learners, you could have them work in pairs or groups to match words with written definitions or photographs that show the meaning.
- Share the reading purpose and learning goal.
- Have the students look through the text and briefly review the sorts of features that will help them identify and summarise main points, for example, looking for key statements or topic sentences within paragraphs and using the headings, photos, and captions.

Reading the text

Below are some behaviours you could expect to see as the students read and discuss this text. Each example is accompanied by instructional strategies to scaffold their learning. Select and adapt from the suggestions according to your students’ needs and experiences.

The students identify and summarise the main points in each paragraph or section of text.

The students make connections between the main points in order to give at least one reason why possums are such a problem in New Zealand.

- Set up a chart, using the structure of the text as a guide, in order to support students with identifying and tracking the main points. A possible example of a completed chart is given below.
- Have the students read page 2 and discuss their opinions of possums. The photographs support the idea of them being cute and cuddly. Discuss what a pest is (as in *A Very Clever Possum*). Clarify that the meaning of “pest” in a scientific context goes beyond the idea of something annoying.
- You could support the students to visualise the very large numbers on page 2 by sketching some “people” on the whiteboard and drawing eight dots (to represent possums) by each one to convey the idea of how numerous possums are.
- Encourage the students to wonder or make inferences about why we don’t see possums more often if there are so many of them. (The students can look for information to help them answer this question as they read. For example, all of the possum photographs have been taken at night and there is a lot of information about possums living in trees.)
- Remind the students of the reading purpose. Ask them to reread page 2 with a partner and to look out for the sentence or statement in each paragraph that seems most important. Discuss the students’ ideas and record the main points (in the students’ words) on the chart.
- Now that the students have been introduced to the two main ideas of the text, direct them to decide which paragraph on this page is most important. They should be able to identify this as the third paragraph, in which:
 - the words “But now” draw the reader’s attention and signal a contrast to what has gone before;

- the title is included within the sentence;
- there are two main ideas – there are too many possums and they are a danger.
- Draw attention to the heading on page 4 to clarify the purpose for reading pages 4 and 5. Remind the students to look for topic sentences or statements as they read and think, pair, and share about the main points.
- Prompt them to infer the consequences of the possums eating the leaves, flowers, fruit, seeds, and eggs. (They can check their inferences when they read page 6.) Add the main points to the chart.
- Give the students time to preview page 6 before they read it and ask them what they expect to find out on this page. They should be able to make connections between the heading, the photograph, and the content of the previous pages to predict that this page will give them more information about the damage possums can cause.
- As the students read and discuss page 6, prompt them to notice the connections between the ideas. For example, in the first paragraph, sentence 1 is the topic sentence, sentence 2 provides more information about how the trees and plants are harmed, and sentences 3 and 4 describe the flow-on effects for the birds. Add the main points to the chart.
- Before reading page 8, allow plenty of time for the students to study and discuss the photograph of the damaged tree. This provides dramatic proof of the scope of the damage possums can cause, and the students should now realise what this damage means for birds as well as the trees themselves.
- Have the students read page 8 and discuss why the problem is so hard to solve.
- Revisit the learning goal and support the students to track how they met it. Ask the students to describe an example of how they identified and summarised the main idea.

Too many possums?	
Australia	New Zealand
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Possums are not pests. – Predators like dingoes, owls, snakes, and eagles eat possums. – Many trees are spiky and prickly, so it's hard for possums to climb and eat them (or get eggs and chicks from nests). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Possums are pests because there are too many and they are dangerous to plants, birds, and some animals. – There are no predators of possums. – Trees are easy for possums to climb.
<p>(Summary sentences)</p> <p>In Australia, lots of possums are killed by predators, or they die because they can't get food.</p> <p>In New Zealand, there are too many possums because they are safe from predators and can eat lots of food and have lots of babies.</p>	



Why is this a problem?		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Possums eat the leaves and plants. – The trees and plants die. – The birds have no places to build their nests and no food. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The possums eat eggs and the young chicks (birds). – There are not as many baby birds to grow up and lay more eggs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Possums give diseases to cows and deer on farms.



How are people trying to solve the problem?	
<p>They use:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – poison – traps 	<p>but</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – this costs a lot of money – there are still too many possums.

The students make connections between (synthesise) the information in the text in order to identify the main ideas (that possums cause damage and there are too many of them) and form a personal opinion about possums.

- Review the summary chart, possibly changing information around as the students notice connections between ideas or adding the students' comments or ideas. Encourage the students to think critically about what could happen if possums aren't controlled.
- Have the students talk with a partner about their opinions of possums before and after reading this text. Although some students may still think of them as cute and cuddly, look for an indication that they have some awareness of the damage they can cause. *Do you agree that there are too many possums? Why or why not?* To support your students, especially English language learners, you could use a speaking frame to show the students this is a way they can give their opinions and reasons. Model a sentence, for example, *I think there are too many possums because they eat all of the trees.* Then write your sentence into a speaking frame like the one below. Take out the optional parts of the sentence and have the students create their own sentences. Depending on the needs of your students, you could provide a frame with the right-hand column blank.

Give your opinion	I think/don't think there are too many
Give a reason	because _____.

The students look for and use multiple sources of information (for example, context, photographs, grapho-phonics and word-structure clues, and syntax) to decode and/or clarify the meaning of unfamiliar words and phrases.

- Show students on the whiteboard how they can break multisyllabic words into familiar chunks or syllables, for example, "Aus-tra-li-a", "pred-a-tors", "din-goes", "dis-ease", "con-trol".
- Draw attention to the word "predators" on page 4 and remind the students that words in bold print are usually explained somewhere in the text. Prompt the students to make the link between the asterisk and the footnote.
- Model how to use context to help them work out the meaning of "spines" on page 5. *I'm noticing that it's close to the word "prickles" and it's something that makes it hard for the possums to climb the tree. I know that "spine" is a word for "backbone", and a book also has a spine, so I'm inferring that it's something long and sharp that sticks out, probably bigger than a prickle.*
- To help students work out the meaning of "increased" on page 5, remind them of the strategy

of trying out other words that would make sense (as well as using context clues). *What word would make sense here? What have we already found out about the numbers of possums?* The students could try the same strategy to clarify the meaning of "pass on" on page 6 (for example, "give" or "spread").

- Have a dictionary available to confirm or clarify word meanings.

The students use their knowledge of punctuation and syntax to help them track connections between ideas within sentences and paragraphs.

- The students should quickly notice the use of the word "but" to signal the comparisons in the text, for example, between the ideas of possums being cute and cuddly and being pests; between the possum situation in Australia and New Zealand; and between the attempts to control possums and the scale of the problem.
- Discuss the use of the word "like" on page 4 to signal the list of examples of predators.
- Draw attention to the use of the word "which" to join ideas within a sentence on page 5. There is a similar example on page 6 using "that" ("a disease that they can pass on"). Explain that conjunctions like "which" and "that" can make writing flow better by joining two linked ideas within one sentence. You could demonstrate this by rewriting the sentences without the conjunctions. For example: "Many trees in Australia have spines and prickles. The spines and prickles make it hard for the possum to climb and get food."

After reading

- The students can reread the text as they listen to the audio version on the Ready to Read CD *Readalong 2011*.
- Have the students share their before- and after-reading opinions about possums and discuss the effectiveness of the text. For example, *How convincing is the author's point of view? Is it based on fact or opinion? How do you know?* The students could compare this text with others that present a particular point of view, for example, *The White-tailed Spider*.
- Have the students share with a partner any words they found difficult and the strategies they used to work them out. Listen to the discussions. Do you need to follow up on any decoding strategies, particular words, or features of words?
- Read or reread *A Very Clever Possum* and have the students evaluate Mr Lees' solution in the light of the information they now have about possums.
- The students could find out more about ways that people are using to try and solve the possum problem, especially in the students' local area.