



Overview

Leo has travelled from New Zealand to visit his father, who has a houseboat in England. Leo and his dad touch briefly on memories of earlier visits to England, when the family was still together and living in New Zealand.

The river has changed since the earlier visit, polluted by a factory upstream. Leo's desire to see the selkie he saw previously causes him to fall into the dirty river. Leo finds that to save himself, he has to "stop fighting the river", and students may hypothesise that this realisation could help him deal with the changes in his life.

The author conveys underlying messages about the impact of environmental and personal changes.

You may wish to ask the students to read the story independently first, then return to examine the way the author develops the ideas and themes in the text.

Texts related by theme

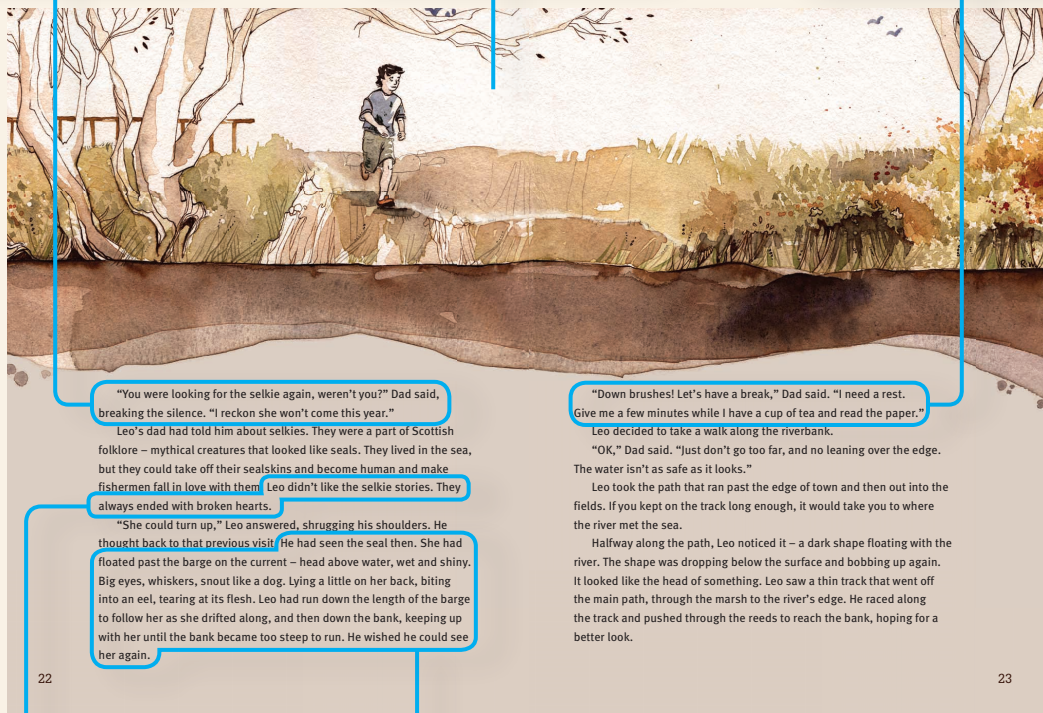
"Heartbeat" SJ L3 Jun 2012 | "North" SJ L3 Sep 2012 | "After the Storm" SJ 2.1.11

Text characteristics from the year 6 reading standard

some ideas and information that are conveyed indirectly and require students to infer by drawing on several related pieces of information in the text

illustrations, photographs, text boxes, diagrams, maps, charts, and graphs that clarify or extend the text and may require some interpretation

some information that is irrelevant to the identified purpose for reading (that is, some competing information), which students need to identify and reject as they integrate pieces of information in order to answer questions



"You were looking for the selkie again, weren't you?" Dad said, breaking the silence. "I reckon she won't come this year."

Leo's dad had told him about selkies. They were a part of Scottish folklore – mythical creatures that looked like seals. They lived in the sea, but they could take off their sealskins and become human and make fishermen fall in love with them. Leo didn't like the selkie stories. They always ended with broken hearts.

"She could turn up," Leo answered, shrugging his shoulders. He thought back to that previous visit. He had seen the seal then. She had floated past the barge on the current – head above water, wet and shiny. Big eyes, whiskers, snout like a dog. Lying a little on her back, biting into an eel, tearing at its flesh. Leo had run down the length of the barge to follow her as she drifted along, and then down the bank, keeping up with her until the bank became too steep to run. He wished he could see her again.

"Down brushes! Let's have a break," Dad said. "I need a rest. Give me a few minutes while I have a cup of tea and read the paper."

Leo decided to take a walk along the riverbank.

"OK," Dad said. "Just don't go too far, and no leaning over the edge. The water isn't as safe as it looks."

Leo took the path that ran past the edge of town and then out into the fields. If you kept on the track long enough, it would take you to where the river met the sea.

Halfway along the path, Leo noticed it – a dark shape floating with the river. The shape was dropping below the surface and bobbing up again. It looked like the head of something. Leo saw a thin track that went off the main path, through the marsh to the river's edge. He raced along the track and pushed through the reeds to reach the bank, hoping for a better look.

abstract ideas, in greater numbers than in texts at earlier levels, accompanied by concrete examples in the text that help support the students' understanding

sentences that vary in length and in structure (for example, sentences that begin in different ways and different kinds of complex sentences with a number of subordinate clauses)

Possible curriculum contexts

SOCIAL SCIENCES (Social studies)

Level 3: Understand how people make decisions about access to and use of resources.

ENGLISH (Reading)

Level 3 – Ideas: Show a developing understanding of ideas within, across, and beyond texts.

ENGLISH (Writing)

Level 3 – Ideas: Select, form, and communicate ideas on a range of topics.

Possible reading purposes

- To enjoy and understand the layers of meaning in a fiction story
- To learn about the impact of pollution through fiction
- To empathise with fictional characters.

See [Instructional focus – Reading](#) for illustrations of some of these reading purposes.

Possible writing purposes

- To express a serious message through fiction
- To use the text as a model for writing about action.

See [Instructional focus – Writing](#) for illustrations of some of these writing purposes.

Text and language challenges

VOCABULARY:

- Possible unfamiliar words and phrases, including “barge”, “babble”, “whiff”, “gesturing”, “slick”, “houseboat”, “selkie”, “folklore”, “mythical”, “sealskins”, “marsh”, “dinghy”, “Waterways Agency”, “hulk”, “bow”, “haze”, “reckoned”, “surge of panic”, “procession”, “moored”, “sodden”, “tenderly”
- The vocabulary related to rivers, including nouns (e.g., “edge”, “barge”, “bank”, “reeds”, “surface”, “marsh”, “dinghy”, “pollution”, “current”), verbs (e.g., “flowed”, “rush”, “slid”, “floating/ed”, “drifted”, “swept”, “churned”), and adjectives (e.g., “swollen”, “lazy”, “silent”, “oily”, “murky”, “steep”)
- The strong action verbs, including “toppled”, “clawed”, “churned”, “spun”, “grasped”, “clung”
- The use of onomatopoeia, including “gurgle”, “babble”, “murky”
- The similes: “like little kids”, “like putting cream on sunburnt skin”
- The use of personification, including “It just slid by, lazy”, “gloomy hulk”, “whining”.

Possible supporting strategies

Before asking students to read the story independently, check for any words, concepts or word usage that may be unfamiliar to some students. The story has a lot of key vocabulary related to rivers, and this vocabulary is essential to understanding both the surface action and the deeper meanings. Before reading, brainstorm words related to rivers, using the illustration on pages 20–21 as a prompt. Have students work in pairs or small groups to create word maps about rivers. You could ask them to put words into categories such as things, movement, what it looks like, or categories such as nouns (e.g., edge, barge, bank, reeds, surface, marsh, dinghy, water pollution, current), verbs (e.g., flowed, rush, slid, drifted, swept, churned), and adjectives (e.g., swollen, lazy, silent, oily, murky, steep). Alternatively, you could leave it open and, as the pairs share their words, put the words into categories in a class word map for rivers. During this discussion, feed in key vocabulary and prompt students to notice the factory in the illustration.

After reading, some vocabulary building may support students in their writing, for example, examining the words used to describe the movement of the river or to describe the selkie.

The English Language Learning Progressions: Introduction, pages 39–46, has useful information about learning vocabulary.

SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE REQUIRED:

- Familiarity with family relationships, including families where parents live apart
- Knowledge of rivers, currents, and riversides
- Knowledge of boats
- Knowledge of pollution – how it may be caused and the impact it may have
- Knowledge of the concepts of folklore and tales of magical creatures such as selkies.

Possible supporting strategies

Ask students who have specific knowledge (for example, of river boats or of river pollution) to share this with the group.

After reading, some students may wish to explore the folklore stories of selkies. If students have knowledge of selkies (or similar creatures from other cultures) ask them to share this with the group.

TEXT FEATURES AND STRUCTURE:

- A present-day realistic fiction, set in England
- The dual themes of change – environmental and personal
- The insertion of information about selkies
- The shortened sentences, including “Big eyes, whiskers, snout like a dog.”, “Down brushes!”
- The implied information about the characters’ family and feelings
- The changes to the river over time that parallel the main story of change within the family.

Possible supporting strategies

Review the features of a narrative, prompting the students to identify typical features of characters, setting, plot, and a problem to be resolved. Remind the students to keep these in mind as they read. Prompt them to think about other narratives they know.

Refer to charts of features you have co-constructed with the class or create one. This is particularly important with students who have little experience with this type of narrative. Keep in mind that narratives in other languages may or may not have the same features. Encourage students to make connections between the features of narratives in English and narratives in other languages they know. For students who need support with understanding the implied messages about the family, a graphic organiser could help them record and analyse evidence from the story. Create a graphic organiser with sections for the river and the family and for evidence and inference. Choose a section of text and model adding information to the graphic organiser, prompting students to make connections between the river and the family.

Instructional focus – Reading

Social Sciences (Social studies, level 3: Understand how people make decisions about access to and use of resources.)

English (Level 3 – Ideas: Show a developing understanding of ideas within, across, and beyond texts.)

Text excerpts from “The River”

The brown water flowed past, not making a sound. ... It just slid by, lazy and silent ...

“From the factory up-river,” Dad said, gesturing over at the slick floating past. ... “The water sure isn’t what it used to be.” ...

A grey dinghy with Waterways Agency written on the bow headed upstream ...

“Remember when we first came here, Leo?...” Dad smiled weakly. “The river isn’t the only thing that’s changed.” ...

“I told you, she’s not coming.” He shook his head. “The river’s not the same.”

“Why doesn’t she come back?” Leo asked. Then a pause. “Why can’t things be the same?”

“Let’s get those clothes off,” said Dad, ignoring the question.

Leo wanted to call out for help, but there was no one to call to. He could feel tears building. Instead of crying, he took a deep breath, then he flipped round and stopped fighting the river. He would go with the current – try to get over to the other side of the bank.

Students (what they might do)

Students skim the story, locating passages that give information about the river itself. They ask questions of the text and search for answers.

The students make connections between the text and what they know about environmental changes to infer that pollution from the factory has had a serious impact on the river. They make further connections between the story and what they know about river pollution in New Zealand to hypothesise that this will have affected plants and animals that live in or near the river. The students integrate the clues and inferences they have made to identify the themes and evaluate how well the author has developed them.

Students skim the story, locating passages that give information about the relationship between Leo and his dad. They ask questions of the text and search for answers. The students integrate the information that is explicit and implicit in the text with their own feelings about change. They hypothesise that neither Leo nor Dad are happy about the changes in their lives, but that change can’t be reversed.

The students consider the information in the text and the themes they have uncovered. They make connections between the text, the themes, and their own knowledge about coping with life to infer that in saving himself from the river, Leo learnt that he could survive in life by going with events (the current) and aiming for a goal (reaching the bank). The students integrate this information to understand that the author used Leo’s fall into the river to show how Leo changes.

METACOGNITION

- What did you learn about your own reading strategies when you read the story a second time?
- What helped you to form your opinion about the ending?

Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching)

PROMPT the students to look for clues to one of the themes in the text.

- What does the author want us to learn about changes in the environment from this story?
- Reread and search for evidence that will show how he developed this theme.

MAKE a chart headed Changing Environments. As students share their ideas, list the clues that show how this theme is developed.

ASK students to share their thinking as they reread.

- What theme or message do you think the author is developing?
- What clues have you found so far?
- What reading strategies are you using to help find clues?

MODEL making inferences if students need support to identify clues.

- On page 20, the author mentions a whiff of something oily, a factory up-river, and a slick floating past. Then Dad comments that the water isn’t what it used to be. I’m making connections between the text and what I’ve seen and read about chemical pollution from factories near a stream in my area. When I connect these clues and my own experience, I can infer that the pollution has changed the river and the author wants me to understand the father’s concern.

ASK QUESTIONS to elicit the theme.

- Review the chart we made. Using the clues in the text and your own knowledge, what message do you think the author wants us to take from this story?
- How effective has he been in developing and conveying this message?

PROMPT the students to reread the story, looking for clues about the story’s theme of change. Have the students share their thinking as they reread.

- What theme or message do you think the author is developing about his characters and their relationship? What clues have you found so far?
- What reading strategies are you using to help find clues?

DIRECT the students to explore how the author conveys the message through analogy. Ask questions about who or what the river, the selkie, and the pollution are analogous to.

- What is the father talking about when he says the river’s not the only thing that’s changed?
- Is Luke only talking about the selkie when he says why doesn’t she come back?
- Why doesn’t Dad answer Luke’s last question?

DIRECT the students to reread this extract from page 26.

- As you explored both the themes in this story, what did you think of the drama of Leo falling into the river? Why do you think the author included this? How does it relate to or add to the themes of the story?

GIVE FEEDBACK

- Your contributions to the chart showed you were reading carefully and critically. That’s how good readers get deeper meaning from stories and other texts.
- Integrating information from different parts of the text gave you a better understanding of the themes.

Reading standard: by the end of year 6

The Literacy Learning Progressions

Assessment Resource Banks

Instructional focus – Writing

Social Sciences (Social studies, level 3: Understand how people make decisions about access to and use of resources.)

English (Level 3 – Ideas: Select, form, and communicate ideas on a range of topics.)

Text excerpts from “The River”

Leo pushed his head under the rope railing and leaned over the edge of the barge. The tide was in, and the river was swollen, reaching up the bank through the reeds.

He had seen the seal then. She had floated past the barge on the current – head above water, wet and shiny. Big eyes, whiskers, snout like a dog. Lying a little on her back, biting into an eel, tearing at its flesh.

Then he slipped. It wasn't a sudden fall into the water. It happened little by little. First his right foot got sucked down into the mud, and as he was trying to pull it out, his other foot got stuck. And then he just toppled in.

Now a surge of panic took over Leo's body. He kicked out hard with his legs and clawed with his arms. The water churned, and he could hear his hands slapping the surface. He splashed harder, but he was no closer to the bank.

Now he was in the middle of the river and picking up speed.

“Why doesn't she come back?” Leo asked. Then a pause. “Why can't things be the same?”

“Let's get those clothes off,” said Dad, ignoring the question.

Examples of text characteristics

DIRECT AND INDIRECT INFORMATION

Writers often supply information indirectly: the reader has to read on, make inferences and predictions, and monitor their reading to work out what ideas the writer wants to communicate.

USE OF DETAILS

By using a series of small details, an author builds up a picture in the reader's mind. This helps the reader to imagine they can see the object or event themselves and understand its importance in the story.

BUILDING TENSION

When describing a dramatic event, slowing it down to recount the action moment by moment can increase the tension. This can be done by:

- *describing events one at a time to show the action in slow motion*
- *using time markers to give a sense of watching events unfold (“Then”, “First”, “And then”, “To start with”, “Now”)*
- *repetition*
- *using show, don't tell: by showing exactly what is happening, the reader can work out for themselves what the events and actions mean for the characters.*

OPEN ENDING

In fiction, authors expect readers to add their own thoughts and to do some work as they read. Leaving the ending open forces the reader to think hard about what happens next and why the author finished the story at that point.

METACOGNITION

- What writing strategies helped you select and form your ideas?
- Tell me about some of the big decisions you made before and during writing.
- How did using feedback from your partner help you revise your writing?

Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching)

DISCUSS ways of developing ideas in a narrative.

- What message do you want to communicate to your readers?
- What ideas will help lead your readers to this message?
- Will you convey information directly or indirectly?

For students who need more support with their writing, give them a graphic organiser to record their ideas on a given topic. Help them to select and organise the most promising ideas to write about. Support them to review and use models, for example, for the opening paragraph of their story.

PROMPT the students to experiment with adding details to their writing.

- What details will help your readers to understand the significance of an idea in your story?
- How can the structure of your sentences increase their impact?
- Are there places where punchy, condensed sentences would be more effective than longer, more complex sentences?

EXPLAIN that writers select the events they will highlight to achieve their purpose.

- As you develop your ideas, think about events or actions in the story you want to highlight to help get your ideas across.
- Which events, actions or dialogue will be turning points in your story?

ASK the students to work in pairs to identify how tension is built in a section of text.

- Which words indicate the order of events?
- Which words help build tension?
- What can you apply in your own writing to build tension or show the significance of an event?
- Have you given your readers clues to help them make predictions about what will happen next?

DIRECT the students to review the ending of their writing with a partner.

- Is this a satisfying ending?
- What feelings did you want to leave your readers with?
- Have you spelt out exactly what happens next, or is it an open ending?
- How well does that work?

GIVE FEEDBACK

- You used the graphic organiser to record and organise your ideas. I see you've deleted quite a few and left the most important ones for your purpose. That will help you with the writing.
- The ending of your story is very clever. It leaves the reader wondering if the character really did confess to the robbery.

 Writing standard: by the end of year 6

 The Literacy Learning Progressions