

The White-tailed Spider



by Tina Johnson
photographs by Aaron Beck

This text is levelled at Gold 2.

Overview

This report both acknowledges that the white-tailed spider has a “bad name” and presents a different point of view. Although it has an informal conversational style, the report also includes some examples of the more formal language of report writing and of persuasive texts. There is an audio version on the Ready to Read CD *Readalong 2010*.

Related texts

- Texts with a similar structure (reports that convey a particular point of view) at Gold: *Extraordinary Earthworms*, *Four Blue Eggs*, *Sun Bears Are Special*, *The Greatest Race on Earth* (all RTR)
- Fiction texts about spiders: “My Spider” (JJ 18), “Fred” (JJ 36).

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.

Cross-curriculum links

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

The information about white-tailed spiders in the body text and visual language features (headings, close-up photographs, labels, and captions)

A mix of explicit and implicit information that supports students to infer:

- the author’s purpose (to persuade the reader that white-tailed spiders don’t deserve their bad name)
- the main ideas (that things often seem less scary when you know more about them; that white-tailed spiders are not as dangerous as people may think)

Do you like spiders?

How do you feel about spiders? Would you like to keep one as a pet, or do you scream when you see one? Often we are afraid of things because we don't know much about them.

The white-tailed spider has gained a bad name. News reports have blamed this spider for serious infections. But scientists now believe that the actual bite from a white-tail is not so serious as these reports suggested.



The facts

The white-tailed spider came to New Zealand from Australia over a hundred years ago.

The white-tailed spider has **venom**. It uses this poison to kill other spiders and insects.

The white-tailed spider has been known to bite people. This is most likely to happen when it is trapped in clothing or squashed in a shoe.

The white-tailed spider bite is usually only painful for a short time and leaves a small red mark that disappears after a few days. Most of the time, the bite doesn't cause any serious harm, but it is possible that the bite area could become infected.

The bite from a white-tailed spider leaves a red mark and can cause swelling.

The form of the text as an argument, giving both points of view

The conversational style, for example, using the second person (addressing the reader as “you”) and the first person plural (“we”); referring informally to the spider as “the white-tail”; and using exclamation marks

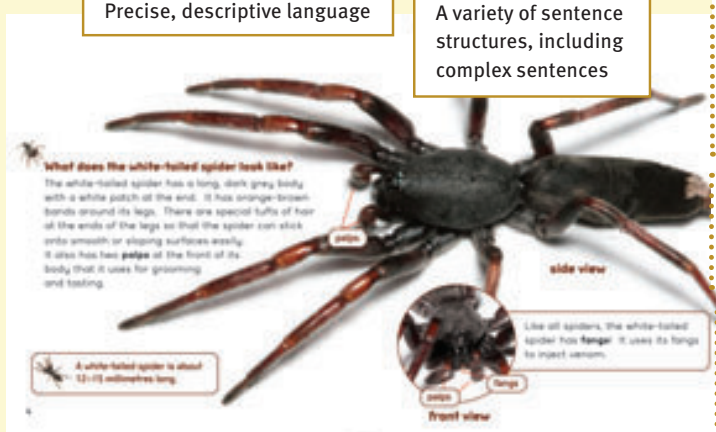
The use of qualifying words and phrases to downplay the negative aspects of the spider, for example, “has been known”, “most likely”, “usually”, “Most of the time”, “it is possible”, “could become ...”

Precise, descriptive language

A variety of sentence structures, including complex sentences

Words such as “but”, “so”, “that”, “by”, or “as if” to link ideas within sentences

The use of bold print to indicate subject-specific words (which are explained in the running text and/or labelled photographs)



What does the white-tailed spider look like?

The white-tailed spider has a long, dark grey body with a white patch at the end. It has orange-brown bands around its legs. There are special tufts of hair at the ends of the legs so that the spider can stick onto smooth or sloping surfaces easily. It also has two **palps** at the front of its body that it uses for grooming and tasting.

side view

front view

palps

fingers

The instructions inside the back cover about what to do if bitten by a white-tail

The prefixes and/or suffixes in “painful”, “disappears”, “millimetres”, “Unlike”, “antiseptic”

Some unfamiliar words and phrases, the meaning of which is supported by the context or illustrations, for example, “white-tailed spider”, “gained a bad name”, “infections”, “white-tail”, “venom”, “poison”, “harm”, “bite area”, “infected”, “swelling”, “tufts”, “palps”, “grooming”, “millimetres”, “fangs”, “inject”, “bitten”, “antiseptic”, “react”, “blisters”

Suggested reading purpose

- To use the information in this text to help us form an opinion about white-tailed spiders

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:

- make connections to their prior knowledge and between sections of the text, including the visual language features, to identify and summarise information about white-tailed spiders
- evaluate the information in the text and come to their own conclusion about white-tailed spiders
- use word-solving strategies (for example, using grapho-phonetic information, knowledge of word structure, and context, or looking for definitions and explanations) to decode and work out the meaning of unfamiliar words and phrases
- use knowledge of punctuation and syntax to track ideas in long or complex sentences and to clarify the meaning of the more formal language of the report.

Introducing the text

- Ask the students their opinions of spiders. You could use the author’s questions from page 2.
- Show the cover. If white-tailed spiders didn’t come up in the previous discussion, briefly allow some time for students to share any knowledge, experiences, or beliefs about them. As the students share their ideas, you could start a vocabulary list on the whiteboard or in the shared reading book. It can be added to throughout the session.
- Have the students read page 2 and discuss the main ideas on the page – that unfamiliar things can be scary and that white-tailed spiders may not deserve their “bad name”. (For support with the meaning of “gained a bad name”, prompt the students to use clues in the following sentence.)
- Using these ideas, ask the students to read through the headings to confirm (or clarify) that

the author will give them information about white-tailed spiders so that they will find them less scary.

- Share the reading purpose and learning goal (for example, to make connections and summarise). Review the sorts of things that students can look for and use to help them do this, for example, the headings, topic sentences within paragraphs (particularly in the introduction and conclusion), key words, photographs, 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 make connections to their prior knowledge, between sections of the text, and between the body text and visual language features to identify the information about white-tailed spiders (summarise).

- Set up a chart to gather and sort information as the students read. A partially filled-in example is given below. You could follow the lesson below, or you could assign parts of the table to pairs and then have the students work in groups to complete the table. One person from each pair could share their information with the group. They could then reread and discuss their findings. This is particularly supportive for English language learners because of the opportunities for oral language links, repetition, and clarification.
- Ask the students to read then think, pair, and share the facts they have gathered from pages 2 and 3. Add the information and any comments (including personal connections) or questions to the chart.
- You can continue in this way, stopping after each section to summarise and fill in the chart together. Alternatively, give the students their own copies of a chart for them to fill in as they read and discuss the text with a partner.
- Tell the students to look out for connections between pieces of information and decide where it best fits in the table. You could model this: *It says on page 2 that the spider can cause serious infections, and the next sentence talks about “the actual bite”, so I’m inferring that it’s the bite that causes the infection. I can see the word “bite” repeated quite a few times on page 3, so there might be some more information about this that I could add to the chart.*

- You could draw attention to the convention of using the singular term “white-tailed spider” (or “white-tail”) to refer to *all* white-tailed spiders.

Facts about white-tailed spiders	Comments and questions
Why they have a bad name They bite people. (p. 2) The bites can get infected. (pp. 2, 3) Some people might need to see a doctor. (back cover) They have venom (poison) to kill other spiders and insects. (p. 3)	It bites mostly when it's trapped or squashed. (p. 3) Sandfly bites can get infected, too. Do other spiders have venom?
What they look like	
What they eat	
Where they live	

The students say whether they think white-tailed spiders deserve their bad name and give reasons for their opinion.

- At the end of the lesson, revisit the reading purpose. *On page 2, the author says, “Often we are afraid of things because we don’t know much about them.” Then she gives us lots of information so that we don’t need to be afraid. Did this text change your opinion about white-tailed spiders? Why or why not?*
- To support your students, especially English language learners, you could use a speaking frame to show a way that they can share their ideas. Model a sentence, for example, *Before I read the book, I thought white-tailed spiders were dangerous. After reading the book, I think white-tailed spiders are not dangerous because the bite isn’t very serious.* 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.

Before I read	Before reading the book, I thought white-tailed spiders were _____
After I read	After reading the book, I think white-tailed spiders are _____
Why?	because _____

- Despite the information in the text, students’ opinions are likely to be influenced by their emotional response to spiders. Prompt them to identify at least one argument put forward by the author and say which point of view they feel is more convincing, and why. To help them to do this, have the students select facts from their earlier summary chart that have given the white-tail a bad name. Then have them search the text to find how the author has tried to present the opposite point of view. Some examples are given below.

Why the white-tailed spider has a bad name	Why the author thinks that white-tailed spiders don’t deserve their bad name
It has venom (p. 3) and fangs. (p. 5)	All spiders have fangs. (p. 5) Their venom is for killing insects and other spiders, not people. (p. 3)
It sometimes bites people. (p. 3)	It’s most likely to bite when it’s trapped or squashed. (pp. 3, 7)
The bite is painful and leaves a red mark. It could become infected. (p. 3, inside back cover)	Usually, the bite is only painful for a short time and the red mark disappears after a few days. (p. 3) Mostly, the bite doesn’t cause any serious harm. (p. 3)

- Encourage debate (and reference to the text) as the students share their opinions. If necessary, prompt students to notice the author's use of qualifiers to try and downplay the risk of spider bites.

The students use word-solving strategies (for example, using grapho-phonetic information, knowledge of word structure, and context, or looking for definitions and explanations) to decode and/or work out the meaning of unfamiliar words and phrases.

- Prompt students to “break up” multi-syllabic words into recognisable chunks or syllables, for example, “in-fec-tions”, “an-ti-sep-tic”. You can model this on a whiteboard.
- Use a thinkaloud to model strategies to work out word meanings. For example, on page 3: *I can see the word “venom” in bold print. Bold print usually means that there is a definition close by ... The next sentence says, “It uses this poison”, so I’m inferring that venom is poison. As I read, I’ll look out for any other references to venom or poison to check if I’m right.*
- Have a dictionary available to confirm or clarify word meanings.

The students search for linking words and notice and use punctuation to clarify the connections between ideas in longer or more complex sentences or sections of text.

- Draw attention to some examples of words or phrases used to link ideas, such as “but”, “so”, “that”, “by”, “as if”, or pronouns (“this”, “these”).
- Rewrite one or two of the complex sentences on a chart or group reading book to demonstrate how commas help to separate clauses and clarify meaning. For example, “Like all spiders, the white-tailed spider has fangs.” “When the spider comes to see what it has caught, instead of finding dinner, it finds a white-tail.”

After reading

- The students can reread the text silently while listening to the audio version on the Ready to Read CD *Readalong 2010*.
- Discuss the meanings of some of the subject-specific vocabulary and how the students worked them out, for example, by noticing prefixes or suffixes or looking for contextual clues. You could focus on some of the topic words that have more than one meaning (“bands”, “mark”, “bark”, “plants”). *What helped you work out the right meaning?* Note if you need to follow up on any decoding strategies, particular words, or features of words.

- Discuss how prefixes or suffixes can affect the meaning of a word. Have the students generate more words using the same prefixes or suffixes. They could refer to a dictionary for the meaning of prefixes.
- Focus on how the author tries to persuade the reader, for example, the title, the conversational style (addressing the reader directly and asking questions), the exclamation marks, the careful use of language (qualifiers and referring to the spider as the white-tail), and the closing question. Have the students highlight examples of the author's use of language to make the spider sound less scary.
- Study some examples of the language of report writing, for example, “scientists now believe” on page 2 or “has been known to bite” on page 3. Have the students practise substituting less formal language, for example, “scientists now think” and “sometimes bites”, in order to clarify the meaning. Draw out the idea that although report writing may also be friendly, as in this text, it is more formal than personal writing.