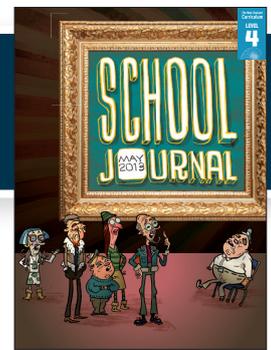


A Real Steal

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Overview

An art gallery has a new exhibition and it's hired a security guard to make sure no one touches the paintings. A visiting art critic has strong opinions about the value of the works, but things start going wrong when a thief enters. The humour in the play comes from the diverse array of characters and their changing opinions on the value of the "art".

The play should need little introduction and can be read by students independently before returning to reread and discuss. For those students who have limited experience of reading, viewing, or acting in plays, you may need to offer some support.

Likewise, provide support if you know students are unfamiliar with the ways art is exhibited, written about, and discussed in a mainstream gallery setting.

As well as providing opportunities to enjoy reading and staging a play, the text is a good model for writing a play. Students could also engage in a lively discussion about "What is art?" after reading the play.

Texts related by theme

"Kebabs" SJ 4.2.09 | "Terrible Pirates" SJ 4.3.07 | "The Army of Doom" SJ 4.3.08

Text characteristics from the year 7 reading standard

illustrations, photographs, text boxes, diagrams, maps, charts, and graphs containing main ideas that relate to the text's content

complex layers of meaning, and/or information that is irrelevant to the identified purpose for reading (that is, competing information), requiring students to infer meanings or make judgments

words and phrases with multiple meanings that require students to know and use effective word-solving strategies to retain their focus on meaning

Scene: An art gallery. PATRONS 1, 2, and 3, along with the ART CRITIC, are looking around. The SECURITY GUARD is asleep in a chair. There is a pile of rubbish on the floor and a glass of water on a table. The CURATOR enters.

CURATOR. Welcome to the opening of our latest exhibition, *The Essential Essence*. Feel free to look at the artwork ... but please, no touching. These paintings are very expensive, which is why we have a security guard.

The CURATOR nudges the SECURITY GUARD.

SECURITY GUARD (waking up, startled). What? What's happening? Where are the doughnuts? I was promised doughnuts.

The SECURITY GUARD goes back to sleep.

PATRON 1 (whispering). What's this painting meant to be about? I don't get it.

PATRON 2. I don't know if I want to get it.

PATRON 3. Perhaps we should ask an art critic.

ART CRITIC. That would be me. What do you need to know? I can give you an opinion about all of these paintings ... (pointing) Too busy. Too minimal. Too bright. Too dark. And this is just terrible.

PATRON 1. Awful.

PATRON 2. I wouldn't pay a dollar for it.

PATRON 3. I'd buy it just so that I could spit on it.

CURATOR. Whoops. I hung it upside down.

The CURATOR turns the offending painting the right way up.

ART CRITIC. A masterpiece!

PATRON 1. Brilliant.

PATRON 2. I'll pay whatever it takes to get my hands on it.

PATRON 3. I still think it's rubbish.

ART CRITIC (pointing at the rubbish). But what's this? The best work yet! See how it captures the tragic nature of existence? Can't you just see your life in that pile of social waste?

metaphor, analogy, and connotative language that is open to interpretation

Reading standard: by the end of year 7

Possible curriculum contexts

ENGLISH (Reading)

Level 4 – Ideas: Show an increasing understanding of ideas within, across, and beyond texts.

ENGLISH (Writing)

Level 4 – Ideas: Select, develop, and communicate ideas on a range of topics.

Possible reading purposes

- To enjoy and stage a funny play
- To explore the way ideas are developed in a play
- To use the play as a starting point for a discussion about art.

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

Possible writing purposes

- To write a humorous play
- To write a character study as preparation for writing or acting in a play.

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

Text and language challenges

VOCABULARY:

- Possibly unfamiliar words and phrases, including “patrons”, “art critic”, “security guard”, “curator”, “minimal”, “tragic”, “social waste”, “simplicity”, “incredulous”, “penetrating insight”, “queasy”, “priceless”, “ridiculous”, “appreciates”
- The word play of the title: “A Real Steal”
- The (meaningless) exhibition title: *The Essential Essence*
- The double meanings: “get it”, “drains”
- The idioms: “That would be”, “get my hands on it”, “a steal”, “out of here”, “take a bullet”, “what’s what”, “got a nerve”.

Possible supporting strategies

There are a number of high-frequency words that will be familiar to many students. However, there are many low-frequency words and some students will need support, especially if the context is unfamiliar. Display or hand out copies of pages 24–25, without the main text (only the title and the labels on the characters). Have students work in small groups to discuss what they can see and read, what they think the title means, and what they think is going to happen. Have all of the groups share their ideas. As they do, record them on a mind map and/or as predictions. Establish the setting, the two meanings of the title, and the characters. Feed in and list key vocabulary.

Some students will need support to understand idiomatic language and the humour derived from words used with double meanings. Do this after the first reading, and then give students opportunities to try out using idioms and double meanings.

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

SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE REQUIRED:

- Reading, viewing, and/or acting in plays
- Art galleries, including the role of a curator
- Knowledge of the role of a critic
- Experience of differing opinions of artworks.

Possible supporting strategies

The setting will be familiar to some students, but not all will have been to an art gallery. Ideally, build prior knowledge with a class visit to a gallery where students can see a security guard and possibly a curator. Otherwise, ask students to share their experiences of visiting a gallery or art exhibition. Talk about the fact that people have different opinions about art and what “counts” as art. There may be local examples you could share or remind the students about.

Discuss the students’ experiences of reading, acting in, or viewing plays. Bring out some key features, such as the use of dialogue and action, the condensed time frame, and the use of the stage.

You could explore conventions in plays in other languages and cultures.

TEXT FEATURES AND STRUCTURE:

- The structure and format of a play script
- Playing against simple nameless stereotypes for humour
- The use of a variety of rhetorical devices (figures of speech), including parody, irony (using words to convey the opposite of their real meaning), oxymoron (contradiction in terms), exaggerated metaphor, and hyperbole (exaggeration)
- The illustrations, which contain humorous references to New Zealand artworks.

Possible supporting strategies

Review any plays the students know, providing examples for them to study if necessary.

The students can pool their knowledge to work out how to use the structure for a read-through of the play. Review each aspect of the structure, identifying the purpose and format. Support students to analyse the way that the writer creates humour, providing them with definitions for the rhetorical devices used.

Instructional focus – Reading

English (Level 4 – Ideas: Show an increasing understanding of ideas within, across, and beyond texts.)

The Arts (Visual arts, level 4 – Understanding the Arts in Context: Investigate the purpose of objects and images from past and present cultures and identify the contexts in which they were or are made, viewed, and valued.)

Text excerpts from “A Real Steal”

CURATOR. ... These paintings are very expensive, which is why we have a security guard.

The CURATOR nudges the SECURITY GUARD.

SECURITY GUARD (startled). What? What’s happening? Where are the doughnuts? I was promised doughnuts.

ART CRITIC (pointing at the rubbish). But what’s this? This is the best work yet! See how it captures the tragic nature of our existence? Can’t you just see your life in that pile of social waste?

CURATOR. Sorry, that’s just a pile of rubbish. It was left there by the cleaners.

ART CRITIC. It’s still a masterpiece!

CURATOR. Oh, in that case, it’s worth one hundred thousand dollars.

ART CRITIC. A steal at twice the price.

PATRON 1. I just remembered – I have to put the cat out.

PATRON 2. And I have to put the cat in.

PATRON 3. I don’t have a cat, but it needs something.

PATRONS 1, 2, and 3 exit.

Students (what they might do)

The students **integrate** information from the title, the illustrations, and the opening dialogue to infer that the play will be funny and that it will use stereotypical characters.

They **make connections** between the text and what they know of guards who protect valuables to infer that the security guard was asleep and is not going to be very effective. They use the information so far to **hypothesise** about what might happen in the play.

The students **make connections** between what they know of controversial art, the role of an art critic, and the text to infer that the writer is parodying the art critic by use of irony (stating something false as if it were true) to make fun of the way he praises rubbish. They identify that the irony is reinforced when the curator puts a price on the rubbish. The students also infer that the curator is easily influenced by the critic.

They use their vocabulary knowledge to understand the metaphor the art critic uses (rubbish representing human life) and their knowledge of hyperbole to see this as humorous.

Students identify the colloquial use of “the steal” to mean “a bargain” and make connections between this and the title of the play to understand the play on words.

Students **make connections** between the text and their own experiences of making excuses to leave a party or other social setting. They **integrate** this with the confusion and drama in the play to infer that the gallery patrons have not enjoyed their visit and are anxious to leave.

Students identify the nonsense of the patrons’ excuses as another way the writer adds humour. They consider the play as a whole and **evaluate** its effectiveness.

Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching)

ASK QUESTIONS to support students to understand the “set-up” of the play.

- How do the illustrations and the title tell you about the kind of play this will be?
- How do the first lines of dialogue set the scene for what might happen?
- What do we learn about the curator and the security guard right from the start?
- Why do you think the characters have labels rather than names?
- How would you expect a security guard to act? What is the effect when a character doesn’t act the way you expect them to?
- What do you hypothesise might happen?

If necessary, explain that using labels (Curator, Security Guard) instead of names may signal that these are stereotypes. A stereotype is a character that the audience will probably have a general idea about.

DIRECT the students to create their own glossaries of figures of speech.

After reading, discuss some of the examples in the play and encourage students to add to the glossary from their general reading.

ASK QUESTIONS to support analysis of the humour.

- Why are the art critic’s words amusing? What form of writing does it remind you of?
- The writer uses irony here – stating something that is not true as if it is true.
- Why does the curator change her mind?
- What does “steal” mean in this context? What is another meaning for “steal”?
- What other layers of meaning can you find here?

PROMPT the students to evaluate the play.

- What did you think of this play?
- Identify parts you felt worked well and parts that did not work so well. Why do you think that?
- Do you think most readers would share your opinions? Why or why not?
- Do you think the play would be funny when acted on stage? Why or why not?
- How would the abilities of the actors to play the roles make a difference to the effectiveness of the play?

GIVE FEEDBACK

- I could tell from your faces that you found this amusing. Tell me about one place that you thought was funny.
- You compared the excuses the patrons made with the time you and your friends left a boring party. Making connections with your own experiences is a good way to understand a text.

METACOGNITION

- What reading strategies helped you as you read the play for the first or second time? How did they help?
- How did imagining the play being acted help you understand the humour?
- How did you evaluate the effectiveness of the play? What criteria did you use?

Instructional focus – Writing

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Text excerpts from “A Real Steal”

Scene: *An art gallery. PATRONS 1, 2, and 3, along with the ART CRITIC, are looking around. The SECURITY GUARD is asleep in a chair. There is a pile of rubbish on the floor and a glass of water on a table. The CURATOR enters.*

CURATOR (to SECURITY GUARD). You there, wake up and do something.

SECURITY GUARD (waking up, startled). What? What’s happening?

CURATOR. We’re being robbed.

SECURITY GUARD. Then I’m out of here. I don’t get paid enough to take a bullet.

ART CRITIC. It’s absolutely brilliant ... a penetrating insight from the artist. It says, “Society drains me.”

Examples of text characteristics

SETTING THE SCENE

Plays have strict conventions. These include the way the writer instructs the actors, as well as the words the actors will say. In a play, each scene starts with stage directions. They tell the actors and the director what needs to be on the stage and which characters are in the scene. The stage directions tell the actors what they should be doing when the curtain goes up.

STAGE DIRECTIONS

In the body of the play, the writer tells the actors what to do by using directions in parentheses, written in italics. The play conventions mean that actors always know which lines are for speaking and which lines tell them what to do.

IDIOM

In a play, the words written for characters need to match the way the character might speak in real life. The use of colloquial language and idioms is one way of making a character sound real.

PARODY

In a parody, a writer makes fun of another form of writing by imitating and exaggerating it.

METACOGNITION

- What was the most challenging aspect of writing this? What writing processes and strategies helped you?
- How useful was the feedback from your partner? Why have you chosen to make some changes but not others?
- How did using a published text as a model help you? Show me one example of where a model was helpful.

Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching)

PROMPT the students to clarify their writing intentions.

- What big idea do you want to give your audience?
- What text form will you use? Why have you chosen this form?
- What do you know about your audience?
- How will you ensure that your writing will get your message across?

PROMPT the students to consider the conventions of the text form.

- Are there certain conventions you have to follow?
- Why do you think plays always use the same conventions?

MODEL your analysis of this extract to point out the conventions.

- The conventions of a play are quite strict. The words that tell the actors and director what to do are usually in italics (stage directions). The names of characters are in bold upper case. In this extract, the stage directions let the actors and director know exactly who and what should be on stage and what they should be doing. The last sentence says what happens as the play starts.

TELL the students to exchange their work with a partner for feedback.

- Look at the use of conventions: Is it clear what each actor says?
- Are the stage directions clear? For example, if a character has to speak to another character, have the directions indicated when and how?
- Now look at the way the plot develops. Is the writing logical and consistent?
- Is it easy to follow the events?
- How do the characters “sound”? Has the writer used the kind of language and idioms that the characters would use in real life?

DIRECT the students to give each other written or oral feedback.

- Keep your feedback constructive and to the point. This feedback should be focused on the technical aspects of the writing.
- When you receive feedback, review it carefully and then make decisions about any revisions you wish to make to improve your writing.

At times, it might not be appropriate to partner ELLs with native-speaking students, who may not be able to see beyond language difficulties.

TELL the students to share parts of their writing with the group.

- Read a part where you’ve aimed for humour. What did you do?
- If you’ve used a device such as parody or hyperbole, explain how you’ve made this work.
- Will your audience “get it”?

Students who share a first language other than English may benefit from exploring some of these features in their first language. They could share some of these with others in the class, noting how languages and cultures all have devices and humour but differ in the way they are used. They may note that these types of language are difficult to translate and to use in a second language.

GIVE FEEDBACK

- Your editing has made a big difference. Now the writing fits the conventions, and that will make it far easier for actors to know what to do and say.