



The Learning Progression Frameworks describe significant signposts in reading and writing as students develop and apply their literacy knowledge and skills with increasing expertise from school entry to the end of year 10.

## Overview

This sophisticated poem plays with the natural tension created when a poem's form doesn't seem to match the content. James Brown's jaunty use of structure and rhythm challenges the reader to understand both what the poem is about and why the author made the decisions he made.

A PDF of the text is available at [www.schooljournal.tki.org.nz](http://www.schooljournal.tki.org.nz)

## Themes

- Self-esteem
- Anxiety
- Change

## Related texts

“By the River” SJ L3 Nov 2016 | “Meme and Me” SJ L3 May 2016 | “How to be Normal” SJ L4 May 2019

## Strengthening reading behaviours (what to notice)

### Text structure and features

- Abstract ideas  
*Her confidence was infiltrated.  
Her thoughts, she thought, were over-rated.*
- Figurative language  
*folded herself in half each day  
Until she was just two wide eyes –  
her mouth a shrug, her shrug a sigh.  
She slid like droplets down a drain,  
her rainbow bow drowned out by rain.*  
  
*Violet's story started tall.  
Her purple hair impressed us all.  
But then her plumage went awry  
and she became extremely shy.*

### Requiring students to:

- use prior knowledge of the purposes and language of poetry to appreciate the interrelationship between the humour, the writer's voice, and the structure of the poem
- call on their prior knowledge and experience of poetry to infer that on one level, it appears to be fun and nonsense – but it can also be read as a kind of cautionary tale: that people's sense of self can be fragile and a loss of self-esteem can be a slippery slope
- synthesise the literal with interpretive meaning to infer that Violet is being reduced, with the author's implication that her sense of self and self-worth is rapidly diminishing.

### Vocabulary

Possibly challenging words                      plumage, awry, infiltrated, shrug

### Helpful prior knowledge (pre-reading and introducing the text)

- Some awareness of how poets use imagery, including metaphor
- Some knowledge of the meaning behind the expression “shrinking violet”
- Understanding of the ways in which people can lose confidence and have low self-esteem.

## Possible reading and writing purposes

- Read and respond to a poem about a shrinking violet
- Discuss and analyse how the poet reveals a story with a particular message
- Analyse and evaluate the specific language features and structure that the poet uses.

See *Effective Literacy Practice in Years 5–8* for information about teaching comprehension strategies ([Teaching comprehension](#)) and for suggestions on using this text with your students ([Approaches to teaching reading](#)).

## Possible curriculum contexts

This text has links to level 4 of *The New Zealand Curriculum* in: [ENGLISH](#) [HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION](#)

## Understanding progress

The following aspects of progress are taken from the [Learning Progression Frameworks](#) and relate to the specific learning tasks below. See the LPFs for more about how students develop expertise and make progress in these aspects:

- Reading for literary experience; reading to organise ideas and information for learning
- Making sense of text: using a processing system; using knowledge of text structure and features; reading critically
- Creating texts for literary purposes.

## Strengthening understanding through reading and writing

**Select from the following suggestions and adapt them** according to your students' strengths, needs, and experiences.

Note: Most of these activities lend themselves to students working in pairs or small groups.

- After the first reading, ask the students to think about what connections they can make to themselves and this poem. *How did you feel when you read this?* Have them talk with a partner about what struck them first about the poem.
- Working in pairs, have the students read the poem again, using a T-chart to paraphrase what is happening and make meaning from the imagery. Model this first with the title as an example. *I know a violet is a small purple flower, and I've heard the saying "shrinking violet" before to mean someone who is shy, so I think this is about a shy person.*
- The students could read alternate couplets, one reading and the other saying what they think it means, giving evidence from the text. Ask them to identify the main topic of each stanza, for example, Violet's appearance, the change in her confidence, her energy levels, and so on. Then have them write a summary sentence explaining what the poem is mainly about. (It's about a girl who was confident, but then something happened to make her feel worthless, and she gradually lost all confidence. Nobody noticed her or listened to her anymore. She became invisible to them.)
- Support the students to unpack the challenging language. Invite them to share any parts where they found it difficult to agree on the meaning. *What is it meant by "her plumage went awry and she became extremely shy"? A bird plumps its feathers when it feels proud and happy. Violet began proud and happy, but then she became terribly shy.*
- Alternatively, use the **Jigsaw** template at the end of this TSM. Make seven copies and write a stanza on each left-hand puzzle piece. Give one to each pair of students. Ask them to write on a blank right-hand puzzle piece what they infer the meaning of the stanza to be. Then have them cut up the pieces, mix them up with those of other pairs, and ask each pair to take a turn at matching the two pieces of each stanza to put the puzzle together. The students could then discuss the puzzle as a group to clarify the meaning of each stanza.
- Discuss how the poem is structured. Have the students read the poem aloud a few times, trying out different ways of reading it in order to explore its text features, such as form, style, rhythm, or tone. *Does reading the poem aloud help you to understand it?*
- Explore the poet's message. *What did James Brown want us to know about Violet? Has he given the reader enough information? What more would you want to know? Why? Did the poem make you think differently about others and how they feel about themselves? If so, in what way?*
- Have the students use the poem as a model to write their own poem about regaining confidence – an opposite poem starting small and getting stronger. *How do we know someone has become more confident?* They could brainstorm and use a thesaurus to create a pool of words to use in their poem, including antonyms for some of the words used in "Shrinking Violet" (for example, "extrovert", "outgoing", "gregarious", "party animal", "friendly", "social"). They could also think of metaphors in nature about growing that they could use. Some English language learners may prefer to write using a poetry-writing frame to scaffold the structure and form of the poem.

## “Shrinking Violet” Jigsaw

