

Encouraging book talk in the school library



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Introduction

As adults we sometimes struggle to justify our feelings about particular books, but children are quite clear about what they like and don't like.

It is possible to get children to discuss why they liked or did not like particular books and to encourage them to think more deeply about the books they read.

This unit offers ideas and activities to engage pupils in discussing books. It is aimed at librarians, teaching assistants and other adults working with pupils in school libraries.

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Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- clarify ideas on literacy criticism
- explore with pupils what makes a good book
- produce a range of writing frames to encourage pupils to write book reviews
- encourage pupils to follow some of the award schemes for children's books and perhaps start a new one.

1 What makes a good book?

I met a dragon face to face

I met a dragon face to face

The year when I was ten,

I took a trip to outer space,

I braved a pirate's den,

I wrestled with a wicked troll,

And fought a great white shark,

I trailed a rabbit down a hole,

I hunted for a snark.

I stowed aboard a submarine,

I opened magic doors,

I travelled in a time machine,

And searched for dinosaurs,

I climbed atop a giant's head,

I found a pot of gold,

I did this all in books I read

When I was ten years old

Jack Prelutsky: 'Good Books: Good Times', HarperCollins 1990

Maybe it was Custard that Jack Prelutsky met, maybe not; we all have our favourite books and those we hate. How did we develop our personal taste and critical awareness?

All good books have one thing in common – they are truer than if they really happened and after you have finished reading one you will feel that all that happened to you.

Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961)

Here are some points you could raise in discussion with pupils to try to encourage them to think about the books they read. I am sure you will think of many more.

- Did the book they just read surprise them? Why did they choose it? Did they expect to like or not like it because of the blurb or dust jacket?
- Did the characters seem real? Did they feel sympathy for the characters? Do they know anyone like the character?
- Did the book take them to new places? Were they real places or imaginary lands? Did they learn anything about the setting from reading the book?
- Did the author know about the background or topic of the book? Were there any mistakes?

- Did they want to go on reading more after the book had ended?

Above all, we need to let children know that it is all right not to like a book – even if it is critically acclaimed!

Activity 1

What do you think makes a good book?

Try listing six key features you would look for when reviewing a book.

You could try this question out on your pupils too.

Provide your answer...

2 Book reviews

The comments below all relate to the same book, *Ruby Holler* by Sharon Creech, and have been made by pupils at Churchill Community School, North Somerset – the 'Churchill Chatterboxes'.

A captivating yet far-fetched book, I feel this would suit most younger readers but older readers would want something more demanding. (Margaret)

I think *Ruby Holler* is a very moving book, especially when Dallas can tell that Florida is in trouble. I would say that is good enough to take up some space on your bookshelf. (Alice)

Ruby Holler is a book about twin orphans who are sent to an elderly couple. This is a good book because it brings to the reader a sense of what it is like to be an orphan. (Becky)

Writing reviews and sharing opinions about what they read is a good way to get pupils talking about books and introducing them to the concept of literary criticism.

Here's one example of a website with reviews of books suitable for various ages:

[The Children's Book Review](#)

Children often find it easier to write a book review if they have a framework to write to. You can see various examples online, such as this person's template on the [TES website](#).

The Toppsta website has lists of recommendations for various ages, and many reviews written by children. It provides an online form for pupils to submit their own reviews. Go to:

[Toppsta](#)

There are plenty of places on the web where children can find reading suggestions that will help them to develop their own taste in reading.

The Guardian's website has a children's books section, which can be filtered into articles relevant to different age bands; it contains news and reviews, about a variety of new books and classics.

[The Guardian](#)

UK Children's Books (formerly known as The Word Pool) arranges its lists by topic and type rather than age.

[UK Children's Books](#)

The Reading Is Fundamental project has age-related lists plus suggestions for motivating children to read, books for reading aloud and seasonal ideas.

[Reading is Fundamental](#)

Activity 2

Click on "view document" below and look at an example of a book review writing frame.

[View document](#)

Now produce a writing frame or pro forma of your own to prompt pupils in your school to write book reviews. You might want to write different frames for different groups of pupils.

3 Book awards

Members of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals will be familiar with the Carnegie medal, which is awarded for an outstanding children's book each year.

The [BookTrust website](#) lists a variety of different awards for children's books and, although the majority are judged by publishers and critics, some involve children in the selection process. You might like to investigate how you can get your own pupils involved in selecting books for awards.

Although the Carnegie Medal winner is selected by a panel of librarians, children from all over the UK shadow the process and make recommendations. Look at the [Carnegie website](#) for further information about the awards.

The [Waterstones Children's Book Prize](#) aims to uncover hidden talent in children's writing, awarding prizes in various different categories to authors who are still relatively new voices.

[The Blue Peter Book Awards](#) are run by the BBC programme in collaboration with the public library project Reading Relay. The awards include judges' awards and voters' awards.

[The Children's Book Award](#), from the [Federation of Children's Book Groups](#), is chosen by nominations from children throughout the UK.

Some local library services have established their own awards and these are totally chosen by children. Take a look at facilities in your local area to find out if something like this is available.

Activity 3

Plan to get your own pupils involved in choosing books they think should get an award. You might like to shadow the Carnegie Medal, or get involved with Reading Relay and Blue Peter.

The criteria for the selection of the Carnegie Medal provide a useful checklist for those wanting to think about why a book is good.

Click on "view document" below to see these criteria.

[View document](#)

You could establish your own school's award. Any author would be glad to hear that their book had been chosen by a group of children – even if there was no huge monetary prize!

4 Reading clubs

Reading opens minds. Through books, a reader enters different worlds, sees other points of view, experiences new emotions and situations. A reading club is a great chance to read different books, to find books you might never have considered yourself. To share your views with others is much more fun than looking away inside your head.

Nicola Morgan

There is plenty of support to help you run a reading club in your own school.

[Chatterbooks](#) is an educational initiative associated with The Reading Agency, which works with public libraries and schools to run children's reading groups.

[Scholastic](#) has information and various links related to setting up and joining book clubs. Your pupils could get involved with the [CBBC Book Club](#) and talk about the books they like on this website.

Best of all, you could start your own reading club and get pupils talking and engaged with book-related activities.

Activity 4

Investigate the possibility of starting a book or reading club in your own school.

Prepare an e-mail or memo to invite colleagues to discuss the possibility and to enlist support.

Conclusion

This free course provided an introduction to studying Education, Childhood & Youth. It took you through a series of exercises designed to develop your approach to study and learning at a distance, and helped to improve your confidence as an independent learner.

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References

Nicola Morgan at ContinYou, [<http://www.readingclub.org.uk>, accessed 26 January 2007].

Jack Prelutsky, 'I Met a Dragon Face to Face' in *Good Books, Good Times!* By Lee Bennett Hopkins and Harvey Stevenson, HarperCollins.

Acknowledgements

This unit was originally prepared for TeachandLearn.net by Jenny Brown, who is a chartered librarian and has worked as a school librarian in London for 15 years. She was one of the first to obtain the RSA Diploma in Technology for Teachers. Jenny has always had a keen interest in independent learning and higher-order thinking skills, and has championed the key role that librarians can play in developing these. While working for BECTa she managed a number of UK and Europe wide projects in schools and was closely involved in the development and delivery of the NOF training programme for school librarians.

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