



## Overview

While three children are gathering pine cones for a fire at the beach with their father, they find the skull of a kitten. Through the reactions of the family, an unspoken story slowly emerges, and the reader infers that the children's mother has recently died.

Readers need to use evaluation and inference across the story to understand the reason for the characters' actions and reactions. If appropriate, allow students to discover the layers of meaning themselves by setting a purpose and then leaving them to read the story independently. Explore the story after reading by checking for surface understanding and then using discussion

prompts to draw out the deeper levels of meaning. Some students may need more support than this and might need to go through the text in chunks, with support from the teacher.

The story provides opportunities for a sensitive exploration of personal grief and loss and the different ways people cope with changes in family relationships. You will need to be aware of, and sensitive to, any recent experiences of loss among your students.

Texts related by theme

"Nana and the Flower Arranger" SJ 2.1.08 | "Nana's Story" SJ 2.1.03 | "Sports Day" SJ 2.3.09

## Text characteristics from the year 5 reading standard

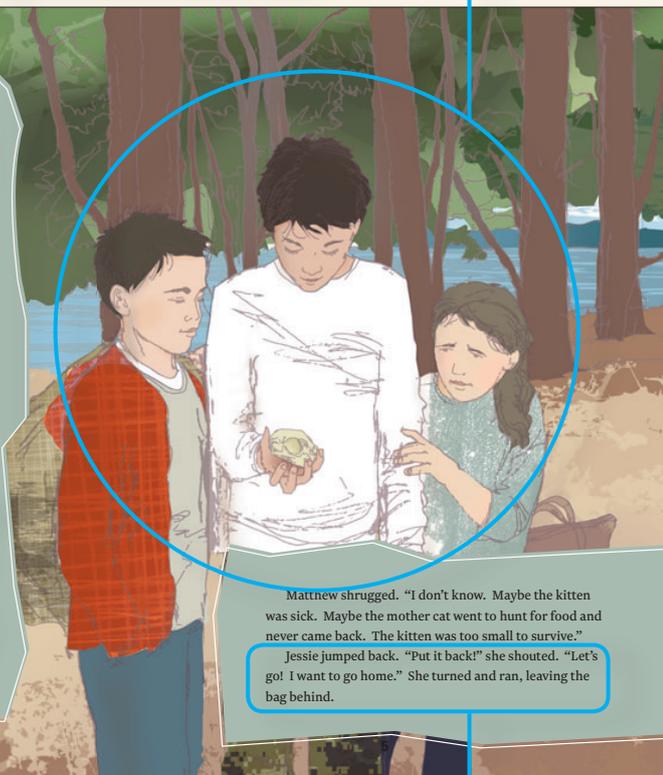
abstract ideas, in greater numbers than in texts at earlier levels, accompanied by concrete examples in the text that help support the students' understanding

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

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

Inside the forest, the air was cool and sweet.  
"Can you hear that?" asked Matthew.  
The other two listened. They could hear nothing, but the nothing pressed on their ears. It was a nothing like the sound of falling snow; the nothing of a heart between beats.  
They found pine cones under the trees. Jessie darted around, filling her bag. "Here's one," she called each time. "Here's another one."  
At the foot of a tree, between the roots, Sam found a hole. A black and secret hole, half-hidden in a drift of pine needles. When they cleared the needles away, the entrance was big enough for Sam's arm.  
"It's a rabbit hole," said Matthew.  
"It's full of pine cones," said Sam. "I'll get them out."  
He knelt down on the pine needles and reached into the hole. Jessie shuddered. "What about spiders?"  
Sam pulled out pine cone after pine cone, and Matthew put them into the sack.  
"Wait," said Sam. "There's one more. I can reach it."  
He pulled out the last pine cone and held it out.  
But it wasn't a pine cone. It was a small, round structure made of bones. Most were curved, some were fluted, and some needle-sharp. In the palm of Sam's hand it was as perfect as a bird's egg.  
A skull.  
"Oh," cried Jessie. "What is it? Is it a bird?"  
Matthew took it and turned it in his fingers. "It's not a bird, and it's not a possum or a rat. Look at the teeth. I think it's a kitten's skull. A wild kitten. This must've been the den."  
Jessie gripped his arm. "But what happened? What happened to the kitten?"

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Matthew shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe the kitten was sick. Maybe the mother cat went to hunt for food and never came back. The kitten was too small to survive."  
Jessie jumped back. "Put it back!" she shouted. "Let's go! I want to go home." She turned and ran, leaving the bag behind.

figurative and/or ambiguous language that the context helps the students to understand

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

## Possible curriculum contexts

### HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION (Relationships with other people)

LEVEL 3 – Identify and compare ways of establishing relationships and managing changing relationships.

### ENGLISH (Reading)

LEVEL 3 – Purposes and Audiences: Show a developing understanding of how texts are shaped for different purposes and audiences.

### ENGLISH (Writing)

LEVEL 3 – Purposes and Audiences: Show a developing understanding of how to shape texts for different purposes and audiences..

### Possible reading purposes

- To understand and relate to the experiences and emotions of other people
- To identify ways in which a writer can “show, not tell” important information in a story
- To explore the ways in which families deal with major changes.

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

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

### Possible writing purposes

- To recount a particular event when you felt supported by your family
- To describe how a person (real or imaginary) has dealt with a major change in their life.

## Text and language challenges

### VOCABULARY:

- Possible unfamiliar words and concepts, including “strewn”, “heaved”, “muttered”, “darted”, “drift”, “shuddered”, “structure”, “fluted”, “survive”, “high-tide mark”, “driftwood”, “couldn’t bear it”, “couldn’t help it”, “fault”, “decorate”, “darkened”, “tossed”, “rays”
- The use of personification: “The sea heaved and muttered”
- The use of similes: “like the sound of falling snow”; “as perfect as a bird’s egg”, “as red and orange as the last rays of the setting sun”; “As blue as their mother’s eyes”.

### Possible supporting strategies

Discuss the way language is used in literary texts (for example, the use of simile). Support students to identify the reasons why a writer might do this, for example, to make an emotional impact or to convey particular feelings or images.

You could explore common similes – perhaps by giving groups of students words and phrases to match (for example, bright/sun). Make links to figurative language in other texts that you’ve read as a class. Begin a simile chart, and as you read, look for examples to add to it.

### SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE REQUIRED:

- Experiences of visits to New Zealand beaches
- Knowledge of storms, including the way a New Zealand beach looks after a storm
- Experiences of visits to pine forests
- Familiarity with collecting pine cones or driftwood to make a fire
- An understanding of family relationships and the ways in which they can change
- Awareness of implied information in a story.

### Possible supporting strategies

Provide opportunities for students to share their experiences of walking on the beach and of the impact a storm can have on it. Ask students to share any experiences they have of collecting and using firewood for a bonfire.

With students who have little experience of New Zealand beaches and pine forests, you could use pictures and/or video to explore the context.

Discussion of the family relationships in this story would be best left until the students have read and evaluated the story for themselves.

### TEXT FEATURES AND STRUCTURE:

- The straightforward narrative structure, with events narrated in chronological sequence
- The implied underlying story of the family’s recent bereavement
- The use of dialogue to convey information about the characters and to hint at the underlying story
- The use of descriptive verbs – “smashed”, “strewn”, “heaved”, “muttered”, “darted”, “shuddered”, “gripped”, “shrugged”
- The use of a variety of sentence structures, including simple, compound, and complex sentences; sentences with lists; incomplete sentences
- The large number of adverbial phrases describing location, for example, “in the forest above Granny’s Bay”, “On the beach”.

### Possible supporting strategies

As students start reading, support them to identify the setting and the characters. If necessary, they can draw a character chart to identify the characters and their relationships. Set a purpose for reading without giving away the underlying story.

After reading the story, work with students to clarify any misunderstandings. Help students to identify the places in the text where the writer gives clues about the underlying story.

Analyse one or two different kinds of sentences to find out how they are constructed. Discuss other ways of conveying the same information and compare the effectiveness of each. Break down sentences using questions such as Who? What? or Where? as appropriate and label the parts of the sentence. If it is helpful for your students, you could also label parts of speech, such as verbs, nouns, and prepositions, and talk about how they function in the sentences.

# Instructional focus – Reading

English (Level 3 – Purposes and Audiences: Show a developing understanding of how to shape texts for different purposes and audiences.)

## Text excerpts from “After the Storm”

## Students (what they might do)

## Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching)

After the storm, the children went to the window to see if the beach was still there.

“I bet it’s smashed,” said Sam.

Matthew leaned out. “I bet it’s not.”

“Is it smashed?” asked Jessie.  
“Is it, Dad?”

*Students **make connections** between the setting and characters and their own experiences of storms, beaches, and family relationships. They **integrate** the information to **form hypotheses** about the possible plot and theme of the story.*

**TELL** the students to read the story, using reading strategies to identify the plot, characters, and theme. This allows them to get a feel for the whole text (but may “spoil the ending” if some students pick it up and others don’t).

- Have the students evaluate the story as they read, thinking about the characters and what is happening in the story.
- Tell them that they can discuss the story when they’ve finished reading it by themselves.

**Or** for students who need more support, you could:

- initially, have them skim-read the whole text with a more limited, achievable purpose, such as identifying aspects of the context (finding people and places), finding similes, or locating vocabulary
- read through the text with them in chunks, asking questions and clarifying and confirming meanings at the end of each chunk.

This second approach allows the students to clearly understand each chunk as they go and enables them to progress through the story at the same pace.

“I think it’s a kitten’s skull. A wild kitten. This must’ve been the den.”

Jessie gripped his arm. “But what happened? What happened to the kitten?”

*On first reading, the students **ask and answer questions** to understand Jessie’s reaction.*

*On a subsequent reading, students **locate and identify clues** to the deeper meaning. They integrate the direct and indirect information to **infer** that the dead kitten has triggered Jessie’s grief for her mother.*

**ASK QUESTIONS** to help students evaluate and think critically about the text.

- What do you think a den is?
- How does Jessie hold his arm? What does this tell us about how she is feeling?
- What do we learn about Jessie in these passages?
- Why do you think the kitten means so much to Jessie?
- How does the writer let us know what is really worrying her?
- Why doesn’t she tell us this directly?

“She couldn’t help it,” said Matthew. “She didn’t mean to leave the kitten. It wasn’t her fault. It was no one’s fault. It just happened.”

*On a second reading, the students evaluate both Matthew’s response and the writer’s purpose in conveying meaning indirectly.*

**PROMPT** students to think critically as they reread the text.

- What do you think now about the writer’s purpose?
- How would you evaluate Matthew’s response? Is he only talking about the kitten?
- What does he mean by “no one’s fault”? What kinds of things “just happen” in life?

Dad put his arm around her. “The kitten didn’t have a father to look after it. It didn’t have a grandma and a grandpa.”

“It didn’t have two big brothers,” said Sam. “Or uncles and aunties.”

Dad smoothed her hair. “You have all those people, Jessie.”

*When they first read the story, students may **evaluate** the information and **identify** this as a turning point in the story. They may now **make inferences** about the human relationships that are paralleled in the kitten’s life and death.*

**ASK QUESTIONS** to support students as they identify and evaluate the deeper meaning of this passage.

- Is Dad really talking about the kitten? Why do you think that?
- What further information helps you to infer what has happened in this family?
- How do Sam’s words and Dad’s actions help you understand the family’s relationships? How would you describe them?
- What was the writer’s purpose and point of view? Why do you think that?

**GIVE FEEDBACK**

- Thank you for sharing your first responses to this story. Let’s reread and see what else the writer was telling us.
- I noticed that you drew on information from different parts of the story to infer the family relationships. That’s great, because integrating information across a text helps us to understand what the author wants us to be thinking about.

## METACOGNITION

- You’ve used great reading strategies to understand what was happening in this story. Show me a place where you paused to consider what was happening. What were you thinking? What reading strategies did you use?
- What helped you to understand the relationships between people in this family? What clues did you use?

Reading standard: by the end of year 5

The Literacy Learning Progressions

Assessment Resource Banks

# Instructional focus – Writing

English (Level 3 – Purposes and Audiences: Show a developing understanding of how to shape texts for different purposes and audiences.)

## Text excerpts from “After the Storm”

The other two listened. They could hear nothing, but the nothing pressed on their ears. It was a nothing like the sound of falling snow; the nothing of a heart between beats.

### FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

*A writer can communicate an idea or a mood through the use of language such as simile and metaphor. Repetition reinforces the mood and helps the reader to build up an understanding of how characters may be feeling.*

At the foot of a tree, between the roots, Sam found a hole. A black and secret hole, half-hidden in a drift of pine needles.

### SENTENCE STRUCTURE

*Putting the main clause after phrases that lead to it builds up anticipation for the reader. Writers can also use descriptive sentences that omit a verb to add detail to something that has gone before. The writer assumes the reader will mentally “bridge the gap” to understand more about what is described.*

“I want fan shells,” said Jessie. “They were Mum’s favourites.”

### USE OF TENSE

*A change of tense tells the reader something has changed. It can be a clue that helps the reader to infer meaning.*

## METACOGNITION

**ASK QUESTIONS** to help the students think more deeply about the strategies they use to convey meaning to their readers.

- What did you learn from this story that you could use in your own writing? What effect do you want to achieve?
- How does the audience you choose affect the way you tell your story? For example, how much could you expect your audience to work out for themselves?
- In what other ways could you have told your story? Can fiction be more effective than a factual story for some sensitive topics? Why do you think that?

## Teacher

(possible deliberate acts of teaching)

**PROMPT** students to experiment with creating mood or atmosphere in their writing.

- How could you describe something that can't be seen or heard?
- How could building a mood or atmosphere help your reader to understand the feelings of the characters?
- Are there places in your writing where you want your readers to feel the mood or atmosphere? How could you do this?

**EXPLAIN** that the ways in which sentences are constructed can affect the impact the writing has on the reader.

- Did you notice your reading slowing down in the first sentence? By putting the main clause last, you can make your readers slow down and feel the mood or atmosphere.
- Think about the ways you could use a similar sentence structure to build a description.
- How would this technique enhance your writing? Discuss with your partner where you could do this.

**EXPLAIN** that this is an example of how the writer can show the reader something important without saying it directly.

- Why does Jessie use the past tense? What is the writer showing us here? Confirm that the past tense usually refers to something completely finished so when she says “were”, the reader infers that the mother has passed away.
- Look over your writing to see if there are places where the use of a different tense could imply particular information to the reader.

**GIVE FEEDBACK** to affirm students' choices of how to convey information and build mood in their stories.

- You've added a powerful simile here – it gives me a much better understanding of how the characters are feeling.
- Instead of telling me directly that Harry was angry, you've shown it by the way you described his actions. This gives your writing more depth and impact.