

Playing with Words

by Apirana Taylor

From *School Journal*, Part 4, Number 3, 2004

Overview

In this autobiographical report, award-winning writer Apirana Taylor explains what motivates him to write and how he became a writer. The text includes Apirana's poem "Te Kooti", and the notes include a range of suggestions for how you might approach these linked works. Note that the poem is conceptually much more sophisticated than the report.

This text is also available on the *School Journal Part 3 and Part 4 CD 2004* and there is an adapted version (with a higher level of support for the reading, extra illustrations, a glossary, and two interactive follow-up activities) on the 2006 CD-ROM *Creepy and other stories*.

Suggested Teaching Purpose

Based on the information I have about my students' learning needs, what would be an appropriate teaching purpose for this session?

Examples of an appropriate teaching purpose are listed below.

•	For the report: to support the students in developing the comprehension strategies of inferring , making connections, and identifying the author's purpose
•	For the poem: to support the students in developing the comprehension strategies of inferring , identifying the author's purpose, or analysing and synthesising.

Features of the Text to Consider in Context

What features of this text would support the teaching purpose?

In both texts:

•	The connections between the report, the poem, and the illustration on pages 22–23
•	The opportunities to infer meaning
•	The levels of meaning offered in the title "Playing with Words"
•	The idea that a poem is as close as this poet can get to perfection and the visual impact of the poem as the final outcome of the planned "five-hundred-page" work

In the report:

•	The implied audience, as if the writer is answering questions
•	The powerful use of similes "words were like paint", "skin as thick as that of the rhinoceros"
•	The analogy the writer draws between writing and breathing
•	The honesty of the text—writing is hard work, and Apirana experiences difficulties when he writes but still loves to write
•	The complexity of the answer to the question "Why do you write?"
•	The description of exhilaration and passion for writing expressed in the text
•	The focus on Apirana's writing rather than his life
•	The description of the Māori and Pākehā influences on his writing
•	The importance of role models (Apirana's father, the poet Alistair Campbell)
•	The writer's belief that his skill as a writer is a gift.

In the poem:

•	The links between the ideas in the poem
•	The poem as an example of the idea that you can capture complex and challenging ideas within relatively few words by creating multiple links between ideas

Readability (of the report)

Noun frequency level: 9.5–10.5 years

What other features of this text might constitute challenges for my students? (For example, features that may require a prompt or a brief explanation)

•	The conceptual difficulty and vocabulary of the poem
•	The words in the report: “epic”, “exhilaration”, “playwrights”, “implode”, “tenacity”.

What prior knowledge would support my students in reading this text?

•	Awareness that poetry often contains more than one level of meaning
•	An understanding of the historical significance of Te Kooti
•	A particular interest in writing.

Sharing Learning Outcomes with Your Students (select one or two)

I will be able to:

•	explain how I used information from the report to infer how the author became a writer and how he feels about his writing;
•	consider why the author wrote this poem and explain my thinking;
•	discuss how the ideas in the text, including the poem, are conveyed in the illustration on pages 22–23.

A Framework for the Lesson

How will I help my students to achieve the learning outcomes?

In the sections below, particular comprehension strategies, reading processes, and links to other aspects of literacy learning have been identified in brackets. Many of these relate directly to the highlighted teaching purpose, but others have also been identified where appropriate.

Depending on your purpose and your knowledge of your students, you may decide to focus on the poem first or begin with the report and introduce the poem when it’s mentioned in the text. Suggestions for each lesson sequence are given below.

Starting with the poem:

Before reading

•	Tell the students you have a poem for them to read and then a report that is written by the poet about his writing.
•	Introduce the title of the poem and show the illustration of Te Kooti. Discuss who Te Kooti was and his role in New Zealand’s history. (Making connections)
•	Clarify the learning outcome(s) with the students.

During the reading

•	Distribute the journals and read the poem to the students. Then read it again verse by verse, discussing the language used and the possible meaning of each verse. This is likely to require a high level of teacher support. It isn't necessary to try and draw out every nuance of meaning, but aim to have the students identify a few linked images. For example, you could help them to notice the connections between the ideas of black and white, birth and death, and fire and ashes. (Making connections)
•	"If you put these ideas together and reread the last verse, what do you think the poet might be suggesting about Te Kooti in this poem?" (Making connections; analysing and synthesising; identifying the main idea)
•	Ask the students "Who might have written such a poem?" "What might be important to the author?" (Inferring; identifying the author's purpose)
•	Introduce the students to the author, Apirana Taylor, and the report. Continue with the reading, selecting from the suggestions in these notes according to your purpose.

Starting with the report:

Before reading

•	Read the introduction and title and alert the students to the fact that Apirana Taylor is both the subject and the author of the report. Identify the text form as an autobiographical report. Ask the students to define what they expect from the text. Draw out the idea that it will probably include information about influences, work ethics, and feelings. (Making connections; forming hypotheses)
•	Clarify the learning outcome(s) with the students.

During reading

•	Have the students read page 20. "Is this what you expected the report to cover?" (Testing hypotheses)
•	"I wonder why less focus was placed on writing at school as Apirana got older." Link this to Apirana's purpose for writing this report. (Inferring; identifying the author's purpose)
•	Ask the students why Apirana might have forgotten why he wanted to be a writer. "What might have got in the way?" (Inferring)
•	The students will easily see that the poem Apirana refers to is nowhere near five hundred pages long. Support them in inferring what happened to his original plans. This links to the idea expressed later that a poem has to be perfect. (Inferring; identifying the author's purpose)
•	Read the first paragraph on page 22 and clarify what happened to the poem "Te Kooti". (Leave a detailed analysis of the poem for a separate session.)
•	Encourage the students to infer the meaning of the word "exhilaration" and to explain how they worked it out. Check it together in the dictionary. (Inferring and confirming)
•	Encourage the students to speculate about why Apirana might have written this report. Have them identify passages in the text that influenced their thinking. (Identifying the author's purpose; inferring)
•	Stop at "I love what I do" on page 22. "Why do you think he refuses to spend time away from writing and art?" "What do you think the "art" is?" Explain how you understood this from the text." (Inferring)
•	Have the students read to the end. "What does the word "implode" mean? "How did you work it out?" (Inferring)

•	“Explain the relationship between Apirana and his writing and how you understood this from what you read.” (Inferring)
•	If necessary, support the students with the meaning of the word “tenacity”. (Inferring; building vocabulary)
•	“Do you think writing is hard work? Explain what you think and how you understood this from the text.” (Inferring; identifying the author’s purpose)

After reading

Select from these suggestions according to your purpose for the reading and what you’ve observed about the students’ needs during the reading.

•	“What messages about writing do you think Apirana is trying to convey in this report?” Encourage the students to identify passages in the text that influenced and supported their thinking. (Inferring; identifying the author’s purpose)
•	“I wonder how Apirana decides what to write about?” “Do you think he will sit down and write a ‘five-hundred-page poem’ again?” (Inferring; forming hypotheses)
•	Have the students read and discuss the ideas in the poem. Use the suggestions in these notes as a guide. (Making connections; inferring)
•	Discuss the possible obstacles that could have stopped Apirana from becoming a writer. Identify the “luck” that helped set him back on the path to writing. (Summarising; inferring)
•	Have the students identify the connections between the illustration on pages 22 and 23 and the ideas conveyed in the poem and the report. For example, the feathers, the Māori taonga, and the backwards letters in the speech bubbles. Note that an extra photograph in the CD ROM suggests some further links. (Making connections)
•	Discuss with the students how this text is like an interview. Have them work in pairs to develop interview questions they would want to ask Apirana. (Making connections; asking questions)

Reflect with the students on how well the learning outcome has been achieved and note any teaching points for future sessions.

Links to further learning

What follow-up tasks will help my students to consolidate and/or extend their new learning?

•	Have the students look for other examples of Apirana Taylor’s work, (for example, the story “Geeks” in this journal) and art. They could look for themes that commonly occur in his work. Have them speculate about what it is that he considers important. (Analysing and synthesising)
•	The students could find out more about the lives and work of other New Zealand poets, such as Alistair Campbell, Brian Turner, or Glenn Colquhoun.
•	Students with a particular interest in writing could see if they can identify what it is in Apirana Taylor’s work that could inspire other writers. (Analysing and synthesising; evaluating)