

# The Short Cut

by Sue Gibbison

SJ 3.1.09

## *Overview*

Elliot and Sean and their families are travelling in the United States. They decide to take a short cut to get to their destination – but they are unfamiliar with the desert environment and completely unprepared for what they find. The group makes a series of poor decisions that lead to their predicament. The decisions are turning points in the story and provide the focus for this lesson on summarising.

Since your students will need to use their prior knowledge to evaluate the decisions, you could explore the text as part of, or after, a unit on safety in the outdoors. Alternatively, you may need to provide them with background information during your preparation for the lesson.

## *Suggested reading purpose and teaching purpose*

*Based on the information I have about my students' learning needs, what would be appropriate reading and teaching purposes for the lesson?*

- To share an adventure story that highlights the need to be prepared in the outdoors
- To support the students in developing the comprehension strategies of making connections, evaluating, and **summarising**.

## *Suggested learning goal*

We are learning to summarise the key events and character decisions that influence the outcome of the story.

## **Success criteria**

*To support our comprehension of the text, we will:*

- use a range of prior knowledge to identify the key events and supporting information as we read
- ask questions about the characters' decisions
- identify the events and decisions that contributed to their situation
- evaluate the events and decisions
- summarise the decisions in our own words.

## *Features of the text*

*What are the potential supports of this text in relation to my students' learning needs and to the reading and teaching purposes?*

- **Text form:** A recount in which the present tense conveys a sense of immediacy.
- **Theme:** Safety (and danger) in the outdoors.

- **Language choices:**
  - The use of short sentences to convey a sense of urgency and danger, for example, “It’s a long night. Aeroplanes pass overhead”, “Elliot hears a strange snuffling. Sean’s dad thinks it’s police dogs”
  - The expressive verbs, for example, “gazes”, “crawl”, “plummets”, “spins”, “squeeze”, “rustles”, “stamps”, “trampling”, “bumping”, “huddled”, “circling”
  - The foreshadowing of potential danger, especially on page 2, for example, “That’s the plan, anyway”, “Elliot gazes at the huge desert far below”, “the temperature plummets”, “You should be OK ... It hasn’t rained for quite a while”
  - The simile “Cars crawl along like bugs”.
- **Specific vocabulary:**
  - The abbreviation GPS (for global positioning system)
  - The measurements of distance and volume, for example, “120 kilometres”, “750 millilitres”
  - The American setting, which is unfamiliar to the characters, and the words that represent it, for example, “coyotes”, “scorpion”, “pretzels”, “sheriff’s car”, “ranger’s station”, “vultures”.

### ***Readability***

Noun frequency level: 9.5–10.5 years for guided reading

*What text features might challenge my students and require a prompt or a brief explanation?*

- Particular words and concepts, including “criss-crossed”, “plummets”, “consults”, “GPS”, “cattle road”, “redirecting”, “two-wheel drive”, “ditch”, “stranded”, “snuffling”, “coyotes”, “exhausted”, “rustles”, “scorpion”, “trampling”, “millilitres”, “pretzels”, “thirstier”, “condensation”, “disturbed”, “colony”, “cellphone coverage”, “sheriff’s”, “sleeping rough”, “ranger’s station”, “disoriented”, “huddled”, “vultures”, “solar water still”, “vapour”, “condenses”
- The need to visualise some of the characters’ actions and to infer the reason for them, for example, “Each time they come to a dry riverbed, they stop, get out of the car, and carry their bags across”
- The use of colloquialisms unfamiliar to English language learners, for example, “on the road”, “real pretty”, “stick with it”, “share it around”
- Phrasal verbs (new especially to English language learners), for example, “set off”, “stick with it”, “work it out”, “share it around”
- The range of time frames and verb forms, challenging especially to English language learners.

*What prior knowledge or experience might help my students to read this text?*

- **Knowledge of the world:** Their familiarity with desert environments

- **Topic/content knowledge:** Their knowledge of safety principles in the outdoors
- **Personal experience:** Their experiences of dangerous situations
- **Literacy-related knowledge:** Their experiences of finding main ideas in text and identifying cause and effect.

*Preparation for reading*

- Students could work independently or in pairs to answer these questions. (Note the importance of going from the known to the unknown to help the students use their prior knowledge appropriately.)
  - What do you know about some New Zealand environments that can be dangerous for people like trampers, skiers, climbers, campers, or people just going for a day trip?
  - What do you know about keeping safe in these environments, from what you’ve read, seen on TV, or experienced yourself or from what someone you know has experienced?
- Introduce, from the text, words or concepts that your students are likely to find difficult so that you can focus on summarising during the lesson. They can use the text to explore their meanings in context. (Forming and testing hypotheses; building vocabulary)

Word	Sentence in the text	What I think it means	Dictionary meaning	Meaning in my first language (for ELLs)

- Let your students read the full text to enjoy the story and then discuss it in pairs.

*A framework for the lesson*

*How will I help my students to achieve the reading purpose and the learning goal?*

**Before reading**

- Share the reading purpose with the students and briefly introduce the text.
- Follow up on the previous day’s reading of the text. Draw out and discuss the compounding problems the characters faced and the increasing danger. “I noticed some poor decisions they made that worsened their situation. We’re going to summarise those turning points when we read the text again.” Foreshadow that the poor decisions may not be explicit – “You may have to evaluate the actions to identify which are mistakes by using what you know about safety in the outdoors and by linking events in the text.” Prepare your students with photocopies of the text and highlighter pens, which they can use to identify key passages. (Making connections; evaluating; summarising)

- Revisit what the process of summarising involves, especially the importance of:
  - knowing what you're looking for (in this case, events and poor decisions that affected the story's outcome) and what to ask yourself as you read ("What was the decision? Was it a wise one? Did it change the course of events?") (Analysing and synthesising; asking questions)
  - being able to express the information in a clear summary statement. (Summarising)
- Share the learning goal and success criteria with the students.

### **During reading**

*Refer to Effective Literacy Practice in Years 5 to 8, pages 80–93, for information about deliberate acts of teaching.*

#### **Page 2**

- Read down to "the temperature plummets". Support the students with unfamiliar vocabulary as necessary. Briefly identify and discuss the descriptions of the environment that are warning signs here and that foreshadow the problem. Draw out the information about the environment's:
  - vastness ("huge desert far below")
  - emptiness ("There are no houses")
  - challenging landforms ("criss-crossed with deep canyons")
  - extreme temperatures ("the temperature plummets").

"Can you make a summary statement about the environment?"  
(Analysing and synthesising; summarising)

- Read to the end of the page. Highlight the way the baker looks at the car and what he says ("It hasn't rained for quite a while"). "Think, pair, and share what you can infer about the route he is recommending. I think I've noticed the group's first mistake. Should they have listened to him? Why or why not?" (Inferring; summarising; evaluating)

#### **Page 4**

- Confirm what "GPS" stands for (global positioning system) and what the instrument is designed to do (provide direction to an exact location). Help your students to infer why the group would "stop, get out of the car, and carry their bags across" when they came to riverbeds (they needed to make the two-wheel drive lighter and higher off the ground). Imagining the scene may help. (Inferring; visualising)
- Your students may need some support to identify the poor decisions on this page. Model your thinking. "I think the group made quite a few mistakes here. Their actions sometimes don't *seem* too bad, but when I really think about them, knowing what I know about the outdoors ..."  
The text you highlight, and ideas you elicit, may include:

- “Just go straight ahead” (the baker does not give them clear directions).
- “So they take the short cut.”
- “Sean’s dad decides to stick with it” (they keep going on the cattle road despite their problems).
- “Their car is two-wheel drive” (not suited to the environment).
- “They somehow manage to keep going” (when they should turn around).
- “The GPS tells them ...” (they put their complete faith in an instrument).
- “Elliot’s mum and Sean’s mum decide to walk” (they separate themselves from the car and the others).
- “They take a bottle of water, an apple” (not enough water and food).
- “It’s four o’clock, so there’s plenty of time to reach help” (they underestimate the time they need and how quickly night falls in this environment).
- “They manage to drive a little further” (they move from where the mothers left the group).

Draw out the idea that the group is in a country that is foreign to them and that they don’t really understand the environment. (Making connections; evaluating; summarising)

### Page 5

- Have the students continue identifying poor decisions or their results:
  - “there are no sleeping bags” (they are not prepared for the worst).
  - “It’s fixed below the car, and Sean’s dad is too big to squeeze underneath” (the two-wheel-drive car is too low for the environment).
  - “but the system is strange to them and they can’t work it out” (they aren’t familiar with the car).

To identify the second point about the car being too low, the students need to make connections with text on the previous page (“they stop, get out of the car, and carry their bags across” and “The wheel spins round and round in the sand”). You could also evaluate whether “trampling” the scorpion is a good idea. (Making connections; evaluating; summarising)

### Page 6

- Have the students do the same:
  - “only one bottle of water” and “750 millilitres isn’t enough to go round” (they don’t have enough water).
  - “They eat pretzels, which makes them even thirstier”.

- “they plug the DVD player into the car battery and watch a movie” (they waste the car battery, which they may need to drive out).

(Making connections; evaluating; summarising)

### Page 7

- Have the students do the same:
  - “The white car, which is full, turns around and drives back the way it came” (couldn’t they have all squeezed in given the danger of the situation?).
  - “once he has cellphone coverage” (they went out of cellphone coverage in a dangerous environment that they don’t know).
  - “But it’s too rough for the plane to land” (they entered a dangerous environment unprepared, where rescue attempts would be difficult).

(Making connections; evaluating; summarising)

### Page 8

- Have the students do the same:
  - “They had to walk over 40 kilometres and spend two nights sleeping rough” (they relied on a mistaken GPS, which underestimated the distance).
  - “The GPS sent them all over the place” (they kept relying on an apparently faulty instrument).
  - “but said nothing because they didn’t want to frighten each other” (how would they be prepared to act without keeping each other informed?).

To identify the first error above, the students have to make connections with information on page 4 (“The GPS tells them the town of Big Water is 6 kilometres away”). (Making connections; evaluating; summarising)

### After reading

- Review the students’ highlighting, and then create a table like that below. In the first column, have the students record the text they have highlighted. In the second, they should summarise the poor decision in their own words. In the third, they should turn the poor decision into a safety tip (focus on use of the imperative verb). Below is an example from page 4 alone. You may want to divide the students into groups for this activity, with each group focusing on one page. Have the students share and explain their tables afterwards. (Making connections; evaluating; summarising)

Evidence in the text	Poor decision (summarise)	Safety tip
----------------------	---------------------------	------------

"So they take the short cut."	They take the short cut without being prepared.	Always stick to the main route if you don't know the environment and are not prepared for difficulties.
"They try another road"	They leave the cattle road for another one (now no one will know where they are).	Always stick to the main or known route, especially if you don't know the environment.
"Sean's dad decides to stick with it."	They keep going even though they are in trouble.	If you are in doubt or have problems, turn back.
"Their car is two-wheel drive"	They take a car that is not suitable for the environment.	Always take equipment that is suitable for the environment.
"They somehow manage to keep going."	They keep going even though they are in trouble.	If you are in doubt or have problems, turn back.
"The GPS tells them ..."	They rely on an instrument that may be wrong.	When using instruments, use your head too. The instrument may be wrong.
"Elliot's mum and Sean's mum decide to walk."	They leave the car and the others.	If lost in the desert, always stay with your vehicle and your companions. (A vehicle is easier to spot than a person.)
"They take a bottle of water, an apple ..."	They don't take enough food and water.	Always prepare for the worst in the outdoors and take extra food and water.
"It's four o'clock, so there's plenty of time to reach help."	They underestimate how long it will take to reach help and leave too late in the day.	If you are unsure of the environment or information you have, stay put and wait for help, especially if it is late in the day.

Note that this table shows sample responses relating to page 4 only.

- "I'm wondering if the group might have made another mistake before they set out?" Draw out the idea that you should always tell rangers or people you know your exact route and expected arrival time. (Making connections)
- Discuss how each poor decision was a turning point in the story and how changing any one of the decisions could have influenced the outcome. You could represent this concept as a tree with various possible branches. (Analysing and synthesising)

- With the students, review the learning goal and success criteria and reflect on how well the learning goal has been achieved. “How has our work today helped you to understand why the group ended up in so much trouble? What did you need to do to summarise the events and decisions in your own words? How will this help you when you are reading by yourself?” Note any teaching points for future sessions.

### **Links to further learning**

*What follow-up tasks will help my students to consolidate their new learning?*

The students could:

- explain and share, with a buddy or group, following silent or independent reading, how and where summarising helped them to better understand a text (Summarising)
- summarise key points in familiar texts (after a reading [maintenance] activity) (Summarising)
- identify the positive decisions the group took, for example, “saving some [water] just in case” (page 7) (Making connections; evaluating; summarising)
- create a “survival card” to give to people when they arrive at Bryce Canyon National Park (Summarising; analysing and synthesising)
- explore a danger in the local environment (for example, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis) and create a survival card related to it (Making connections)
- make a solar water still (Making connections)
- revisit the text with a focus on analysing the writing techniques, for example, the use of the present tense, foreshadowing, short sentences, and expressive verbs. (Analysing and synthesising)