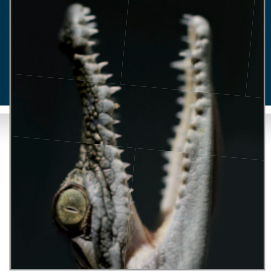


The Cat's Whiskers

by Janet Pates

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Noun frequency level: 8.5–9.5
Year 4

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Overview

“The Cat’s Whiskers” is an article that explains the importance of whiskers to cats. The article uses three key questions to frame and focus the information it provides about how cats use their whiskers, how whiskers work, and how we can determine a cat’s mood from the position of its whiskers. The writer addresses the reader directly in an informal, conversational style. This feature, along with the photos and diagram used to illustrate the factual

details, helps to make the article accessible. There are opportunities for students to find interesting information about cats, to learn about animal survival, and to get to know their pets better. The question-and-answer structure provides opportunities for exploring text structure and is a good model for writing informational texts.

Texts related by theme

“Crocodile Crèche” SJ 1.3.10 | “A Foal Is Born” SJ 1.3.09 | “A Very Special Frog” SJ 1.4.05

Text characteristics from the year 4 reading standard

a straightforward text structure, such as a structure that follows a recognisable and clear text form

some compound and complex sentences, which may consist of two or three clauses

figurative language, such as metaphors, similes, or personification

Some cats don't like their whiskers touching things like the sides of their food bowl. Does your cat scoop the food out of its bowl and eat it off the floor? It's not doing it to be naughty - try giving it a wider, shallower dish.



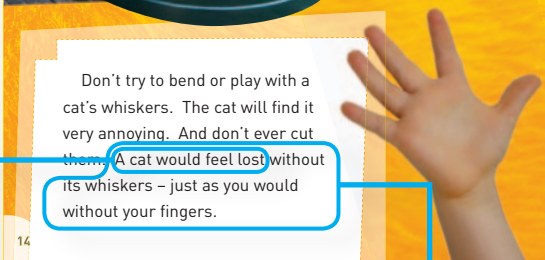
Last of all, whiskers do one more thing for your cat. They make him or her look beautiful.

When people are especially pleased with something, they sometimes say, “It's just the cat's whiskers!”

A cat wouldn't be a cat without its wonderful whiskers.



Don't try to bend or play with a cat's whiskers. The cat will find it very annoying. And don't ever cut them. A cat would feel lost without its whiskers - just as you would without your fingers.



some words and phrases that are ambiguous or unfamiliar to the students, the meaning of which is supported by the context or clarified by photographs, illustrations, diagrams, and/or written explanations

some places where information and ideas are implicit and where students need to make inferences based on information that is easy to find because it is nearby in the text and there is little or no competing information

Reading standard: by the end of year 4

Possible curriculum contexts

SCIENCE (Living World)

LEVEL 2 – Life processes: Recognise that all living things have certain requirements so they can stay alive.

ENGLISH (Reading)

LEVEL 2 – Structure: Show some understanding of text structures.

ENGLISH (Writing)

LEVEL 2 – Purposes and audiences: Show some understanding of how to shape texts for different purposes and audiences.

Possible reading purposes

- To find out what's special about cats' whiskers
- To explore how a cat's whiskers help it to survive
- To identify how the structure of the text conveys the information clearly.

Possible writing purposes

- To identify and explain a feature that helps a plant or animal to stay alive
- To explain how a particular part of your body helps you to stay alive
- To observe and describe a cat's behaviour over a period of time.

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

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

Text and language challenges

VOCABULARY:

- Possible unfamiliar and/or specialist words, including “measuring tape”, “width”, “sensory hairs”, “roots”, “nerves”, “air movements”, “tuft”, “stiff”, “long-distance vision”, “close up”, “accidentally”, “nip”, “relaxed”, “less threatening”, “scoop”, “naughty”, “shallower”, “annoying”, “especially”
- The ambiguity of “lost”
- The collocations: “measuring tape”, “size and shape”, “leg of a chair”, “wonderful whiskers”.

Possible supporting strategies

Identify the specialist (low-frequency) words students may need help with and preview them before reading. For example, use the labelled diagram and illustrations on page 11 to preview “sensory hairs” and other related words. You could use many of the illustrations, asking the students to work in pairs or groups to list features, characteristics, and actions of cats and then have them share their ideas and make a list of cat facts. Use the discussion to preview vocabulary.

Focus on words that students will meet in other contexts, for example, “tuft”, “long-distance vision”, “shallower”. Help students to identify other contexts in which they might meet or use some of these words. For example, discuss the meaning of “threatening” in different contexts (weather, war, dogs) and what “less threatening” could mean.

The English Language Learning Progressions, Introduction, pages 39–46, has some useful information about learning vocabulary.

SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE REQUIRED:

- Familiarity with cats and their behaviour
- Knowledge of mammals and their survival needs
- Knowledge of the question-and-answer structure for giving information.

Possible supporting strategies

Survey students to find out how many have or know a cat. Focus the discussion on the things cats need to survive. Select books, websites, and stories about cats to build knowledge where necessary.

Be aware of students who may not have had much to do with cats.

TEXT FEATURES AND STRUCTURE:

- Factual information presented as a series of questions and answers
- Answers that contain descriptions and explanations
- Supporting photographs, a labelled diagram, and a magnified close-up
- Use of present tense to convey information
- Writer addresses the reader directly – “you”
- Use of imperative verbs to speak directly to the reader – “Don't try to bend ...”, “And don't ever cut them.”
- Many complex sentences with subordinate clauses
- Some complex multi-clause sentences with several ideas and relationships between ideas – “That's not really surprising, because a cat uses its whiskers like a measuring tape to make sure it can fit through any gap.”
- Many adverbial phrases that add detail to the sentences – “Even in a dark room, a cat can sneak up on a mouse **without bumping into the leg of a chair.**”
- Some complex noun phrases – “the leg of a chair”, “the whiskers on its face”, “excellent long-distance vision”.

Possible supporting strategies

Review the ways we most often seek information, in particular, by asking questions. Discuss the ways in which answers might be given, for example, by showing, telling, describing, or explaining, and give a link to examples of each. Point out that many factual texts use the present tense to describe or explain things that are always so. Make connections to other non-fiction texts.

Discuss the ways a writer can “talk” directly to the audience, using “you” and verbs that tell someone what to do (“Don't try ...”).

Check that the students are familiar with finding information in photographs and diagrams. Help them to make connections between the photographs, diagram, and text. They could draw lines (on photocopies) between words and phrases in the text or sections of text and the photographs and diagram.

If necessary, help the students to understand compound and complex sentences by breaking them into separate clauses and identifying the main idea of each clause and how they are connected. Using who, what, where, when, how, and why questions as prompts and breaking down the information together can help students to identify the main ideas.

See *Supporting English Language Learning in Primary Schools: A Guide for Teachers of Years 3 and 4, Explaining*, pages 32–37.

Instructional focus – Reading

Science (Level 2 – Recognise that all living things have certain requirements so they can stay alive.)

Text excerpts from “The Cat’s Whiskers”

Students (what they might do)

Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching)

Have you ever seen a cat stuck in a hole?

No?

When a cat moves around, its whiskers pick up tiny air movements, which help it to sense the size and shape of things and how close they are. Even in a dark room, a cat can sneak up on a mouse without bumping into the leg of a chair.

Do you want to know how your cat is feeling? Look at its whiskers.

If the cat is afraid of something, its whiskers will go back, making its face look smaller and less threatening.

A cat would feel lost without its whiskers – just as you would without your fingers.

Students identify the question-and-answer sequence. They ask questions about why cats don’t get stuck and use their prior knowledge of cats to predict what might come next.

Students visualise a cat hunting for food. With support, they integrate information (what they already know about hunting and what the text says) to infer that if the cat made a noise, the mouse would escape.

Students consider the question, read the answer (“Look at its whiskers”), then use the words and photographs to identify the main ideas.

Students make connections with what they already know about cats and other animals to infer that looking smaller can protect cats from predators.

Students discuss and evaluate the comparison the writer makes by considering the role of whiskers and fingers in staying alive.

PROMPT students to use what they know to predict reasons they might not see a cat stuck in a hole.

- What kind of information do you expect you’ll find in this article?
- What do you already know about cats and their whiskers?
- What questions could you ask about cats’ whiskers?

Some students may need support to express questions. Model a way to phrase a question as a statement: “Let’s think about cats’ whiskers. I wonder ...”

ASK QUESTIONS to support students as they connect the information in the text with the big idea of “requirements so they can stay alive” and make inferences.

- Other than the food humans give them, what do you know about the food cats need? How would they get their food?
- How do their whiskers help them?

PROMPT

- Who is the writer talking to with this question? How can you tell?
- What information will we find in this section?
- Read on to look for the main ideas about how cats show their feelings.

ASK QUESTIONS

- What can you infer about how cats use their whiskers to help them to stay alive?
- What information did you use to make that inference?

DIRECT STUDENTS to reread the last line on page 13.

- What does “less threatening” mean? Can you say this another way?
- What else can you think of that can be “threatening”? (weather, dogs, criminals ...)
- How does “less” change the meaning of the word? What other words could you use to change the meaning? (more, very)

ASK QUESTIONS

- What does “lost” mean in this context? From what you’ve learned from the article, is this true?
- How are whiskers like fingers?
- In what ways do they help cats and humans stay alive?

GIVE FEEDBACK

- You used the photographs to check the information in the text, for example, looking at the photos of whiskers in different positions. That’s an excellent way to make sure you understand what you’re reading.
- You were able to make some great connections between how your fingers help you and how cats use their whiskers.

METACOGNITION

ASK QUESTIONS to help the students reflect on the strategies they have used as they read the text.

- The writer used questions to organise the information. How did this help you to identify main ideas?
- What strategies did you use to work out any unfamiliar words and terms, such as “tuft” or “long-distance vision”? Did your strategies work? What other strategies could you use?
- How much did you know about cats before you read this text? How useful was your prior knowledge in helping you to understand this text?

Reading standard: by the end of year 4

The Literacy Learning Progressions

Assessment Resource Banks

Instructional focus – Writing

Science (Level 2 – Recognise that all living things have certain requirements so they can stay alive.)

Text excerpts from “The Cat’s Whiskers”

Do you want to know how your cat is feeling?

Have you ever seen a cat stuck in a hole?

Does your cat scoop the food out of its bowl and eat it off the floor?

A cat usually has about twelve whiskers on each side of its nose. The roots go deep into the cat’s face, where nerves pick up messages and send them to the cat’s brain.

Examples of text characteristics

AUDIENCE

The question addresses the audience directly (“you”).

The question assumes the reader has a cat (“your cat”).

Questions are very useful for planning writing but can also be used in the final text to catch the reader’s attention. (“Have you ever seen a cat stuck in a hole?”)

STRUCTURE

Informational texts can be about several aspects of a topic or just focus on one very small aspect. By looking only at cats’ whiskers, the writer has kept manageable the scope of the information required.

DESCRIPTION

Informational texts often use clear, factual descriptions to explain or describe something. They often use the present tense, describing characteristics or “what always happens”.

LABELLED DIAGRAMS

A diagram can clarify and add information by showing what the words in the text describe. Diagrams simplify an idea by showing only the key elements being described. Labels point to each element.

METACOGNITION

ASK QUESTIONS to encourage students to reflect on their own and each other’s writing.

- How did having a clear audience in mind help you make decisions about the way you wrote?
- Was it easy to write with this structure? Why? If not, what was difficult? What would have worked better for you?
- Why did you choose to use a labelled diagram? How did you decide what part of the text to illustrate?
- Did you include questions in your final text? Why or why not?

Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching)

ASK QUESTIONS to help the students form their intentions for writing.

- In what ways can a writer engage with an audience?
- How can you show who your audience is?
- How will you decide on your audience? What impact will your decision have on your writing?

MODEL the use of a big topic or theme and asking questions to plan for writing and to help organise information.

- First, I’ll think about the “big topic” my article will be about. The big topic will be about what all living things need to keep them alive.
- Within my big topic, I want to write about how dogs breathe. I could start by thinking of questions my audience might have about this, for example, “Why do dogs hang their tongues out when they breathe?”
- When I’m happy with my questions, I can do some research to find the answers.

Support students to clarify the big topic or theme they will be writing about and then help them to narrow the focus. Brainstorm the specific topic to come up with useful questions that will yield good information. Alternatively, ask everyone in a group to contribute one question each. Suggest criteria the students could use to decide which questions to keep, for example, questions the audience would want to ask; questions for which they’ll be able to find information; questions that are directly relevant to the big topic or theme. Provide writing frames for students who need more support – giving degrees of scaffolding, for example: just the questions; questions and prompts for what to include under each one; or questions and sentence starters. Students with low levels of English proficiency could work with the vocabulary to write captions for photos and/or label diagrams and photos.

EXPLAIN the use of the present tense to write a simple description or explanation, using the words and diagram from page 11.

- When do cats have whiskers – what’s the time frame? What form are the verbs? Why?
- Revisit the vocabulary you looked at before reading. Is any of it useful for your writing?
- What does the diagram add to the text?
- What parts of your text could use a simple diagram to help the reader understand?

GIVE FEEDBACK

Ask the students to exchange their writing with a partner. Tell them to read each other’s texts and then give feedback.

MODEL these starters:

- I could tell your audience was ... because ...
- I liked the way you ... because it helped me ...
- The structure you used helped me understand because ...