



## Overview

*The Bittern* has been adapted as a graphic text from the story of the same name in *School Journal* 3.1.09. Both versions tell the story of Henare Kāretu, who, in an effort to protect the habitat of the bittern, refused to drain the wetland on his farm.

The story has multiple themes of conservation, perseverance, and commitment. It highlights how attitudes to conservation have developed over time and how the actions of Henare are seen in a different light nowadays.

The use of a graphic text format, with a first-person perspective from the grandson of Henare, is accessible and engaging and provides several opportunities for readers to access the sophisticated themes and abstract ideas of the original story. Two “layers” of illustration in parts of the text reflect the “story within a story” about Henare. The text offers opportunities for students to build on the key competencies of thinking, relating to others, and participating and contributing. There is an audio version of this text available at [www.schooljournalstorylibrary.tki.org.nz](http://www.schooljournalstorylibrary.tki.org.nz)

Texts related by theme

“The Bittern” SJ 3.1.09 | “Changing Landscapes” SJ 2.1.07 | “Danger Man and other stories” (e-book)

## Text characteristics from the year 6 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 in structure (for example, sentences that begin in different ways and different kinds of complex sentences with a number of subordinate clauses)

some information that is irrelevant to the identified purpose for reading (that is, some competing information), which students need to identify and reject as they integrate pieces of information in order to answer questions

One day, when your grandad was watching a digger on his neighbour's farm, he saw a big brown bird with a long neck.

The digger had frightened it, and the bird was flying towards Grandad's swamp.

Wow, big logs!

Pad stopped talking for a minute while he changed gear and passed the logging truck in front of us.

I thought about Grandad's decision. Dad always said farming was tough back then. Grandad needed every bit of farmland he could get. It must have cost a lot of money to keep that land by the river the way it was.

Some of his neighbours called him a useless farmer. A few of them even said he was lazy.

People thought they could say anything in those days.

That bittern gave Grandad a funny feeling. He realised that if everyone on the Taieri River drained their swamps, there'd be no place for the bitterns to live.

So he decided not to drain his swamp.

We reached the top of the last hill and pulled over to the side of the road.

a significant amount of vocabulary that is unfamiliar to the students (including academic and content-specific words and phrases), which is generally explained in the text by words or illustrations

figurative and/or ambiguous language that the context helps 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

Reading standard: by the end of year 6

## Possible curriculum contexts

### SOCIAL SCIENCES (Social Studies)

Level 3: Understand how people view and use places differently.

### SCIENCE (Living World)

Level 3: Ecology – Explain how living things are suited to their particular habitat and how they respond to environmental changes, both natural and human-induced.

### ENGLISH (Reading)

Level 3: Ideas – Show a developing understanding of ideas within, across, and beyond texts.

### Possible reading purposes

- To explore the impact one man's decision had on himself, his community, and the environment
- To explore and discuss the relationship of whānau to the land
- To think critically about the way ideas can change over time
- To identify how authors convey setting, characters, and plot in a graphic text.

Page 4 has suggestions for writing instruction.

For more support and suggestions for accelerating students' writing, see *Teaching Writing across the Curriculum in Years 4–6* on the Writing Hub.



The Writing Hub

## Text and language challenges

### VOCABULARY:

- Possible unfamiliar words or phrases, including “Bittern”, “opening ceremony”, “swamp”, “wetland”, “boggy”, “raupō”, “rank grass”, “neighbours”, “grazed their rams”, “plains”, “drainage ditches”, “ploughed and sown”, “grazing”, “pasture”, “digger”, “frightened”, “realised”, “changed gear”, “logging truck”, “tough”, “pulled over”, “harakeke”, “pond”, “bunched”, “DOC”, “ecosystem”, “true conservationist”, “value”, “unveil”, “photographer”, “position”
- The use of colloquial expressions, including “like headless chickens”, “C'mon”, “heaps of”, “good for nothing”
- The collocations: “opening ceremony”, “rank grass”, and “drainage ditches”
- The use of te reo Māori, including the nouns “raupō” and “harakeke”.

### Possible supporting strategies

Find images of bitterns in reference books or on the Internet and show these to the students. Discuss their habitats and the rarity of the birds.

Identify vocabulary that may be challenging or unfamiliar to your students. Identify new vocabulary that the students should prioritise for learning. *The English Language Learning Progressions: Introduction*, pages 39–46, has some useful information about learning vocabulary.

As you work to help the students to build or access their prior knowledge of farming and conservation, give them words and phrases with a simple example sentence (or definition) for each one. Have them look at the words or phrases and the accompanying sentences in pairs and discuss what they think each one means and how it might be used in the context of the story.

Discuss the way the language we use in ordinary speech can be different from more formal language, giving examples such as “C'mon” for “Come on” and “heaps of” for “many” or “a lot of”.

### SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE REQUIRED:

- Knowledge of the New Zealand landscape and history
- Knowledge of the cultural context of the story
- Knowledge of conservation
- Knowledge of farming
- Understanding that people may have different ideas about relationships with the land
- Awareness of public memorials to people who have made a special contribution to an area or a country.

### Possible supporting strategies

Before reading, ask the students to share their experiences of reading graphic texts, including comics and graphic novels.

Ask them to share any experiences of farming and to explain the differences between farmland and natural bush or forest areas. Identify some of the issues that can arise when farmers want more land or when native habitats are threatened.

Discuss other texts or situations where people have had to make decisions about destroying or protecting a habitat. Ask the students to think about what we can learn from reading about other people's lives and decisions.

### TEXT FEATURES AND STRUCTURE:

- Graphic text, where meaning is carried by the illustrations as well as the words
- Words in the form of captions (narration) and in speech bubbles
- Two time settings, shown through the words and the illustrations.

### Possible supporting strategies

List some features and examples of favourite comics or other graphic texts. If the students have little or no experience of comic-style texts, provide some examples of short comic strips, comic books, and graphic novels.

Skim the text together to identify the style of the illustrations and the people and settings they show. Highlight key vocabulary during this discussion and begin a vocabulary list for this text. Spend time before reading to check that the students know how to navigate the text, using the frames as a guide. Point out the different sizes, shapes, and layers of the illustration frames and talk about the ways we could read them.

It may be appropriate for some students to read the text the first time with the standard audio track or the embedded-support audio track.



Sounds and Words

## Instructional focus – Reading

**Social Sciences** (Social studies: Understand how people view and use places differently.)

**Science** (Living World – Ecology: Explain how living things are suited to their particular habitat and how they respond to environmental changes, both natural and human-induced.)

**English** (Ideas: Show a developing understanding of ideas within, across, and beyond texts.)

### Text excerpts from *The Bittern*

**Students**  
(what to prompt, support, and look for as the students are reading)

**Teacher**  
(possible deliberate acts of teaching)

We were on our way to the Taieri Plains – to the place by the river where Dad grew up. We were going to an opening ceremony ...

“Tell us again about what Grandad did.”

Dad had told the story heaps of times, but we always liked hearing it again.

#### DEMANDS OF THE TEXT

Students need to:

- distinguish between the narrative text and the dialogue
- ask questions and search for answers about the journey
- make an inference about the opening ceremony
- form hypotheses about the story Dad is about to tell.

“One day, when your grandad was watching a digger on his neighbour’s farm, he saw a big brown bird with a long neck. The digger had frightened it, and the bird was flying towards Grandad’s swamp.

“That bittern gave Grandad a funny feeling. He realised that if everyone on the Taieri River drained their swamps, there’d be no place for the bitterns to live. So he decided not to drain his swamp.”

#### DEMANDS OF THE TEXT

Students need to:

- identify the speaker
- identify the past and present shown in the illustrations
- draw on their own experiences to help them make inferences about Grandad’s motivation
- form hypotheses about the results of his decision.

*Students draw on their experiences of reading graphic texts to identify the narrative (captions) and dialogue (in speech bubbles). They identify the suburban setting and the characters (Dad and three children).*

*The students make connections between the text and any ceremonies they have attended to infer that a place, event, or marker of some kind may honour the grandfather.*

*Students use the hints in the last frame of this excerpt to help form hypotheses about the story Dad will tell, making connections with their own experiences of family stories that are retold. They predict that Dad will explain what his father did that is going to make him famous.*

*Students make connections between the text and their knowledge of narrative features to identify the speaker and the time periods of the illustrations.*

*Students make connections between their own experiences of sensing something is wrong, the words “funny feeling”, and the last sentence to infer that Grandad felt it would be wrong to drain his swamp. They identify the main idea that draining all the swamps would destroy the local bittern population and further infer that conservation was important to Grandad. They form hypotheses about the results of his decision, including the other farmers’ reactions and the impact on the bitterns.*

**PROMPT** the students to confirm that they can follow the narrative thread through the captions and the additional information in the dialogue. If necessary, ask them to explain whose voice the narrative uses and who is talking in each frame.

**EXPLAIN** and model the use of foreshadowing.

- Writers sometimes give readers clues about what will happen in a story. This is called foreshadowing. In this extract, there are clues that tell us we’re going to read about what Grandad did. The first clue is that they are going to the place where Grandad once lived. The next clue is in the boy’s words: he asks Dad to tell them again. The third clue is in the narrative where we learn the children liked to hear the story over and over.

**PROMPT** the students to form hypotheses about what will make Grandad famous.

- Turn to a partner and tell them what you think Grandad did to become famous. What do you think you’re going to read about on the next page?

#### GIVE FEEDBACK

- You’ve suggested some interesting ideas about what Grandad might have done and given good reasons for them by making inferences from the text.

#### MONITORING THE IMPACT OF TEACHING

Monitor the students to ensure that they are identifying the “story within the story”. Ask questions to clarify the two stories. Students may need support to identify the narrator, as it’s not completely clear whose voice is being used for the narrative captions until the middle of page 7.

Ask them to slow down and think about clues as they read, forming questions or making predictions out loud.

**ASK QUESTIONS** to support the students to think critically as they make inferences and form hypotheses.

- Why do you think the bird was flying to Grandad’s swamp?
- What is “a funny feeling”? Have you ever had that feeling? What might it mean here?
- Why would it matter if “everyone drained their swamps”? What would be the result? Why do you think Grandad cared about that?
- How do you think other farmers would react to his decision?
- What might be the impact of his decision on the bitterns?

#### GIVE FEEDBACK

- When you told us about the feeling you had when ... , you made a good personal connection with the text. Your “funny feeling” told you something was not right, and you’ve inferred that Grandad felt the same way.

#### MONITORING THE IMPACT OF TEACHING

This extract contains complex ideas about values and the impact of decision-making. If your questioning reveals that the students are confused about what Grandad did or what might happen, work through the concepts carefully, discussing the competing needs of farmers and wildlife and the reasons people make decisions. Alternatively, read on with the students, using information from the next page to go back and review the ideas in this passage. Challenge the students to think critically by asking them to give reasons for their responses and to consider different points of view, especially when they are different from their own. For students who need more support, use a graphic organiser to illustrate and record the relationships between ideas and the evidence from the text.



## Text excerpts from *The Bittern*

I thought about Grandad's decision. Dad always said farming was tough back then. Grandad needed every bit of farmland he could get ...

"Some of his neighbours called him a useless farmer. A few of them even said he was lazy."

"People thought they could say anything in those days."

### DEMANDS OF THE TEXT

Students need to:

- identify the speakers and their feelings (including the use of the "angry" dialogue bubble)
- make connections with current attitudes and values to infer that people generally had different attitudes and values in the past
- identify the main idea that Grandad understood the need for swamps and was not going to follow his neighbours.

### METACOGNITION

- Describe your thinking as you read this story. What strategies did you use to keep track of who was speaking and of the time settings?
- Find a place where you were puzzled or where you made an inference. What helped you to resolve the puzzling part or to make the inference?
- What have you learnt about how to integrate information in a text to draw your own conclusions?

## Students (what to prompt, support, and look for as the students are reading)

*The students cross-check between the words and illustrations to identify the voices as Dad's older son (narrator) and younger son, Dad, and Dad's daughter.*

*The students make connections between their understanding of environmental issues and the text to infer that Grandad put a high value on conserving a wild habitat. They integrate this inference with information about Grandad's need for farmland and "that keeping the swamp cost a lot of money" to infer that Grandad could have made more money from farming if he'd cleared the swamp.*

*By making connections with their experiences of graphic novels, the text, and the feelings expressed, the students infer that the daughter is speaking angrily, possibly because she believes the neighbours felt that Grandad was just lazy.*

*Students integrate information from the responses of the neighbours, Grandad's actions, and the daughter's words to infer that Grandad saved the local bittern population through his actions but that his decision had a big impact on his life, both socially and financially.*

*Students discuss and evaluate Grandad's decision and compare him with his neighbours to understand more about his character and values.*

## Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching)

**PROMPT** the students to clarify who the narrator is, using the words and the illustration.

**ASK QUESTIONS** to support the students to make inferences and integrate information.

- Why did Grandad need "every bit of farmland he could get"?
- In what way did it cost him "a lot of money" to keep the swamp?
- Why did his neighbours react the way they did?
- The daughter refers to "those days". What is she referring to that was different in Grandad's day? Why do you think her words are shown in a spiky speech bubble? What is the author trying to show us about the way she spoke and felt?
- Think critically about the "cost" to Grandad. Was it just to do with money he could have made? How might his neighbours' attitudes have affected him and possibly his family?

**PROMPT** the students to discuss and evaluate Grandad's decision.

- Who was right – Grandad or his neighbours? Why? Share your thinking with a partner and then with the group.

### GIVE FEEDBACK

- You've used what you know about reading graphic texts to help you understand how this story works.
- You've brought together several pieces of information in the text to make your inferences about the impact Grandad's decision had on his life. This is called integrating information. It's what good readers do. Remember to use this method next time you are reading.

### MONITORING THE IMPACT OF TEACHING

You may wish to treat pages 6 and 7 together, taking a whole session to tease out the complex ideas and to allow time for the students to evaluate Grandad and his decision.

When they have finished the whole story, return to this section and discuss the changes in attitude that have occurred over time. You could encourage them to put themselves in Grandad's place and express their opinions, giving reasons for them. For students who will find expressing these ideas challenging, model the types of sentences they could construct. For more support, provide sentence starters or speaking frames to support them to participate in the task.

You could use a graphic organiser to help the students identify the arguments for and against clearing the wetlands. Model how you bring together your thinking about different opinions and what you can conclude from this.

Following the reading, provide the students with the audio track to support their comprehension and fluency.

## Suggestions for writing instruction

Students often need support to find an idea to write about. Help them to identify ways they could use this text to form intentions for their writing.

- What personal connections did you make as you read this book? Take one of your connections, make notes about the experiences the book reminded you of, and then write up the personal connection for others to read. Who would be interested in reading this?
- How can you use the "big ideas" in this story to come up with some ideas for your own writing? For example, could you do some research to find a place where farmland is in conflict with conserving wildlife? Where could you find the information you'd need?

- What kind of format, structure, and language will you use in your writing? Why?
- As you've seen, graphic texts and comics aren't always about superheroes or science fiction. Choose a story or article that you've enjoyed and turn some or all of it into a graphic text. You may need to leave some parts out. You could work with a partner, sharing your skills at selecting, writing, and drawing.

Provide scaffolding to help the students to build on their writing strengths, giving them more support where needed and reducing it as they take control.