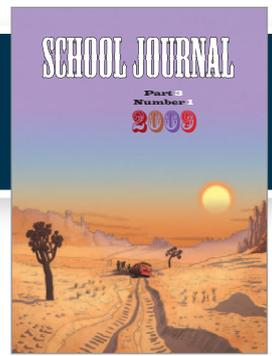


# The Bittern

by Diana Noonan

School Journal  
Part 3 Number 1 2009  
Noun frequency level: 9.5–10.5  
Year 5



## Overview

“The Bittern” tells the story of Henare Karetu who, in an effort to protect the habitat of the bittern, refused to drain the wetlands on his farm. The story has multiple themes of conservation, perseverance, and commitment and tells the story mainly through dialogue. The importance that Henare (Grandad) placed on the protection of the wetlands is positioned within his local farming community’s attitude to land usage and reflects differing

cultural values. The text highlights how attitudes to conservation have developed over time and how Grandad is now seen in a different light. The text interweaves the stories of three journeys. Its rich language and content-specific vocabulary includes te reo Māori.

Related Texts “Plastic Fantastic?” SJ 3.3.07 | “Changing Landscapes” SJ 2.1.07 | “Danger Man and other stories”

## Text characteristics from the year 5 reading standard

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

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

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

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 patch of raupō.

“I really want to go to the loo,” moaned Kawa.

“That bittern gave Grandad a funny feeling,” said Dad, “because all of a sudden, he realised that if everyone on the Taieri River drained their swamps, there’d be no place for the bitterns – or any of the other waterbirds like the pūkeko – to live. So he decided not to drain his swamp.”

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

“Wow, big logs!” said Kawa, but I wasn’t taking much notice. I was thinking about Grandad’s decision. Dad always said farming was tough back then and Grandad needed every bit of grazing 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,” said Dad, easing the car back into the left lane. “A few of them even said he was a lazy Māori.”

“People thought they could say anything in those days,” said Miranda. She sounded really angry.

Dad didn’t reply. We reached the top of the last hill and pulled over so Kawa could duck into the bushes for a pee. Away down below stretched the Taieri Plains. They were green and flat and criss-crossed by long canals. At the southern end, where the Waipori and Waihola lakes sparkled in the morning sun, the Taieri River wound its way from one side of the plains to the other.

“Even from here, you can make out our swamp,” said Dad. “All that harakeke by the river – that was part of Grandad’s farm.”

We drove down the hill, not talking until we were almost there. Dad turned off onto a gravel road, then we pulled into a new car park. “Looks like we’re the last to arrive,” he said. “I hope we’re not late.”

... while he changed gear ... passed the logging truck in front of us.

... wow, big logs!” said Kawa, but I wasn’t taking much notice about Grandad’s decision. Dad always said farming ... when and Grandad needed every bit of grazing he could ... lost a lot of money to keep that land by the river the way ... me of his neighbours called him a useless farmer,” said

... all of a sudden, he realised that if everyone on the Taieri River drained their swamps, there’d be no place for the bitterns – or any

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

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

Reading standard: by the end of year 5

## Possible curriculum contexts

### SOCIAL SCIENCES

LEVEL 3 – Understand how people view and use places differently.

### ENGLISH (Reading)

LEVEL 3 – Show a developing understanding of ideas within, across, and beyond texts.

### ENGLISH (Writing)

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

### Possible reading purposes

- Exploring and describing the impact of Grandad's decision on himself, his community, and the environment
- Exploring and discussing the relationship of whānau to the land and wider community
- Exploring multiple time frames and how ideas change, from Grandad's earlier life to the present
- Identifying and discussing incidences of stereotyping.

### Possible writing purposes

- Describing how a local person made a difference in our community
- Describing our local environment and the way it has changed over time, and why
- Describing how different community groups hold different views about an important part of our city, town, or community
- Reporting on community events that are important to the students.

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

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

 The New Zealand Curriculum

## Text and language challenges

### VOCABULARY:

- Possible unfamiliar words and concepts, including “wetlands”, “raupō”, “rank grass”, “grazed their rams”, “interrupted”, “drainage ditches”, “ploughed and sown”, “changed gear”, “pasture”, “easing”, “criss-crossed”, “canals”, “wound its way”, “boardwalk”, “DOC”, “true conservationist”, “unveil”
- The use of colloquialisms (“like headless chooks”, “We're running late”, “duck into the bushes”)
- The collocations: “rank grass”, “drainage ditches”
- The use of te reo Māori, including the noun “harakeke”.

### Possible supporting strategies

Identify the vocabulary your students will need support with. Use strategies to preview the vocabulary before reading, such as having the students describe copies of the illustrations, brainstorm the topic, or match words with definitions or pictures.

Decide which vocabulary is low frequency and only relevant to this text (for example, “rank grass”) and which is appropriate for your students to focus on learning (for example, “conservationist”, “running late”). For the latter, provide multiple opportunities for the students to encounter and practise it before, during, and after reading.

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

### SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE REQUIRED:

- The cultural context of the story and the history of New Zealand
- Knowledge of conservation
- Knowledge of farming
- Knowledge of different ideas about relationships with the land.

### Possible supporting strategies

Provide opportunities for the students to explore some of the necessary background knowledge, facts, and information they need to understand the context. For example, they could watch DVDs or read about habitat destruction and endangered species, discuss environmental problems from around the world and their causes, or brainstorm ideas about people's relationships with the natural environment.

### TEXT FEATURES AND STRUCTURE:

- The story within a story
- The story told through the use of dialogue
- The use of ellipsis (for example, [Have you] “Got the camera?”)
- Multiple time frames
- Wide range of verb forms
- Some complex sentences with subordinate clauses contain the detail of Grandad's story
- Competing information, especially the “story within the story”.

### Possible supporting strategies

Support the students to identify who is speaking and what they say. Prompt them to notice how direct speech is shown in the written text.

Check the students' understanding of direct speech with ellipsis. Help them to understand the meaning and to notice other examples. Tell them that ellipsis is a typical feature of spoken English. If appropriate, ask the students if they know how ellipsis works in any other languages.

If necessary, support the students with identifying the multiple time frames in the story. Choose parts of the text and ask them to identify what (the main action), who, and when. (You could use a graphic organiser to do this with one section of the text.) Model reading that uses context clues, time signals, and verb forms.



Sounds and Words

# Instructional focus – Reading

Social Sciences (Level 3 – Understand how people view and use places differently.)

## Text excerpts from “The Bittern”

“... he realised that if everyone on the Taieri River drained their swamps, there'd be no place for the bitterns – or any of the other waterbirds like the pūkeho – to live. So he decided not to drain his swamp.”

Dad always said farming was tough back then and Grandad needed every bit of grazing 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,” said Dad ...

“Yep,” said Dad. “That old bittern, he changed everything.”

Then she spoke about Grandad and how hard he'd worked to keep his swamp. She said that Grandad had been a true conservationist at a time when not many people knew the value of wetlands.

## Students (what they might do)

*The student identifies the main idea that Grandad did not follow his neighbours' actions. (He did not drain his swamp.) They make connections between their prior knowledge and the context to establish what is meant by “farming was tough back then” (physically and financially demanding).*

*The student draws on and integrates several related pieces of information to infer that Grandad actively saved the bittern by his actions but that his decision had considerable ongoing impact on his life, both social and financial.*

*The students discuss and evaluate whether Grandad's decision was the right one.*

*The students ask and answer questions to build on the idea that Grandad viewed the land differently to those around him and that ideas about the use of land can change over time.*

*They evaluate Grandad's actions and make connections to their own lives and the idea that one person's actions and commitment can make a difference.*

## Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching)

**PROMPT** students to help them to find relevant information and make inferences about Grandad's motivation.

- What do we know about where Grandad lived, what he did, and what was important to him? How do we know?
- Why did the farmers drain their swamps?
- Why didn't Grandad do what the other farmers did?

*Some students may need support with identifying and understanding the hypothetical situation (“if everyone on the Taieri River drained their swamps”) and consequence (“there'd be no place for the bitterns ...”) that Grandad thought about.*

### MODEL

- I wonder what he means by “farming was tough” back then. What does the word “tough” mean? Let's look at the whole paragraph to work that out.

**PROMPT** students to evaluate Grandad's decision.

- How did Grandad's decision affect his son (Dad), the family, grandchildren, other farmers, DOC?
- Tell a partner whether you think it was the right decision and why.

**ASK QUESTIONS** to help the students clarify their understanding of particular phrases.

- Dad says, “The old bittern, he changed everything.” What does he mean?
- What do you think a “true conservationist” is?

**ASK QUESTIONS** to help students integrate information across the text and use this information for their wider curriculum purpose.

- What causes people to change their opinions about the importance of keeping natural areas?
- What does the author want us to be thinking about after we have read this story? How do you know?
- What key ideas in the story help us to understand more about conservation of wetland environments?

**ASK QUESTIONS** to help students make connections to their knowledge of different ideas about relationships to, and ownership of, the land. Encourage them to think about ideas within their own or other cultures.

### GIVE FEEDBACK

- I noticed that you used several pieces of information from the text to infer that Grandad's decisions had a huge impact on his life. Well done. Integrating information across a text is what a good reader does. Let's read on and see what other ideas you can infer from across the text.

## METACOGNITION

**ASK QUESTIONS** to make the students' strategies explicit for them as they read and respond to the text.

- What does she mean when she says ...? How did you know that? What helped you?
- How can you say that in your language?
- What helped you to understand the impact of Grandad's decision? What clues did you use?
- What did you have to do to make that inference? What words or prior knowledge helped you?

Reading standard: by the end of year 5

The Literacy Learning Progressions

Assessment Resource Banks

# Instructional focus – Writing

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

## Text excerpts from “The Bittern”

Away down below stretched the Taieri Plains. They were green and flat and criss-crossed by long canals. At the southern end, where the Waipori and Waihola lakes sparkled in the morning sun, the Taieri River wound its way from one side of the plains to the other.

“Well,” said Dad as he turned onto the main road, “your grandad Henare was a sheep farmer. He had some hill country, and then he had the swamp down by the river.”

“It’s called ‘wetlands,’” said Miranda.

“It wasn’t in those days,” said Dad. “We just called it ‘swamp.’”

Dad always said farming was tough back then and Grandad needed every bit of grazing 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,” said Dad ...

## Examples of text characteristics

### DESCRIPTIVE LANGUAGE

**Descriptive verbs** – *stretched, sparkled, wound*

**Adjectives** – *green, flat, long, morning*

**Alliteration** – *“criss-crossed by long canals”, “sparkled in the morning sun”, “where the Waipori and Waihola”, “wound its way”*

### DIALOGUE

*It’s not just visual details that make a text come alive; it’s also the words that people say.*

*Dialogue is an excellent shortcut to character and can be more effective than a description.*

### IMPLICATION

*In order for a reader to infer, a writer needs to imply ideas in their writing. Students need to learn to imply in their writing if this fits in with their purpose.*

## METACOGNITION

**ASK QUESTIONS** to encourage the students to think more deeply about their writing.

- What were you thinking when you wrote this? What were you trying to say?
- Why did you choose that word to describe him? What effect were you trying to achieve?
- What does the character mean when she says ...? How does this reflect their character?

## Teacher

(possible deliberate acts of teaching)

**ASK QUESTIONS** to help students to form their intention for writing.

- Who is your audience? How does this affect your writing?
- What is your purpose for writing? Will it be stated explicitly in the text or implied? Why?
- What sort of language will you use?

**MODEL** the choice of descriptive language to add detail. Using this excerpt, replace some of the word choices with less descriptive language (for example, stretched/was, wound its way/ran, criss-crossed by/covered in). Discuss the extra impact that the author’s choice of language adds to the text.

You may need to provide support with descriptive vocabulary. After exploring some of the language in the text, you could give students a range of descriptive verbs and adjectives and ask them to use them to describe photos or illustrations. Then ask the students to use them in their own writing. Alternatively, you could ask them to write using words they are familiar with and then ask them to work in groups, or work with another student, to make their text more descriptive.

**PROMPT** students to focus on a small section of the dialogue and how it is used to develop character.

- What can you tell me about these characters from **what** they say and **how** they speak?
- What does the dialogue add to the text?
- Is it easy to follow the story through the dialogue?
- Now look at your own writing. How might you use dialogue to show what your characters are like or to make your story more engaging?

**TELL** the students how, as readers, they have to infer from the text (read between the lines).

- The author implies their ideas in the writing and does not say them directly – they “show don’t tell”. Let’s look at how she’s done that.

**EXPLAIN** the difference between implicit and explicit.

- This extract says that “farming was tough back then” and “he needed every bit of grazing he could get”. I infer from this that Grandad’s decision must have had a huge impact on his life, both financially and socially. I get this from the text, but the writer does not say directly “Grandad suffered socially and financially”.

**MODEL** rewriting part of this excerpt to show the difference between implicit and explicit.

- Now look at your own writing and see if you can change something that you have written explicitly into something that the reader has to infer.

**GIVE FEEDBACK** to affirm students’ writing decisions and guide their learning.

- I like the way you’ve managed to imply that Sam knows more than he lets on. I was able to figure this out because ...
- I think your description of Sam shows that you have a very clear idea of what he’s like. How could you include some dialogue in your story that will show us some aspects of his character? What does he speak like? What language does he use?

Writing standard: by the end of year 5  
Literacy Learning Progressions