



## Overview

This TSM contains information and suggestions for teachers to pick and choose from, depending on the needs of their students and their purpose for using the text. The materials provide multiple opportunities for revisiting the text several times.

“Words” is narrative poem in which an unnamed person recounts their experience of bullying at school. Words are used to attack the narrator and ultimately, words defeat the bully. Many students will connect with the story and enjoy its satisfying resolution. The simple, straightforward structure will make the poem accessible to most readers and could easily be used as a model for student writing.

This poem:

- has themes of bullying and the power of words
- reveals the inner world of the narrator
- contrasts the language and world of the teachers with those of the students
- could also be called a prose poem: it is written in sentences but incorporates poetic features.

A PDF of the text is available at [www.schooljournal.tki.org.nz](http://www.schooljournal.tki.org.nz)

### Texts related by theme

“Just Kidding” SJSL L3 2012 | “Badge of Honour” SJ L4 May 2015 | “The Rules” SJ L3 Oct 2015 | “Benny” SJ L4 Oct 2015 | “MeMe and Me” SJ L4 May 2016 | “New Boots” SJ L3 May 2017 | “The Fight” SJ L4 Nov 2017 | “How to be Normal” SJ L4 Nov 2018

## Text characteristics from the year 5 reading standard

We have retained the links to the National Standards while a new assessment and reporting system is being developed. For more information on assessing and reporting in the post-National Standards era, see: <http://assessment.tki.org.nz/Assessment-and-reporting-guide>

the next time he called me a \_\_\_\_\_,  
which he did less and less.

You couldn't say Laccum without smiling.  
It was silly. It was empty.  
It was perfect.

James Brown

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

jumping out at him whenever.

“You're hilarious, Laccum,” I said  
the next time he called me a \_\_\_\_\_,  
which he did less and less.

You couldn't say Laccum without smiling.

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

mouth it or make a sign with his hands  
that meant the name. The more I ignored him,  
the more he'd make a dart of it to throw at me.

One day, Mr Martin was calling the roll,  
but at Callum, he got his letters muddled

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

whenever we were in the same game or group.

One lunchtime, our games ran into each other,  
and he called me a \_\_\_\_\_.  
Some kids laughed, and I could feel

my face getting hot. I didn't know what to say.  
Callum could see this, and he said it again.  
My dumbness spilled into my eyes.

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)



## VOCABULARY

- A number of possibly unfamiliar verbs, including “groaned”, “spilled”, “smirked”, “chant”, “marched”, “shoved”, “tolerate”, “ignore”, “defend”, “tease”, “settle”, “mouth”, “muddled”, “lacking”, “hooted”

## Possible supporting strategies

- Identify any words or phrases that may be unfamiliar to your students. However, the challenge – and interest – in this text is less with the vocabulary and more in the way language has been used to convey abstract ideas and feelings.
- Discuss the difference between concrete language and abstract language: concrete language refers to objects or events that we can experience through our senses and abstract language refers to ideas or concepts like love or freedom that we can't see or touch. Explain that we can use concrete words and terms to represent abstract ideas. For example, we can use a dove to symbolise peace. Brainstorm some other examples of abstract ideas that can be represented with concrete symbols.
- See also [ESOL Online, Vocabulary](#), for examples of other strategies to support students with vocabulary.
- [The English Language Learning Progressions: Introduction](#), pages 39–46, has useful information about learning vocabulary.

## SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE REQUIRED

- Familiarity with the classroom and playground setting
- Experience of bullying behaviour and of injustice
- Familiarity with poetry and poetic structures

## Possible supporting strategies

- Prompt students to make connections with times they have experienced bullying, as a subject, witness, or perpetrator. Be sensitive to students' feelings – it may work better to distance the subject during discussion, perhaps by sharing your own experiences from school.

## TEXT FEATURES AND STRUCTURE

- The form of the text as a narrative poem that is told in the first person and in the past tense
- Its form as a prose poem, combining the features of prose with those of poetry
- A structure of sixteen three-line stanzas
- Abstractions: “My dumbness spilled into my eyes”, “Defend yourself with words”, “our handshake to settle the matter”
- Metaphors: “the more he'd make a dart of it to throw at me”, “Laccum became his evil twin”
- Meaning and sometimes sentences that span two stanzas
- The use of dialogue and the contrast between the language of the teachers (“We don't tolerate fighting”) and that of the students (“He shoved me over”)
- The use of punctuation, including the ellipsis and the dash, to indicate how the poem should be read and the way people speak
- The use of a blank space (twice) to suggest an unpublishable word
- The wordplay: “Laccum”
- The hyphenation of the word “back-wards” so that it can be split over two lines

## Possible supporting strategies

- Discuss what features the students might typically expect to find in a poem. Encourage them to compare the features of this poem with a “typical poem”, drawing their attention to the use of complete sentences and natural language. Explain that this is a prose poem, and it gives the writer the opportunity to play with the poetic form in unconventional ways.
- Ask the students to suggest why the author has replaced some words with a blank space. *When have you seen this done before?*
- Tell the students that this poem describes a realistic situation but uses abstract ideas and terminology to help create meaning in our minds and encourage a response. *A word isn't a physical weapon – we can't pick it up and stab or shoot someone with a word. But we know what it means to “defend ourselves with words”. We have a mental image of what it's like to do this.*



Sounds and Words

# Possible curriculum contexts

## ENGLISH (Reading)

Level 3 – Purposes and audiences: Show a developing understanding of how texts are shaped for different purposes and audiences.

## ENGLISH (Writing)

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

## Possible first reading purpose

- Read and enjoy a poem about a familiar situation, that of bullying.

## Possible subsequent reading purposes

- Find out how a student deals with bullying at school
- Identify and analyse the author's choices regarding structure, language, and ideas
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the poem.

## Possible writing purposes

- Write a poem about a personal experience of bullying
- Use some of the author's techniques in your own poem
- Write a short story about being bullied or teased and how you dealt with it.



The New Zealand Curriculum

### First reading

- Share the reading purpose with the students.
- Allow the students to read the poem independently, sharing their responses with a partner.
- Discuss the form of the poem as a prose and narrative poem and how this is reflected in its structure, language, and grammar. Invite the students to try reading the poem aloud, in pairs or small groups, experimenting with different ways of communicating the narrator's voice. Remind them to use the words, punctuation, and line breaks to work out places to pause or to run lines on.

### If the students require more scaffolding

- Remind the students of the strategies that are particularly useful on a first reading, such as slowing down, rereading and looking for context clues, and making connections to their prior knowledge.
- Have the students read the first stanza. Prompt them to make connections between the text and what they know about relationships and bullying at school to infer what is going on. Have the students think, pair, and share the way they would feel if they were one of the people in this situation. Based on what the students have learnt from reading the first stanza, encourage them to make predictions about what will happen.
- Discuss how the punctuation helps us understand how to read this poem. Point out the way some of the sentences run across two stanzas. Have the students trace this and say them aloud.
- Read the poem aloud, using your voice to convey the meaning, for example, adopting different voices for the different speakers and pausing where there is a dash, an ellipsis, or a missing word.
- The stress, intonation, pitch, rhythm, speed, and pronunciation of English can be areas of difficulty for English language learners. Most would benefit from listening to repeated readings of the poem before reading it aloud themselves. Group choral readings and repetition can be supportive strategies, along with explicit feedback on their oral reading attempts. Some students find that recording themselves reading the poem aloud and then listening to the results is helpful and enjoyable.

**Subsequent readings** How you approach subsequent readings will depend on your reading purpose. Where possible, have the students work in pairs to discuss the questions and prompts in this section.

### The teacher

Give the students a printed copy of the poem and highlighters. Invite them to use different-coloured highlighters to trace the way we learn about each of the two main characters and how each character feels. Prompt the students to notice that we are not told directly about their feelings – these abstract ideas are conveyed through their actions and through figurative language.

- *The writer says, “My dumbness spilled into my eyes.” How is he feeling here? Why doesn’t the poet just say, “I felt dumb”?*
- *What can we infer from the line “Laccum became his evil twin”? What sort of language is this?*



You could give the students a Google Doc copy of the poem and they could use this to highlight sections and add their comments.

If the students are having trouble understanding the ideas in the poem, you could have groups show the key events as a series of freeze-frames. (To prepare for the frames, the students have to discuss the important elements of the poem and make decisions about how to portray the characters and events.)

### The teacher

Encourage the students to focus on the language of the other characters and what this reveals about them. Prompt them to consider its authenticity.

- *What do you notice about the way Ms Kelly speaks to the boys? Does her way of speaking ring true? Are these phrases you’ve heard teachers use? What do they mean? How helpful are they?*
- *What do you notice about the ways the students behave when they are with teachers compared with when they are out in the playground? Does this seem realistic?*
- *I’m interested in your response to these lines: “‘Leave him alone,’ someone said, looking at me as the duty teacher arrived.”*
- *What sort of person do you think loud Ed is?*

### The students:

- make inferences as they find information that conveys the development of the main characters
- identify specific features of the poem that reveal each of the character's personalities and feelings
- think critically about the writer's use of figurative language and discuss its impact.

### The students:

- make connections between the language of the people in the poem and the language they experience at school
- make judgments about the authenticity of the language in the poem based on examples from the text
- evaluate and discuss the meaning and validity of well-worn phrases
- consider and share their emotional response to the poem
- notice how a well-placed verb and adjective (“hooted loud Ed”) creates an evocative picture of a character.

## The teacher

Invite the students to share their personal responses to the ideas in the poem, making connections to their own experiences.

- *What was your opinion of the people in this poem?*
- *What do you think of Callum's behaviour, compared with that of the narrator? Is it OK to bully someone who has bullied you?*
- *What about the actions of Ms Kelly and Mr Martin? Was a handshake really going to "settle the matter"? Is Mr Martin a bully?*
- *What did the writer mean when he said, "It was silly. It was empty. It was perfect"?*
- *Thinking about the title of the poem and the way the story plays out, what was the writer's message? Do you agree?*
- *Were you satisfied with the ending? Was it what you expected? Did Callum get his just desserts?*

## The teacher

Ask questions to support the students to evaluate the poem.

- *The author has tried to recount a fairly typical experience from the perspective of someone around your age. How successful has he been?*
- *Let's think again about what we said about the form of the poem: the way it combines poetic features with features that would more usually be found in prose. Why do you think the writer chose this form? Do you think it was a good way for him to convey his message?*

## METACOGNITION

- *We spent time practising an oral reading of the poem before we started to discuss its message and how it was created. Did this help, or would you have preferred to have done it the other way around? Why is that? Now that we've got to know the poem so well, how do you think it has changed the way you would read it aloud?*
- *You noticed how the writer uses verbs instead of adjectives to show feelings. Is that a technique you could bring into your own writing?*

## The students:

- integrate information from the poem with their personal experience and value systems to weigh up their response to the ideas in the poem
- identify and explain the poet's message using examples from the text to justify their responses
- discuss and defend their opinions, using evidence from the text.

## The students:

- evaluate the poem in terms of the authenticity of its language and content, its resolution, and the writer's choice of poetic form
- give evidence for their opinions.

## GIVE FEEDBACK

- *You have identified how the writer has provided examples to build the idea that words have the power to hurt people. Can you also find examples where the writer has deliberately shown how words also have the power to make things better?*



Reading standard: by the end of year 5



The Literacy Learning Progressions



Assessment Resource Banks

# Instructional focus – Writing

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

## Text excerpts from “Words”

Page 26  
my face getting hot. I didn’t know what to say.  
Callum could see this, and he called me it again.  
My dumbness spilled into my eyes.

## Examples of text characteristics

### POETIC FORM

*Many traditional poems have a regular structure, so we know what to expect. Others are written in free verse, where the poet is free to make their own choices about the use of rhyme, the numbers of syllables or lines, the punctuation, or the way the lines are formed. Others combine both approaches. The defining features of a poem come from its language and structure as the poet seeks to convey a feeling or idea as effectively as possible.*

## Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching)

Have the students write a poem of their own about an experience of bullying.

Prompt them to consider what story they would like to tell. It could be a memory from their own life, a story they’ve read about, or a fictional event. Have them decide whose perspective they are writing from (the person being bullied, the bully, or an observer).

Tell them they can select the form for their poem, but that you want them to adopt some of the techniques James Brown uses, such as lots of verbs, verb phrases, dialogue, and figurative language. These techniques will help them to visualise the characters and how they were feeling and to think about how he used line breaks and punctuation to give a sense of how the poem should sound.

Page 27  
“Are we lacking Laccum?” Mr Martin joked.

### DIALOGUE

*Dialogue can be used to reveal people’s characters and the ways that they relate to each other. The way that people speak can be as important as the words they say.*

Discuss how both the words and the way they are said can reveal things about a character, their relationships, and feelings. Brainstorm words that can reveal tone or voice.

Ask the students to add some dialogue to their poems (if they haven’t already used some).

Have the students share their poems with each other, experimenting with how they sound when read aloud.

Page 26  
I don’t know why, but Callum always groaned  
or said something like “Useless” or “Loser”  
whenever we were in the same game or group.

### FLASH FICTION

*“Flash fiction” is a very short work of fiction. It’s difficult to write well because the writer has just a few words to follow a complete story arc: beginning, rising action, climax, and resolution, and, if appropriate, to also convey something about the characters and setting.*

Introduce the term “flash fiction” and explain what it is.

- *What similarities can you find between the poem we just read and the elements of flash fiction?*

Tell the students that they are going to write their own piece of flash fiction on the theme of bullying. Discuss and agree on a suitable word count. Depending on your students, you may need to construct a piece of flash fiction together or model how it is done.

Give the students five minutes to write their first draft before sharing it with their partner or group for feedback. Give them another five minutes for revision.

Have them discuss with a partner what they learnt about writing from this experience, including:

- the hardest thing and the most positive thing about writing flash fiction
- the thing that worked best in their story (the plot, setting, or characterisation) and why
- their favourite line and why
- which lines could still be improved, and if so, how.

### GIVE FEEDBACK

- *You started with a really great idea for your poem, but your first draft was a bit flat. It was when you went back and started thinking about the way people spoke to each other – not just what they said – that you really grabbed my attention as a reader. That’s when I got a real sense of what they were like and how it must have felt to be in that situation.*

### METACOGNITION

- *What have you learnt about yourself as a writer from this experience? Is there a form of writing you prefer, and if so, what is it, and why do you prefer it?*



Writing standard: by the end of year 5



The Literacy Learning Progressions