

Playing with words and ideas

Several years ago, we ran this little unit of creative work. Here is what happened. The poem '**The Cave of Curiosity**' is based on the simple idea of creating a place (*cave*) and linking it to an abstract idea (*curiosity*). To begin, we played an abstract noun game.

Divide the children into pairs and sort them into 'A's and 'B's. On their mini whiteboards, 'A's write a list of common nouns that are places, such as *park, pavement, castle, cave*, etc. 'B's write a list of abstract nouns. It can be helpful for the children if you explain that these are things you cannot touch and with some classes brainstorm a list, e.g. *happiness, jealousy, greed, kindness*, etc. Some children came up with what we called 'magical' nouns such as *stars, clouds, moon* and we added those to the list of abstract nouns.

Collect as many of their ideas as you can on the flipchart and show the children how they can combine their 'A's and 'B's in a variety of ways.

Places and containers	Abstract/ Magical nouns
mountain summit	majesty
timeless world	pointless sacrifices
tower	air
river	sensitivity
backstreet	stars
stable	clouds
theatre	forgiveness
pond	power
orchard	souls
cave	secrets
town	tomorrow
country	lies
ocean	anger
path	imagination
corridor	satisfaction
lunchbox	taste
alleyway	air
roller coaster	fear
suitcase	space
cloud	curiosity

Help the children put their ideas together. They might have a *mountain summit of majesty* or a *tower of air* or they might prefer a *mountain of imagination* or a *tower of taste*. Encourage them to say their ideas out loud and listen to the effect. We wanted them to surprise the reader with new and startling combinations and

amazing juxtapositions, avoiding clichés. Having done this, we read **'The Cave of Curiosity'** and **'In the City of Silences'**.

We read the first poem several times, with the children joining in on the second and third read so that we were speaking it aloud with expression chorally. We discussed our initial likes and dislikes, favourite sections and then took each verse in turn to explore the meaning as well as notice how the effect had been created. This led to a simple toolkit:

To create a playful poem, you can:

- use a repeated opening line, e.g. *In the cave of curiosity, I created...*
- use a place + abstract or magical noun
- tell the reader what you *created, saw, found, noticed, watched, discovered, uncovered, etc*
- list three or four ideas for each verse
- play with alliteration, e.g. *an angry ant*
- juxtapose ideas, e.g. *humming birds/ lorries*
- personification, e.g. *silence closing its lips*
- the senses, e.g. *the touch of smooth pebbles*
- invented ideas, e.g. *a computer calling to a King*

We discussed the second poem, noted the simple pattern and then talked about the way in which the first line linked to the second. For instance, you would get a surprise and a shock if an alley was full of electric eels! There is a link in each couplet (pair of lines). Can the children find and explain the links?

This sort of writing hinges around a child's natural inclination to play with language. Very young children will do this when they are toddlers but as they grow older, children often lose the pleasure in language play. Words and sentences can become increasingly frightening and bound by rules and checklist. Here, we were developing what might be described as 'writing for pleasure' – it is a game but a serious game.

The Cave of Curiosity

In the cave of curiosity, I created
an angry ant ambling along,
a terrified tarantula tickling a tornado
and a curious computer calling cautiously to the King.

In the cave of curiosity, I created
the sound of silence closing its lips,
a humming bird's wings flickering,
as the sea silently scrapes the pebbles
and ten tired lorries trundle by.

In the cave of curiosity, I created
the touch of smooth stones from the summer beach,

the stickiness of honey on a fingertip
and the heat from a teaspoon as it stirs my morning tea.

In the cave of curiosity, I created
the coldness of frost as it freckles the window pane,
the sharpness of a saw as it crunches through wood
and the sadness of a tear as it trickles down a cheek.

In the cave of curiosity, I captured
the moon's cold gleam imprisoned in a box,
the joy of a merry-go-round as it spins like a feral ferris wheel
and the force of a rainbow as it dazzles the sky
with a smile that stuns.

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In the City of Silences

In the city of surprises,
the alleys are alive with electric eels.

In the city of suffering,
a poor man became the author of statistics.

In the city of serendipity,
a lost key stumbled across a frozen lock.

In the city of sarcasm,
stern words sliced chasms of pain.

In the ship of shadows,
silhouettes smothered the sea's surface.

In the waterfall of whispers,
silence stumbled over sunlit stepping-stones.

In the door of decisions,
I turned Eastwards to the sun's source.

In the city of sunsets,
a song stood still as darkness solidified.

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I borrowed aspects from both poems as a basis for our shared writing. First, I wrote up one of my own ideas as a model, explaining what I was doing, talking aloud as a writer.

*On the mountain summit of majesty,
I hunted for my surroundings,
frozen rocks danced in the glimpse of a perilous peak
and a forgotten galleon surfaced as clear as an eye's coating.*

The children then joined in. Someone would suggest an opening place (e.g. *the tower of air*) and then we chose a preposition to go with it, e.g. *Inside the tower of air*. This gave us our first line. We then had to decide on the verb, e.g. *I noticed, found, saw, listened to, watched, uncovered, captured, trapped*, etc. We made a list of these possibilities that lots of the children used when writing. We then extended the sentence and I would occasionally prompt them into the challenge of using alliteration, similes, metaphor or personification. All the time, we were pushing ourselves to come up with surprising combinations.

Our shared writing

In the timeless world of pointless sacrifices,
I hung my suspicious thoughts in a superstitious ceremony of congratulations.

Inside the tower of air,
I listened to the spoken breeze whistling wildly,
like hailstones tiptoeing towards the gritted ground.

Beyond the river of sensitivity,
I punched the whipping ripples
which were lazy silhouettes reclining against curved boulders.

Above the stable of clouds,
I bounced over comfortable space
till I reached the redness of Mars.

In the theatre of forgiveness,
I watched the show of soliciting sorrow settled beneath the sacred tiles,
reflecting like a pulsing, pupil image.

In the pond of power,
I swam beneath a ceiling of colliding kelp
scattered like knotted strands of dry, whispering hair.

In the path of movement,
I uncovered the peak of death to reveal a claustrophobic curse
as tight as a deadly grip.

In the town of tomorrow,

I discovered an alleyway of life,
leading to a shop of fire-spitting miniature suns.

In the cave of secrets,
I carefully captured a shallow shadow.

In the prison of fear,
I quickly trapped his desperation
which shook like a rattlesnake clutching the tip of its mind.

In the country of lies,
I disguised stopped time like a reversed record.

We used a 'Save it' box at the bottom of the flipchart paper to write down as many of our shared ideas as possible. Children also jotted any independent preferences in their magpie books. This gave everyone a bank of ideas to draw from for their independent writing and meant we could go back at the end of the shared writing and consider any other options. As you can see, the children often wanted to join two of their paired choices to extend their sentences.

Examples of Children's Independent Writing

*In the trench of luck, an honourable,
death turned into a
fairy tale.*

*In the tomb of gloom, I discovered a
path leading to an ocean of imagination
as if God was leading me there.*

In the cave of doom, I sneakily spied on frustrated anger.

*In the game field of greed, I swim in fame and glory as if each
game entices me to succeed.*

*In the stadium of movement, I discovered a room of mystery
Confusing me turning me unconscious.*

*In the jungle of stars,
I studied an ocean of dead life
causing an eruption of sparks
like an excited poppy seed exploding.*

*In the country of life, I arrived safely at the restaurant of
breath where the tills danced joyfully.*

*In the corridor of sound, I studied a
curse of sorrow scattering many new lives as the walls trembled.*

In my house of galaxies, I laid my table of insight as my boiled eggs cried for their lives.

In the lunch box of imagination, a dwarf sits capturing dust before being snapped closed by daylight.

At the worlds end, death waves shot by before I could reach them.

By: Ted, Imi, Roo, Abi, Jasper, Millie, Beth, Lucy, Ben and Harry Year 6

*In the garden of confusion, white fenced mazes
Swirled like a hypnotic wheel that made you
absent minded.*

In the desert of sarcasm, the sun was showing off its freedom while peasants were trapped in an invisible box like a mime being enticed back to the start of life.

In the plain room of silences a single floral door closed as if a rustler had come to steal its power on the other side of its never ending story.

Extracts from Ella's poem, Year 6

A Cave of Memories

In the cave of memories, I revealed an outstanding Sea of hope buried underneath the crisp dirt like a salmon earthworm foraging down into the living undergrowth.

In the town of tomorrow, I risked my life by trudging into the tunnel of death where the ground crumbles and the shadows disappear.

In the attic of love, a rose heart took my shaking hand and led me to a pool of darkness, pushing me in.

In the misshapen world of terror, the sand sneezed, the grass stretched and the moon moaned.

In the forest of jewels, the sky cried singing diamonds digging deeply into the mud, leading to a path of movement for me to walk down.

In the school of nightmare, the fantasy teachers gave me too much homework repetitively.

In the maze of wonder, only the pebbles showed me the way to victory.

In the book of souls, the pages opened up my mind and turned it to dust, just as I found out it was tales never to be told.

In the tent of misery, the stick and stone lit the way to your total paradise of fun.

In the mirror of mayhem, the bubble well created images of mystical objects.

By Tia, year 6

The City of Judgment

*In her abandoned blue eyes, I helplessly confused myself
while she desperately twirled them side to side.*

*In her abandoned blue eyes, I sneezed my fear in fin air,
then frantically leaped into the side of her ocean.*

*In the corner of hidden time, I exposed my rich, careless hair
to every crack and disposed pieces of the flareless wind that
determinedly disguised me to the world.*

*In the branches of hell, I screeched, twitched and swallowed
all the desperation, sadness and phobia from my body and
ran awkwardly towards the left of happiness.*

*In the hall of darkness, I helplessly watched every pitched
brick ecstatically expand every voice, lie and secret*

*My eyes and ears had ever heard or seen leap, dance and
sing to every brick of emptiness.*

By Bethany, Year 6

You will notice that there are the odd words that are invented (*flareless*) or a slight grammatical awkwardness (*determinedly disguised*). We left these as they are good examples of children striving to create new utterances and pushing the boundaries of language purposefully. If it was ok for Shakespeare to create new words then Bethany can as well!

This idea would work well with almost any age group. You might have to adapt the main model or just use the **Cave of Curiosity** with younger children. Keep the shared writing enjoyable but challenge them so that they find new and startling combinations. You may find that the invitation to be playful leads to children trying out the occasional 'silly' idea. I would suggest reminding them that we are aiming for something that is playful but sounds serious so they have to maintain the tone of the writing.

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