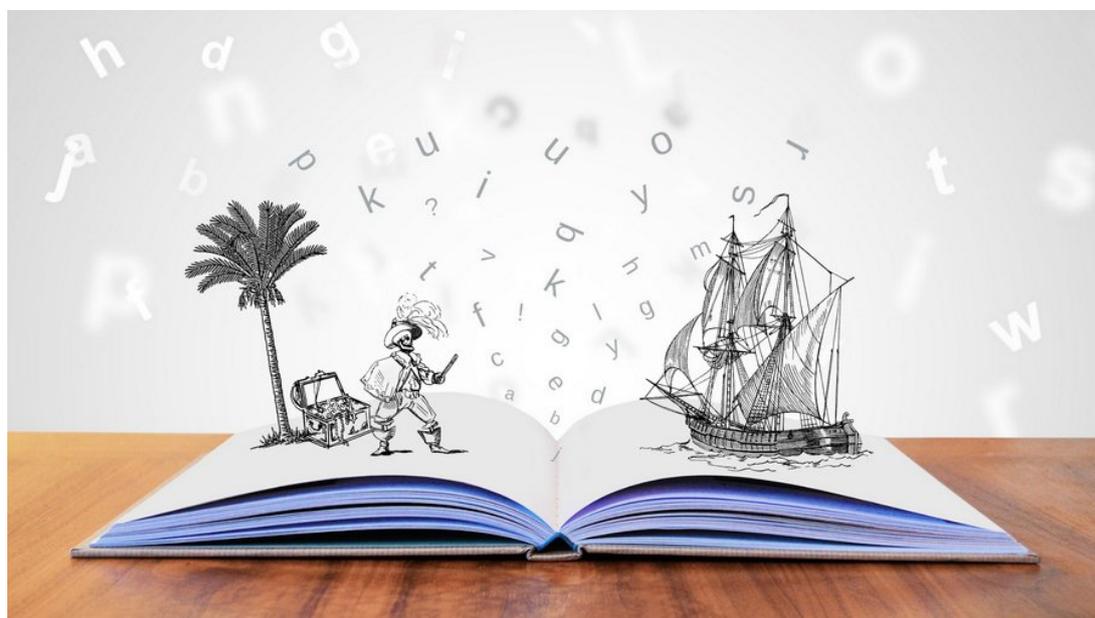




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Developing subject matter when composing texts



Assessment Resource No 3

In [Assessment Resource No 1](#) we looked at a process for designing assessment tasks for composing texts. [Assessment Resource No.2](#) focused on viewing a student work sample based on the assessment task from the point of view of the purpose for writing. A deeper understanding of purpose was developed through carefully designed teaching and learning.

In this resource, we will continue to look at a student work sample, but consider it through the lens of the field or subject matter of the text and how this is represented through choices at the clause and group level. Based on the formative assessment task, we will again consider how to design teaching and learning to further support and develop writing to represent the field, subject matter or topic of a text.

Assessing through the lens of subject matter or field

Once we have implemented a task that shows what students are able to achieve, it is important that we view their texts through a range of lenses in order to design or adapt teaching and learning to further develop not only their skills but also knowledge and understanding.

As a response to the sample task in [Assessment Resource No 1](#), a student composed the following text as a draft. The student was also given the opportunity to plan before writing but declined to record any planning. This in itself is a teaching point.

At night the trees were blowing in the wind. There were eyes looking out of the trees. The trees were grey and brown with leaves coming off the branches. The leaves fell off the tree on to the ground. There were nice orange flowers on the bush. The trees in the bush were hugging each other like the wind does. Looking out from the bush was two red eyes to see if there were any black bats to go and catch to have for dinner.

Composing effective texts relies on the ability of the writer to effectively express or represent ideas and experience. Based on the stimulus and instructions provided to the student (See [Assessment Resource No 1](#)), it is clear that the expectation was to draw upon understanding of the way language is used in the English subject area of the curriculum. This is quite different to the choices we make in History and Science for example.

By considering a text through the lens of the grammatical features that represent

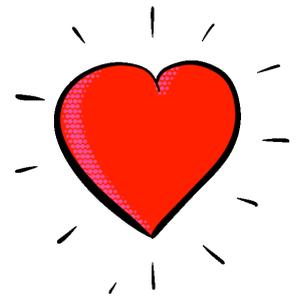
ideas and experience, particularly in English, we can determine the design of explicit teaching based on student need. These questions assist in talking about subject matter and guiding discussion about language choice and function:

- Who or what participants might be involved in what occurs?
- What kinds of processes, happenings or activities might occur?
- What circumstances might surround the activities?

The task required students to create an imaginative, literary world by describing a setting reflective of the fantasy genre. When we use language to create a world, the choices at clause level are a key way in which we construct our meanings for readers to engage with the representation of ideas.

A clause is a message or chunk of meaning that represents an idea or experience.

A clause is made up of groups of words. At the heart of a clause is a verb or verb group which represents the happening or process. It gives life to the clause. We can also consider who or what is taking part which will tell us the noun or noun group that functions as the participant.



Often we have additional detail in a clause, represented by an adverb or adverbial phrase telling circumstances such as when, where or how. This can be seen in a clause from the student text where we consider both form and function.

At night the trees were blowing in the wind.

FUNCTION	circumstance	participant	process	circumstance
FORM	adverbial phrase	noun group	verb group	adverbial phrase

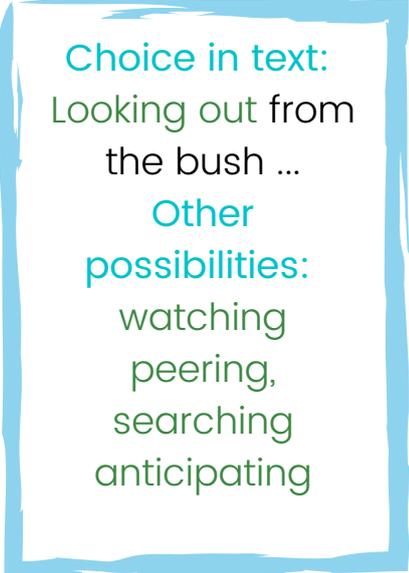
What kinds of processes, happenings or activities might occur?

Let's start with the heart of the clause. By considering the purpose of a text we can assume the choice of certain types of **processes or verbs/verb groups** within each clause to represent the experience for the reader. Typically, when describing a setting we could expect relating verbs, eg. *was* or *had*, as attributes of participants are identified or described. Looking at choices across the student text, there is repeated use of the verb *were* as an existing verb within the 'There were ...' structure. This functions to convey a state rather than a relationship or action being described. When used repetitively, the text can seem spoken like and has the potential to inhibit development of rich description of a subject placed at the beginning of a clause.

The text also has several examples of phrasal verbs that convey action or sensing (*coming off, looking out*), where additional words such as prepositions are included after the main verb. This also results in a more spoken like text with the choice of everyday forms. This could be a teaching focus at the point of reviewing writing where a range of possibilities are given for the verb choice and discussed in terms of their effect in conveying the experience, the effect on the reader, the spoken likeness of the text and the achievement of the purpose.

By discussing other possibilities, not only is vocabulary extended but the text seems more written like. Careful choice of processes can also impact on the mood of the description and engagement by the reader.

We may also see the use of action processes/ verbs as the behaviours of participants are described, be the participants living or



Choice in text:
Looking out from
the bush ...

Other possibilities:
watching
peering,
searching
anticipating

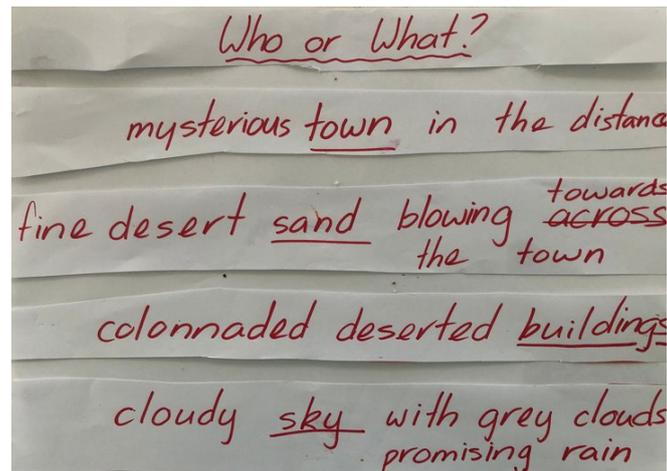
non-living, as in The trees in the bush **were hugging** each other like the wind does. Note the attempt at personification with the trees **were hugging** and the simile like the wind **does** at the end of the clause, although the unnecessary use of **does** again makes the text sound spoken like. Variation in verb choice is shown through the use of sensing verbs (looking out, to see) which is a good basis for further exploring sensory aspects with figurative language. In addition we could also point out the correct subject verb agreement by discussing, Looking out from the bush **was/were** two red eyes.

Who or what might be the participants involved in the activities?

When assessing student work we can also ask the above question and start to consider who or what the student has decided to focus on in order to achieve their purpose. In the writing sample, the student has used the **noun group** to represent **participants** across the text by beginning with the trees then introducing eyes, and describing the trees as grey and brown with leaves. The student then chooses to link to the branches and back to the leaves before introducing nice orange flowers on the bush. The writer then focuses our attention on the trees in the bush and finally any black bats. These **noun groups/participants** tend to consist of a main noun with an article and/or everyday adjective. There is also evidence of the use of adjectival phrases with on/in the bush. Given the purpose of the text and its role in engaging a reader, we would also expect to see the use of evaluative adjectives within expanded noun groups. We do see this in the use of nice, however, this seems to be at odds with the mood create elsewhere in the text.

When considering the image used as the stimulus for the writing task ([Assessment Resource No.1](#)), the student has described relevant features of the setting but there is also scope for developing the description and mood further. One way of doing this could be through conversations about the potential of the

noun group at the point of planning. As seen below, the student was guided to brainstorm participants in another stimulus for describing a desert setting reflective of the fantasy genre. A specific focus was placed on the development of the adjectival clause. The noun groups were then used or adapted when drafting assisting in developing the field and the production of more written like text.



What circumstances might surround the activities?

A key to well developed description is adding detail to the actions or processes with thoughtful choice of **adverbs** or **adverbial phrases** telling particular **circumstances**. Choice of adverbs or adverbial phrases can add detail such as when, where, how, how long, by what means, to what degree, with whom or what, and why, amongst others (See Derewianka p66-68).

In the student text the reader is orientated in terms of when with At night, however, there is limited use of circumstances through adverbials beyond those telling where, including, in the wind, of the trees, onto the ground, from the bush. There is evidence of detail telling how with like the wind as the student attempts a simile including personification. The adverbial phrase for dinner adds a reason to the action or process.

The student could be guided, again at the point of planning or reviewing their

text, to consider other ways to add detail about aspects of the action such as how or the manner in which an action occurs. The table below shows possibilities for further developing the circumstances of manner with the focus on place shifting to manner with possible choices discussed in terms of the fantasy genre and the mood created for the reader.

Original clause/message	Adverbial/ circumstance telling how
The leaves fell off the tree onto the ground .	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• swiftly• cautiously• in slow motion• in swirling circles• without assistance from the wind• like an out of control parachute

Using assessment to inform teaching

By thinking about the choices a student makes through assessment, teaching and learning programs can be developed and or adapted based upon specific identified needs. In this case, we have considered how we can develop the subject matter, topic or field of a text in order to achieve the purpose. Particular areas of need can be addressed by building **joint construction** opportunities into a teaching program in which key language choices are discussed alongside the development of metalanguage. In the joint construction example below, conversation occurred around choices within the clause, including choice of **verb or process** and shifting from everyday phrasal verbs, extending the **noun group to name participants** and adding **circumstantial detail** through a focus on both **adverbials** of place and manner. These choices were discussed in terms of the purpose of describing a setting for the fantasy genre (See [Assessment Resource 2](#)), particularly in terms of the shift from spoken to more written like text through vocabulary choices, development of the mood and engagement by the reader. Joint construction results in meaningful conversations to collaborate with students to move them beyond their current choices to achieve a purpose.

The fine desert sand
was just sitting there doing nothing. Lonely palm
trees (^{protruding from} popping out) of the sand also
sat still within the sand
dunes.

The sand gently rolled
down towards a hidden
river. The rising river
was like a snake slithering
through the landscape.

The tall sandstone cliffs guarded the
clear sapphire river. A cascading waterfall
ran down like the cliff face looks like a
man's mouth dribbling.

Behind the cliffs there
was a mysterious town in the distance
with colonnaded deserted buildings.
The ^{grey} cloudy sky with grey clouds promising
rain looked down on the river.

Further Reading

Derewianka, B. & Jones, P. (2016) [Teaching language in context](#). Melbourne: Oxford.

Derewianka, B. (2011) [A new grammar companion for primary teachers](#). Sydney:
Primary English Teaching Association.

Rossbridge, J (2021) Assessment Resource Series.

<https://joanne-rossbridge-e43b.mykajabi.com/home-page-1-6dde45d9-7846-4d0d-8297-7e47ca7a229d>

Rossbridge, J. & Rushton, K. (2010) [Conversations about text 1: Teaching grammar using literary texts](#). Sydney: Primary English Teaching Association.