

TALK THROUGH STORIES

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Why we wrote Talk Through Stories

In the film 'Reading Aloud matters', we introduced Jack and his father. By the time Jack had started school, he had listened to stories and talked about them for about 1,000 hours. Jack's father had constantly broadened his vocabulary and supported his wider understanding of language. You have also met Mylo and his mother, Natalie, who read with him at least twice a day.

Voracious readers can overcome inauspicious beginnings and drive their own learning. They increase their vocabulary and their knowledge. They are likely to have been taught to read early. They know how to work out unfamiliar words for themselves and they do well at school. They understand the books they choose to read independently, because of their good vocabulary supports. Such children have a significant advantage.

Although *Talk Through Stories* is for all children, it is especially for those who are not as fortunate as Jack and Mylo. It is designed to extend and deepen children's vocabulary so that they can understand the books they will be able to read for themselves. Time, however, is not on their side. That is why it is so important to plan specifically and systematically – step by step – to develop their vocabulary.

How Talk Through Stories works

- In *Story week*, we help children to get to know the story really well: the plot, the characters, and their actions and motives.
- In *Vocabulary week*, we explore eight words from the story, specifically selected to develop children's understanding of each word in the context of their everyday lives.

If your children already know the story well, however, you might want to use only a few of our ideas before moving on to the plan for *Vocabulary week*.

How the stories were selected

We chose stories that we believe are worth reading and re-reading – stories that children will love. We began with old favourites that many teachers are likely to know, such as *Dogger* by Shirley Hughes, *Burglar Bill* by Janet and Allan Ahlberg, *Can't You Sleep, Little Bear?* by Martin Waddell and *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak.

We then moved on to more recent literature, such as *Hugless Douglas* by David Melling, *Perfectly Norman* by Tom Percival and *I'm in Charge* by Jeanne Willis.

We also searched hard for stories where children from minority ethnic backgrounds were the main protagonists in everyday situations, such as celebrating a birthday, going shopping, being ill, having a

tantrum, having their hair cut or worrying about the arrival of a new sibling. We have included *Billy and the Beast* by Nadia Shireen, *Anna Hibiscus* by Atinuke and *The Extraordinary Gardener* by Sam Boughton. We intend to add more when they are published, as well as others.

Finally, Talk through Stories is not a cumulative programme, so the order in which you read the stories does not matter. For example, you can alternate challenging stories with less challenging ones. We hope you will choose the books from our list that you think will appeal to your children.

The eight *Vocabulary week* words

The eight words selected for focus in each of the stories are what Isabel Beck, in *Bringing words to life*, has called ‘Tier 2’ words.¹ These are words that children are unlikely to hear in everyday conversation but are likely to come across in stories. In *I’m in charge* by Jeanne Willis, for example, we chose:

bellowed startled barged sneaked grinned dreadful stomped refused

and in *Ruby’s worry* by Tom Percival:

explore discovered wondered enormous barely unexpected shrink tumbled

When we selected the stories, we had to make sure that the vocabulary was sufficiently challenging, that is, that the stories included at least eight Tier Two words. As a result, many wonderful stories are not on our list, only because they did not include a sufficient number of Tier Two words, even when the narratives and characters were excellent. However, you should also read those to your children; the portal has a list of suggestions.

In designing the Vocabulary sessions, we drew on the basic instructional format and suggestions for activities in Chapter 4 of *Bringing Words to Life*. We recommend this excellent book.

Marion Blank’s level of questions

Once we had created the blueprint for *Vocabulary week*, the most challenging job was to write sentences and questions that were suitable for children whose language is still developing. We used Marion Blank’s ‘Level of Questions’ – a verbal reasoning model – to help us to think about the questions we wanted to ask and in which order we might ask them.² So, for example, we ask children questions about events before questions that require reasoning or an emotional response.

¹ Beck, I.L, McKeown, M.G. & Kucan, L. (2002). *Bringing words to life: robust vocabulary instruction*. New York: The Guilford Press.

² Blank, M., Rose, S. A. & Berlin, L. J. (1978). *The Language of Learning: The Preschool Years*. Orlando: Grune & Stratton, Inc.

Turn to Your Partner

If we are to develop children's language, they need to talk. The aim of Talk Through Stories is to give them opportunities to do this and to develop their vocabulary. It is vital, therefore, that children have a partner when answering the questions.

Every time you ask a question, you will use the questioning signal to alert children to turn to their partner. Then, when the pairs have asked and answered the question, it is your role to choose a pair to feed back to the group. Explain to the class that you will not choose children to answer if they put up their hand. If you respond to those who raise their hands, you deny others the chance to take part and learn.

Organising Story week and Vocabulary week

Every day you will need:

- your usual 20 minutes for Storytime
- a further, separate 10 minutes for Vocabulary time

Allow sufficient time for both the story and, separately, the work on the eight words. The programme will make a difference to your children.

It's really important that Vocabulary time is at a different time to Storytime, because we do not want children to think that every story they enjoy has to come with work on learning new words.

Timetables

There are many ways you could organise these sessions, but here are two possible timetables. Note that Storytime is always one week ahead of Vocabulary time for each story.

Option 1: Full Storytime and Vocabulary timetable

Follow this full timetable, if your children do not already know the story very well.

	TTS Storytime 20 minutes per day	Vocabulary time 10 minutes per day
Week 1	TTS Story A	
Week 2	TTS Story B	TTS Story A words
Week 3	TTS Story C	TTS Story B words
Week 4	TTS Story D	TTS Story C words
Week 5	TTS Story E	TTS Story D words
Week 6	TTS Story F	TTS Story E words
Week 7		TTS Story F words

In Week 1, read Story A. In Week 2, read Story B and follow the vocabulary activities for Story A that you read the week before. In Week 3, read Story C and follow the vocabulary activities for Story B, and so on.

Option 2: Time for your own stories as well as Storytime

This option includes the times for your own stories, so Vocabulary time for the eight words takes place over two weeks rather than one.

	Your own storytime	TTS Storytime 20 minutes per day	TTS Vocabulary time 10 minutes per day
Week 1		TTS Story A	
Week 2	Your own stories		TTS Story A words (2 days)
Week 3		TTS Story B	TTS Story A words (3 days)
Week 4	Your own stories		TTS Story B words (2 days)
Week 5		TTS Story C	TTS Story B words (3 days)
Week 6	Your own stories		TTS Story C words (2 days)
Week 7		TTS Story D	TTS Story C words (3 days)
Week 8	Your own stories		TTS Story D words (2 days)
Week 9			TTS Story D words (3 days)

If you have a teaching assistant, you could also timetable extra Vocabulary times for small groups of children. The assistant might monitor the class while you run the sessions.

Talk Through Stories is as powerful as you make it. It is your enthusiasm that will bring the activities to life.

Further units

Do let us know of books you would like us to write units for.

If you would like to write some units of your own, there is guidance on the portal: *How to write your own units*.