

The 50 word mini epic

Primary: (ages 7 – 11)

Literacy and language

Students are challenged to create a series of short stories that only contain 50 words. They are given a series of unusual stimuli to spark their imagination and curiosity and enable them to start their creative journeys. They are asked to engage in a continuous process of refining and editing to improve their stories whilst playing with language, grammar and punctuation. At the end of the activity, the stories will be published into a collection of 50 word stories.

Time allocation 4 lesson periods (but could last longer depending on ability)

Subject content Develop ability to write concisely but powerfully
Compose texts using appropriate punctuation, spelling and grammar
Understand importance of word choice, punctuation, paragraph division, and structure
Check, edit, and refine work independently

Creativity and critical thinking This unit has a **creativity** and **critical thinking** focus:

- Play with ideas to create meaningful and novel outputs
- Consider different perspectives and reflect on strengths and weaknesses of their own writing

Other skills Communication

Key words Wow words; powerful verbs; paragraphs; editing; inspiration

Products and processes to assess

This approach to literacy is a quick and fun way to get students writing. It encourages the least able students because they only have to produce 50 words while challenging the most able ones with a consideration of what makes short writing effective and developing editing skills. At the highest levels of achievement, students produce and edit a series of imaginative 50 word stories that use the initial stimulus in a personally original manner, are correct in punctuation, spelling and grammar, and make use of appropriate language, structure, and other devices to create suspense, impact, and engagement. They are able to independently edit and improve their work and reflect thoughtfully on its strengths, limitations, and the effects of the devices they have used to make the writing more powerful.

Teaching and Learning plan

This plan suggests potential steps for implementing the activity. Teachers can introduce as many modifications as they see fit to adapt the activity to their teaching context.

Step	Duration	Teacher and student roles	Subject content	Creativity and critical thinking
1	Lesson period 1	<p>The teacher may choose to introduce the activity by brainstorming with students what might be important when you want to tell a powerful and engaging story in only a short number of words (e.g. vocabulary, punctuation, structure, images, editing, paragraphs, short sentences, being clear on the most important idea etc.). The teacher may choose to review and give examples of some of these concepts and show some examples of short 50 word stories at this point.</p> <p>They can then discuss inspiration with the class - sometimes it can be hard to find inspiration for a story but if you look around you, there is inspiration everywhere. You just have to try and see the world in a new way.</p> <p>Teacher shows them a photo or piece of art (see Appendix 1 below for examples) and tells them they will take them through a process to help them understand the piece of art and use it as inspiration (SEE, THINK, WONDER).</p> <p>SEE – ask the group to tell each other everything that they see. This should be all the things that are known, the facts that are undisputed, the details of the picture.</p> <p>THINK – ask the group to tell each other what the picture makes them think about. These should be memories, previous experiences or knowledge, or other connections they are making.</p> <p>WONDER - ask the group to tell each other questions they have about the picture. They are only allowed to ask questions. Encourage them to think about the SEE and THINK statements and build questions from them. Question starters that might be useful are: I wonder..., what if..., would it be possible..., etc. Write all these questions on the board or on a sheet of paper.</p>	<p>Exploring how to communicate ideas/images in few words</p> <p>Considering effects of word choice (e.g. use of ‘wow’ words/power verbs etc.)</p> <p>Reviewing how to structure and edit a text</p> <p>Thinking about inspiration and how to come up with ideas for stories</p> <p>Using questioning language</p> <p>Developing confidence and competence in spoken language</p>	<p>Feeling, observing, and describing relevant information</p> <p>Making connections they previously haven’t made between the prompt and their own experience and knowledge</p> <p>Posing questions and analysing gaps in their knowledge</p>
2		<p>Teacher asks everyone in the class to pick one of the questions from the WONDER exercise above. This will become their stimulus for the first 50 word stories. Instruct them to return to their seats and take notes on their questions, i.e. start to flesh out information they could use in their stories. After the teacher is confident that everyone has enough information, ask them to spend the rest of the class writing an inventive 50 word mini epic story.</p>	<p>Composing: articulating ideas in written form</p>	<p>Reviewing questions and finding new perspectives on them</p> <p>Generating and playing with ideas to produce a meaningful and personally novel output</p>

		<p>The only other rule is that they are not allowed to show the teacher the story unless they have completed at least 3 drafts and can show them plus the final version. After final stories have been checked and the student is happy with their work, they are given a final piece of paper and asked to produce a 'publishable' copy, i.e. neat handwriting, title, etc.</p>	<p>Editing and improving texts</p> <p>Producing an output with accurate spelling, punctuation, and grammar</p>	<p>Reviewing their output independently, reflecting on strengths and weaknesses and revising as necessary</p>
3	Lesson period 2	<p>Teacher brings the class together and tells them that someone left a box in the school last night and no one knows who it belongs to. Teacher produces a box and asks one of them to open it and remove the contents (prior to this lesson the teacher needs to find a box and put 4 or 5 unrelated items in it).</p> <p>When all the contents have been removed the class is asked to repeat the process SEE, THINK, WONDER. After they have asked lots of questions they are encouraged to make some key decisions on who they think the box belongs to, i.e. is it a man or a woman, where are they from, do they have a name, why are they here, etc.? Students can be encouraged to consider why they think that and if they are assuming anything they don't know for sure.</p> <p>Then one of the students is asked to become the character they have just invented and sit on a chair at the front of the group. This student will only have a limited knowledge of the character but, through a process of improvisation, will be able to answer the questions posed by their peers. The class is invited to ask questions to the character (student) to allow everyone to find out more.</p> <p>As the class are asking questions the teacher notes down on the board or a piece of paper any mysterious or unusual facts that come up during the character interview.</p> <p>After a few minutes the student is thanked and asked to re-join the group. The teacher and students reflect on the conversation and look at the facts that came from it. Each student is asked to take one of these as stimulus for their 50 word story.</p> <p>The process of lesson one is repeated that invites the pupils to create, edit and produce a final 50 word story. The teacher may choose to ask students to reflect on the previous stories and challenge students to focus on a particular area of their writing in this second story (this area could be identified by the students themselves or by the teacher. E.g. use of power words, sentences etc.)</p>	<p>Using questioning language</p> <p>Developing confidence and competence in spoken language</p> <p>Developing note-taking skills</p> <p>Composing and editing effective texts with correct use of grammar etc.</p>	<p>Identifying and challenging assumptions and generally accepted ideas</p> <p>Reviewing and reflecting on information to generate ideas for new stories</p> <p>As in step 2 but output is expected to demonstrate greater skilfulness/quality than in first iteration</p>
4	Lesson period 3	<p>The group is gathered and asked to lie down and close their eyes. A piece of music is played (one is suggested in the resources section below or something else emotive).</p> <p>After the track has finished students return to their seats and draw images that were in their heads when listening to the piece of music. The piece of music can be played again</p>		<p>Making connections between music, images, and stories to spark imagination</p>

	<p>as they do this.</p> <p>Students are invited to pick one of these images as stimulus for their 50 word story. Before starting they make some notes that flesh out their picture and bring text into it.</p> <p>The process of lesson one is repeated that invites the pupils to create, edit and produce a final 50 word story. Again students can be asked to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of their previous story and focus on a particular area of writing as appropriate to context and curriculum.</p>	<p>Identifying an area of their written work that needs more work and improving it in a new composition</p>	<p>As in step 2 and 3, but output is expected to demonstrate greater skilfulness/quality than in previous iterations</p>
5	<p>Lesson period 4 (and 5)</p> <p>The class is brought together and each student is given 3 post-it notes. The class is told they are about to re-name the classroom space and asked to imagine that things are no longer called as we know them, i.e. the door is not called a door, the window no longer a window. They have to re-name the space according to how they know or see it.</p> <p>They can be given some suggestions, i.e. the door could become a space portal, the window is actually a witches mirror, the bin is a monsters cave. They are invited to be playful with the space and write their new names on their post-it notes and stick them to the object.</p> <p>After about 10 minutes the room should be covered with post-it notes that have new words for the objects. The group is invited to wander through the space and pay attention to labels for the new classroom.</p> <p>Each student picks one or two of the new names. These will be stimulus for their 50 word mini epic. Again, they should be encouraged to take notes and flesh out the information before starting their story.</p> <p>The process of lesson one is repeated that invites the pupils to create, edit and produce a final 50 word story. The teacher may choose to engage in a final reflective discussion asking students about what they have learned about what is important when writing with only a few words and what they have learned about finding inspiration for creative work in the world around them.</p> <p>The project could culminate with all the publishable stories compiled into a simple book and bound as a record of their achievement.</p>	<p>Using interesting vocabulary and ideas to rename and re-imagine their classroom space</p> <p>Articulating the most important things things to consider to help them write well with few words</p>	<p>Generating unusual and radical ideas to rename the objects in the teaching environment</p> <p>Observing the classroom environment and how it has been augmented with imagined new names and functions</p> <p>Making connections between imagined names and other ideas to invent a new story</p> <p>As in step 2-4</p>

Resources and examples for inspiration

Web and print

- Not essential but access to some 50 word stories websites would be useful.
- Suggested music: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVN1B-tUpps>
- Further resources on 'wow words' can be found here.
https://www.nbss.ie/sites/default/files/publications/mm_wow_words_booklet_cu.pdf

Other

- Paper and pens for research and writing tasks
- Post it notes
- See 3 examples of 50 word stories in Appendix 2
- Art work – see suggested images below
- Box with random objects in it
- A way to play music to the class

Opportunities to adapt, extend, and enrich

- Students can be asked to spell most of the words they need to communicate, using spelling rules, specialist vocabulary, self-correction techniques and a range of resources
- Links can be made with expressive arts: drama/improvisation, music appreciation and visual art deconstruction

**Creativity and
critical thinking rubric**

- Mapping of the different steps of the lesson plan against the OECD rubric to identify the creative and/or critical thinking skills the different parts of the lesson aim to develop

	CREATIVITY Coming up with new ideas and solutions	Steps	CRITICAL THINKING Questioning and evaluating ideas and solutions	Steps
INQUIRING	Make connections to other concepts and knowledge from the same or from other disciplines	1,4	Identify and question assumptions and generally accepted ideas or practices	1,3
IMAGINING	Generate and play with unusual and radical ideas	2-5	Consider several perspectives on a problem based on different assumptions	2-5
DOING	Produce, perform or envision a meaningful output that is personally novel	2-5	Explain both strengths and limitations of a product, a solution or a theory justified on logical, ethical or aesthetic criteria	2-5
REFLECTING	Reflect on the novelty of solution and of its possible consequences	5	Reflect on the chosen solution/position relative to possible alternatives	3-5

APPENDIX 1- examples of photos/pieces of art



APPENDIX 2- examples of 50 word stories

Revenge: Best Gifted

Abandoned in the easy chair once again, Norma fumed. Her children gossiped in the kitchen. They didn't want to be overheard saying anything that might upset her.

Norma sniffed. She was ninety, not nine.

Reclining, she chuckled softly and plotted her revenge.

She'd knit them all scratchy socks for Christmas.

The Future Makers

The lifeless tree outside the school gates swayed gently in the wind. The playground was quiet.

Inside, however, there was magic afoot. Tales of invisible water bottles, haunted books and giants were told. Stories of the future, by the authors sitting in Miss Turnbull's class, just waiting to write...

Early Proposal

"Darling, you can't marry your Teddy Bear."

"Why not?"

“He’s not real.”

“Of course he’s real. You tell me to talk to him when I can’t sleep. Anyway, I’m not marrying anyone else.”

“Darling, you’ll find someone just like your Daddy.”

“Exactly. I’m marrying Ted as soon as I’m eight.”