



ALPAA Text Notes

The Magic Finger

by Roald Dahl

1966 Puffin Books, Penguin Books. England

Text notes written for use with the Accelerated Literacy teaching routine by Wendy Cowey for ALPAA

These notes have been developed by AL practitioners and are offered in good faith for other AL teachers to use as a resource for their own classroom teaching.

Notes on this site presume that the people who use them have some training in the Accelerated Literacy teaching method. This knowledge could include professional development such as the Accelerated Literacy Intensive or state or territory school based training.

More detailed notes as well as Accelerated Literacy Practitioner Guides are available on the National Digital Learning Resources Network (NDLRN) http://www.ndlrn.edu.au/using_digital_resources/accessing_resources/accessing_resources.html. The notes on this website are detailed and provide additional information on how to teach Accelerated Literacy. Reading at least some of these notes will provide a background to the notes that follow on the ALPAA site.

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The Magic Finger

by Roald Dahl, 1966
Puffin Books, Penguin Books, England

Synopsis of the story

The Magic Finger is a short novel that provides a transition for children between shorter stories with illustrations such as Arnold Lobel's *Fables* and longer novels without illustrations.

It tells the story of a girl (the narrator) who has an extraordinary 'magic finger' that she can use in times of great stress. These times seem to occur when she finds injustice in the community in which she lives. Her magic finger punishes the people involved and shows them the error of their ways.

Readers never learn the girl's name as she is the narrator. In the book she relates two instances where she used her magic finger. The first is a short example of the way her finger works. The second, central to the book, relates what happened when she used her magic against the Gregg family who liked to shoot ducks. In both instances she intended to use her magic finger but did not know what the magic would do.

Themes

The major theme of the book is environmental as the girl acts against the practice of duck shooting.

Other themes include notions of fairness and justice and willingness to stand up for what you believe is right.

Why use this story?

The Magic Finger provides an introduction to novel reading for students in Year 2 or 3. It is typical of Roald Dahl in that it takes the part of a child against the world of adults. Typically too, it is quite funny. It has some illustrations but is not a picture book. The study passage suggested in these notes is short and straightforward and would provide material for a two or three week teaching sequence. There is, however, the potential for other studies available in the rest of the book.

As well, it provides a basis for persuasive writing about whether the girl had the right to act as she did. Does one person ever have the right to punish or take revenge on others? It also deals with the subject of duck shooting and whether it should be allowed at all.

Study passage

The study passage: Page 4 – from, '*For months ... to P7 ...And she never will be.*

This passage describes the power of the girl's Magic Finger and shows how dangerous it is.

<p>Complication The incident that initiated the event <i>'That's an easy one,'</i> <i>I said 'K-a-t.'</i> <i>'You are a stupid little girl!'</i> <i>Mrs Winter said.</i> <i>'I am not a stupid little girl!'</i> <i>I cried.</i> <i>'I am a very nice little girl!'</i> <i>'Go and stand in the corner,'</i> <i>Mrs Winter said.</i></p> <p>Character's reaction <i>Then I got cross,</i> <i>and I saw red,</i> <i>and I put the Magic Finger on Mrs Winter good and strong,</i> <i>and almost at once...</i></p> <p>Consequence <i>Guess what?</i></p>	<p><i>up and spell cat.'</i> The way she orders the girl to spell rather than asking her politely gives readers an insight into her rather bossy classroom management.</p> <p>Complication The incident that initiated the event Until now, the spelling lesson had been progressing in a bossy but relatively unproblematic way. When, however, the girl replies, 'That's an easy one,' she sounds overconfident in a way that alerts readers to the possibility that she will make a mistake, with even such a basic word. When she does spell the word incorrectly, Mrs Winter could have responded in a supportive way but chooses not to. No one likes to be called stupid, particularly in front of others. The girl's response then was anger and she contradicts Mrs Winter.</p> <p>Note that the girl doesn't respond with the opposite to stupid by saying she is clever but points out that she is nice, despite the fact that she was being quite cheeky.</p> <p>Mrs Winter then sends the girl to stand in the corner as a punishment.</p> <p>Character's reaction The words, <i>Then I got cross, and I saw red</i>, signal the start of the Magic Finger at work. In this case, there is a signal that the result of this spell will be particularly bad because the girl put it on Mrs Winter <i>good and strong</i>. It wasn't just an ordinary effort but a special one that started working <i>almost at once...</i> The author uses 'and' three times as a conjunction to emphasise the rapid sequence of events.</p> <p>Consequence <i>Guess what?</i> This question builds a sense of anticipation. It isn't a question that is meant to be answered</p>
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Whiskers began growing out of her face!

They were long black whiskers, just like the ones you see on a cat, but much bigger.

And how fast they grew! Before we had time to think, they were out to her ears!

Of course the whole class started screaming with laughter, and then Mrs Winter said, 'Will you be so kind as to tell me what you find so madly funny, all of you?'

And when she turned around to write something on the blackboard we saw that she had grown a tail as well! It was a huge bushy tail!

by the reader. The consequence of the girl's crossness, seeing red and the good and strong application of the Magic Finger is about to be revealed.

And sure enough, for a teacher to have whiskers growing out of her face would be terrible. Note that they *began* growing which indicates that they will keep growing. The exclamation mark adds to the shock of the event.

The author then expands on that statement by describing the whiskers so that readers have no doubt that they were not ordinary human whiskers. *They were long black whiskers*, and a further simile, *just like the ones you see on a cat, but much bigger*, completes the description of the appearance of the whiskers. A further description of the pace at which they grew completes the image of the awful effect of the Magic Finger.

The whiskers grew very quickly (*and how fast they grew!*). The expansion, *Before we had time to think, they were out to her ears*, describes not just the speed at which they grew but also their impressive length.

Readers would be in no doubt now that the whiskers were a dire punishment. They not only grew fast, they were long and black and catlike.

The reaction of the class was to scream with laughter. No one seemed to feel sorry for Mrs Winter. Just as funny was the fact that Mrs Winter didn't seem to realise what had happened and asked what the class found *so madly funny*.

The final indignity was that when she turned to write on the blackboard the whole class could see that she had grown a huge bushy tail. The whiskers she might have been able to shave off but the tail was another

<p>Resolution <i>I cannot begin to tell you what happened after that, but if any of you are wondering whether Mrs Winter is quite all right again now, the answer is No. And she never will be.</i></p>	<p>thing altogether.</p> <p>Resolution The final statement in the description of this incident makes it even sadder for Mrs Winter. The girl says she cannot begin to tell you what happened after that. Readers have to imagine the chain of consequences for Mrs Winter and to detail them all would detract from the overall drama of the quick growth of cat features on Mrs Winter. Imagining also has the potential to make them even worse than they might have been. Significantly though, if any one wondered about whether the effect of the Magic Finger was only temporary, the girl leaves readers in no doubt by finishing with, <i>the answer is No. And, she never will be.</i></p>
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Teaching Sequence

Low order literate orientation

Background

(from www.roalddahl.com)

The book was originally titled *The Almost Ducks* and is about a girl who cannot stand people hunting and shooting animals for sport. She becomes so angry when she finds her next door neighbours shooting ducks that she uses a special power to teach them a lesson.

There is scope as part of low order literate orientation to discuss with students Roald Dahl’s attitude to hunting for sport and for writing persuasive text about this issue.

While the overall narrative is about the Gregg family and what happened when the girl used her Magic Finger on them, the study passage is important as it provides an example of the way an author can tell a smaller story inside a longer one to illustrate an important point. By hearing about the fate of Mrs Winter, readers understand the serious consequences of invoking the Magic Finger.

The study passage

To introduce the teaching sequence on the passage analysed above, teachers could explain that Roald Dahl included the description of this incident in the story to demonstrate to readers the full power of the girl’s Magic Finger.

Without this passage, the story would make sense and readers could go on reading about the Gregg family and what happened when they made the girl angry about their duck shooting.

By including this incident as part of the orientation to the overall novel, however, readers' understanding of the power of the Magic Finger is greatly enhanced. The incident foreshadows the seriousness of the decision the girl made to use her power on the whole Gregg family. After finding out what happened to Mrs Winter, readers realise that the Magic Finger is merciless when it is invoked and they expect dire consequences for the Gregg family.

Before beginning work on the study passage, read at least the first part of the story to the students up to page 9 (*...I got the whole story from Phillip and William the next morning, after it was all over.*)

Read the rest of the book in subsequent lessons. Other passages could then be studied (e.g page 14 from *Late that night ... He was now quite afraid*). This passage is an interesting example of how Roald Dahl creates an atmosphere of foreboding by describing a night scene.)

High order literate orientation

The language the author uses as example of the effect of the Magic Finger on the girl's teacher has been discussed in detail in the text analysis above. High order literate orientation on this passage would be based on that analysis. The points below use the structure of the passage as a framework that will lead to a writing exercise. The brief notes about each part of the structure are to be used in conjunction with the more detailed analysis.

Situation and character

The girl sets the scene by explaining her reluctance to use her Magic Finger on the Gregg family who were duck shooting. She felt like this because of what happened to her teacher, Mrs Winter. Then she foreshadows that something bad is about to happen by stating, 'Poor old Mrs Winter.' Readers immediately expect the worst.

Sequence of events

Orientation (setting)

The incident that made the girl reluctant to use her Magic Finger took place in her classroom. Readers then need to imagine what that was like; children sitting in desks, teacher at the front, etc.

The teacher asked the girl to spell 'cat'. This word seems to be seen as one of the easiest words students ever have to spell and therefore readers could anticipate that she would know how to spell it.

Complication

The incident that initiated the event

But no, something went terribly wrong. Firstly, the girl was over confident which would make all readers a bit nervous for her. Then, she spelled '*k-a-t*'. If she had been correct there would have been no story to tell but this is the moment that things go wrong.

Of all the things a teacher could say when a student makes a mistake, to call that student stupid is the one that would be most unlikely and most hurtful. For Mrs Winter to react the way she did tells readers something about her style as a teacher. No one could feel sorry for a teacher who was so cruel.

The girl didn't burst into tears though. Rather, she contradicted the teacher and was sent to 'the corner' as punishment for her cheekiness.

Character's reaction

At this point, the girl completely lost her temper. Again, she could have chosen to just sit in the corner and wait till the lesson was over. Instead, though, she lost her temper, saw red and put her Magic Finger on Mrs Winter. Her behaviour tells readers something about the girl in the same way as Mrs Winter's behaviour tells them something about her as a teacher. The girl didn't like to be in trouble and thought Mrs Winter was unfair and so she retaliated.

Consequence

The description of the way Mrs Winter grew whiskers, their size and colour and their likeness to a cat's whiskers make clear the effect the Magic Finger had on the teacher. She can't have felt the whiskers growing because she didn't know why the children were laughing. The tail is an added twist to the scene because while whiskers could perhaps be shaved away, there wasn't much Mrs Winter could do with the tail.

Resolution

Finally, the author didn't go step by step through Mrs Winter finding out she had whiskers and a tail. Did the children run out and get the principal? Did she faint or burst into tears? All those details are left to readers' imaginations. The final statement though, makes clear that the changes were permanent.

Considering the horrible consequence of the Magic Finger's work, it is no wonder the girl decided she shouldn't use it again. We also learn from this description that she did feel sorry for Mrs Winter and felt a little remorse about her actions. Readers may think that the teacher deserved her fate – or not!

Transformations

Transformations could be used to bring out the structure of the passage and why the author related it this way. They could also discuss the importance of the author including this description of the Magic Finger's power as part of the orientation to the whole story. If it was removed, what would be lost from the overall text?

One passage that could be useful for transformations is:

Consequence (of using the Magic Finger)

*Whiskers/ began growing/ out of her face!!
They /were/ long black whiskers/,/ just/ like/ the ones/ you/ see/ on a cat/,/but
/much bigger!/
And/ how fast /they/ grew!/ /
Before we had/ time/ to think/,/ they/ were/ out to her ears!!*

This description is important because it is an example of a highly explicit description of an event as it takes place. It is being used to fill readers with a feeling of awe at the power of this Magic Finger. There was Mrs Winter standing in front of the class and before everyone's eyes she is rapidly transformed into a cat-like creature just because she had been mean to the girl and made her stand in the corner.

Spelling

Teachers will need to choose words to take to spelling based on the year level of the class as well as previously taught spelling knowledge.

Possible choices of words could include:

Words ending with ss.

cross, class.

Words related to *grow* as in *began growing, grew* and *grown*.

Words with the –ell pattern as in *spell, spelling, tell*.

Use of the pattern ing.

Because *–ing* is a common pattern and seems to be well known to most students after Year 1 at least, it could be useful to find words ending with *–ing* (*growing, screaming, wondering*) and demonstrate that it is also a pattern that can be found in other words e.g. *f/ing/er*. Then generate other words that have *ing* as a pattern (*ingot, spring, thing, dingle, mingle* etc).

Words with be- as a prefix as in *began, begin, before* from the text and add others e.g. *beside, belong, befall* etc.

Writing

When Roald Dahl wrote this book he based it on his dislike of the sport of hunting and killing animals. By inventing a Magic Finger that could transform the whole Gregg family into ducks and the ducks they were going to hunt into people, he forced the family to experience what it was like to be hunted. As a result they reformed, changed their name to Egg in honour of their feathered friends and never hunted again. This book makes readers think of how it must feel to be hunted and was intended to discourage people from shooting animals for sport.

The incident of poor Mrs Winter is used as an example of the Magic Finger's power and foreshadows that the Greggs will be taught a lesson in the same way as Mrs Winter was herself humiliated because she humiliated a child.

To use this writing technique as an example for a teaching sequence, teachers would need to think of a situation where a magic device could be used to teach a lesson about behaviour or ways of living. Then think about how an example of the magic's power could be used to show its potential.

One such example could be bullying. A magic device could be a magic foot that worked when it was stamped in anger. A demonstration of the magic at

work could be a child, the owner of this Magic Foot being bullied in the playground.

The structure could be as follows:

Situation and character

I promised myself never to stamp my Magic Foot again after what happened to Bobbie Bloggs.

Poor Bobbie Bloggs!

Sequence of events

Orientation (setting)

After school all the children in the street were playing in the playground nearby. We were having a great time with our toy cars, making roads in the sandpit and driving round them, when along came Bobbie Bloggs the biggest, bossiest boy on the block.

"Hey, I want to play!" he shouted.

"Okay", we all agreed. "Come over here and you can be one of the road builders."

Complication

Bobbie Bloggs stomped his way over to the sand pit. He kicked the neighbourhood cat out of the way and pushed past the little kids. He stamped my best car into the sand and scratched its paint.

"I don't want to build roads," he said, "Give me those cars and get out of the way!"

He was so big no one could stop him.

Character's reaction

I looked at my favourite car with its paint scratched and its wheels bent and I was furious.

I could feel the blood rushing to my head and before I could help myself I stamped my Magic Foot.

Consequence

Then, before anyone could move away, you would never guess what happened.

Bobbie Bloggs started to shrink! He became smaller and smaller until he was the smallest person there. And that's not all, his nose turned small and pink, just like a mouse's nose only pointier and instead of shouting he could only squeak. All the kids started to laugh and the cat came over and licked him.

He squeaked furiously and tried to run, but he found he had grown a long thin grey tail that tripped him up.

Resolution

Don't ask what happened after the kids had stopped laughing and the cat had carried Bobbie away. All I can say is that none of us has ever seen him again and the cat ended up with a tummy ache!

Persuasive texts

While the passage from *The Magic Finger* discussed here is relatively short, the topic of hunting and killing animals for sport is one that could be the subject of a persuasive text, for example, "Should shooting animals for sport be banned?"

There is also the issue of whether it is ever all right to take revenge or retaliate in the way Roald Dahl depicts. That is probably why he has the girl use a magic finger that controls what happens. The girl used her Magic Finger but she didn't control what it did.