

Jeffrey and Sloth Lesson Plan

Created by Kari-Lynn Winters

Based on *Six Traits of Writing* (Ruth Culham; Scholastic, 1995)

The Story

Jeffrey can't think of anything to write about, so he doodles instead. He sketches a round-bellied, long-armed Sloth. When the Sloth doodle tries to take over Jeffrey's life, Jeffrey uses the written word to put it back in its place. In doing so, he overcomes his writer's block.

The Author

When Kari-Lynn Winters, a graduate student, performer and teacher, began to submit children's picturebook manuscripts to publishers about seven years ago, people often advised her to write novels instead. But Kari-Lynn's persistence paid off; she is now the author of *Jeffrey and Sloth* (Orca Book Publishers, 2007), a picturebook about overcoming writer's block, *Run-Away Alphabet* (Simply Read Books, forthcoming, 2008), an alphabet book which focuses on the sounds of the letters, and *When Chickens Fly* (Raincoast Books, forthcoming, 2009), a picturebook about a chicken who wants to be an Olympic athlete.

Kari-Lynn grew up in St. Thomas, Ontario. She is currently completing her Ph.D. at UBC, focusing on authorship and literacy learning. Kari-Lynn has also published children's poetry and short stories in magazines and anthologies, and academic articles and chapters. She lives in Vancouver, British Columbia with her husband, two children and two cats.

The Illustrator

Ben Hodson can sympathize with Jeffrey's frustration with staring at a blank piece of paper and trying to think of a great idea. He does that almost every day! Ben finds that doodles definitely help bring out ideas, and he often uses doodling when he's working on a new book. Ben also knows how easy it is to get distracted, even when you don't have a sloth bossing you around. Jeffrey and Sloth was painted with acrylic paint and outlined with pencil crayon on watercolor paper. Ben lives in Ottawa, with his wife, May, and their daughter, Zoe.

Ideas and writing questions for students

- How do you decide on a theme/big idea?
- Are these big ideas supported?
- How much do you show versus how much do you tell?

1. Doodle to Write

Jeffrey has writer's block. He can't think of anything to write about. So he doodles instead.

Students can decide on a theme/big idea by:

- Doodling their own pictures.

- Asking questions about their doodles. For example: a) Which doodle should I write about (remember, inanimate objects can come to life as well)? b) Where will my story take place? c) What might be a problem that arises between my doodled characters?
- Getting students to brainstorm plots using their doodles as imaginative sources.

2. Doodling Details

Doodles can say a lot about a character's particularities.

Students can decide how their theme/big ideas are supported:

- Ask students to use adjectives to describe their doodled characters. For example, Sloth is lazy and bossy.
- Once the particularities of the characters are determined, the student can assign goals for their characters. For example, Sloth is lazy. He wants to sleep.
- Next, students can support their ideas through their characters' objectives. If Sloth wants to sleep, what will he need to sleep or to sleep better?
- Ask students to think about what might stand in the way of the characters achieving their goal (e.g. another character, their environment). In *Jeffrey and Sloth*, Jeffrey's own goal of getting his homework done stands in Sloth's way.

3. Stories All Around You

Stories are everywhere. As a writer it is your job to find them.

Students can look for story ideas in their environment:

- After reading *Jeffrey and Sloth*, study the first illustration as Jeffrey looks at the blank page.
- Ask students what they notice about Jeffrey's environment. Point out the sloth poster, the fish, the posters, the CN Tower, and so forth.
- Initiate a conversation about how Jeffrey includes the items in his environment into both his doodles and also into his story (e.g. He ends up writing about a sloth, about swimming to France, and so on).
- Invite students to look closely at their own environment and to incorporate some of these ideas into their stories.

Organization:

- Does the writing have a strong beginning?
- Does the story make logical sense?
- Is the story organized in the best possible way?
- Does the story have a satisfying conclusion?

1. Story Starters

Story beginnings need to be strong. They should hook the reader.

Students can decide on a good beginning:

- Start by discussing the beginning for *Jeffrey and Sloth* (e.g. "Jeffrey looked at the blank page. It glared back."). What does this story starter do? For example, does it introduce you

to a character, does it suggest a main theme or idea within the book, does it make you want to turn the page?

- After ideas have been established about what a story starter should do, invite students to write three different beginnings to a story (either to *Jeffrey and Sloth*, or to their own stories).
- Ask questions about their beginnings. For example, which beginning: a) tells about the story's big idea or theme? b) most easily lends itself to visualization or action? c) best introduces the conflict or the characters in the story? d) engages your curiosity and makes you want to turn the page?

2. Pop-up Story

Organizing your ideas helps a reader to make sense of a story.

Use Pop-up Story with *Jeffrey and Sloth* and with other pieces of literature before critiquing each other's writing. This will give students the opportunity to: a) learn how a story is constructed, b) develop their critical thinking skills, and c) practice using a "critique" vocabulary.

Steps for Students to collectively determine the organization of a story:

- Call 2 or 3 students up to the front of the class.
- Assign each student a role (e.g. narrator, character #1, character #2).
- Ask the students playing characters to squat down.
- Invite the narrator to read the story. Be sure to tell him or her that you will be stopping the narrative throughout in order to see the pop-up illustration.
- At certain points (especially those points in the story which are active) stop the narrative and ask to see what that scene might look like.
- Invite the students playing characters to create a *tableaux* (still picture), demonstrating the ideas from the story.
- At the conclusion of the narrative, discuss the organization of the writing. Be sure to let the author speak first and last. Questions might also be used to initiate conversations. For example: a) Did the story make sense? b) Did the story build to a climax and then resolve? c) What could be added to or removed from the story so that it makes more sense to the reader?

3. Connect your ending to your beginning

Conclusions should wrap up a story as well as relate to the beginning of the story.

Students can collectively determine a strong ending to the story:

- Ask students to write their own story starter on a blank piece of paper.
- Put these pieces into a hat. Choose one to read aloud.
- Call different students to the stage one at a time.
- Invite these students to suggest an ending. They can choose to say their suggested ending, to write it on the blackboard, or to enact it.
- Discuss which ending the students feel is the most powerful. Why?

- Sometimes an ending relates to the story starter but not to the story itself. When this happens it may be a good time to go back to the beginning of the story and create another story starter.

Voice:

- Does the story reveal the author's voice?
- How does an author hold the attention of the reader?
- Is the dialogue realistic and does it move the story forward?

1. Interpreting Voice

Voice is like a stamp of individuality on a piece of writing.

Students can begin to discover their own voice:

- Ask the students to copy a section of *Jeffrey and Sloth*. For instance:

Sloth interrupted. "If I could find that cozy blanket I wouldn't mind."

"You realize that Canada is a big place? You would have to climb mountains, trek across the tundra, paddle the Great Lakes and hike the prairies."

"Well, you can't make me!"

- Next, ask them to copy a section of text from another children's author.
- Compare these two sections. Are there differences or similarities?
- Discussion ideas might include:
 - a) What dialogue tags do different authors use? (e.g. said, interrupted, shouted)
 - b) How do different authors use dialogue? To carry the plot—if you took a chunk of the dialogue out, would the story still make sense? To fill in the narrative—does the dialogue show you what has just been said in the narrative? To develop the character—does the dialogue expand your understanding of the character?
 - c) Do the authors use different types of sentences to tell their story (e.g. commands, questions, exclamations)?
 - d) What kinds of describing words or verbs are used by the different authors?
- As a group (with the teacher modeling) re-write the chosen sections of text in a way that might demonstrate the students' voice.

2. Showing versus Telling

Writers often hear the phrase "show don't tell."

Students can decide how much they want to show versus how much they want to tell in order to hold the attention of the reader:

- Ask two children to come to the front of the class.
- Assign each a role—either Jeffrey or Sloth.
- Ask the children to reenact these scenes:

Jeffrey knew what was happening. He knew Sloth was being lazy. He could tell because Sloth was in the chair. Jeffrey thought about what he could do.

Or

Jeffrey now realized what was happening. “Oh, I get it. You don’t want me to write because you’re lazy.”

“No, no, that’s not it,” Sloth said.

“Oh yeah? So if I wrote a story making you dig clear through the earth, you wouldn’t care?”

Sloth looked worried. “Absolutely not.”

“And if I wrote about you swimming across the ocean, that would make you happy?”

Sloth was sweating now. “I might be happy.”

- Ask the children which scene was easier to enact. Why?
- Look carefully at how authors make stories more interactive or visual.
- Discuss how author’s use dialogue, action words, details and emotions to portray a more vivid experience.

3. I Spy

Voice portrays enthusiasm and truth to a reader.

Students can pay attention to record the voices of others:

- Pass out blank notebooks (can be homemade) to each student.
- Give students a secret spy assignment—to go around the playground, the school, or their home and record a snippet of a conversation (e.g. a sentence or two). Note: students may or may not want to ask the people conversing if they can record them.
- Write the sentences on the blackboard. Discuss the differences or similarities in voice (e.g. sentence structure, word choice, length of sentences).
- Ask students to guess who may have said these words (e.g. a mother, a child, a teacher)
- Include a snippet of dialogue in their stories.

Fluency:

- Can you read the story effortlessly or do you trip over the words?
- Is the writing pleasant to read?
- Do the sentences vary in length?

1. Read-Aloud Stories

Stories should flow effortlessly.

Students can determine how well their story flows off the tongue:

- Divide the students into pairs.
- Ask students to exchange stories with their partners.
- Invite each student to read the other person’s paper aloud.
- Make a small mark on the page each time the person reading trips over the words.

2. Variety is the Spice of Life

Sentences should vary in structure and should begin in different ways.

Students will begin to notice how a variety of sentences can strengthen a story:

- Read both of these passages to the students:

“Focus on the words,” Jeffrey muttered to himself.

“Just forget about the words,” whispered a voice.

Jeffrey looked around, his eyes wide. “Who said that?”

Down on the page, now covered with doodles, the sloth he had just sketched looked different. “Hey, I didn’t draw you with your hands on your hips!”

“Good writers have lots of ideas,” declared Sloth. “You don’t have any!”

and

Jeffrey muttered. He heard a voice. He looked around. He opened his eyes. He noticed the sketch looked different. He saw that the Sloth had his hands on his hips. He heard the sloth tell him that he didn’t have any ideas.

- Discuss these two passages with the students. Which was more interactive or more rhythmic? What did the author do to make the passage more active, or more interesting? Look at the sentence structures, how the sentences begin, how dialogue enlivens the action, and the length of the sentences.
- Ask students to take three sentences from their own stories. What can they do to their own stories to add variety?

Word Choice:

- Did the author use strong verbs?
- Are there places where metaphors would make the story more visual?
- Did the author repeat commonly used words?

1. Enacting Strong Verbs

The specific words that you choose help readers visualize and engage with the story.

Students will have the opportunity to understand the function of strong verbs by enacting a section of the book:

- Choose three volunteers. Assign the roles of Jeffrey, Sloth, and the narrator.
- Ask the narrator to read the story aloud (from “Well, you can’t make me!” to “...hiking, wandering, stumbling along...”) as the actors mime the action.

- In *Jeffrey and Sloth*, Jeffrey makes Sloth dig, swim, climb, trek, hike, etc. Discuss these results. Was there enough movement? Could the actors picture in their minds all that was happening? How would the story have been different if all Sloth had to do was walk?
- How many strong verbs can you think of to replace walk?
- Write a list. Then enact them with your class.

2. Making Metaphors

Metaphors capture a reader's attention and make your story memorable.

In *Jeffrey and Sloth*, Jeffrey's ideas come slowly. Therefore he creates a metaphor when he draws a sloth. This is because Jeffrey is like a sloth.

Students can gain a better understanding of metaphors:

- Ask the students to focus in on a character or a plot point in their own stories.
- What are some of the characteristics of this character or of the plot points?
- What other creatures or situations are they reminded of? Could these characters or situations be represented by another creature or situation?
- Ask students to think about metaphors in their own stories. When they have thought of an idea they can come to the front, talk about their character or plot point and then enact their metaphor (e.g. Jeffrey is a sloth because he is slow and sloth-like).
- Ask the other students to guess the metaphor.

3. Wanted Posters

Overused words can make a story less interesting to read.

Students will spot and get rid of boring, overused words in their stories:

- Ask students to think about words that they hear or use all of the time in their stories (e.g. like, nice, has, walk).
- Check to see if there are any overused words used in *Jeffrey and Sloth*.
- Students will then create wanted posters, showing that they are trying to capture these words.
- Next, students will go back to their own writing. Were they able to capture any of the overused words?
- Teach students about using a thesaurus. Give them an opportunity to replace their overused words with vivid, active words.

Conventions:

- Did the author create an engaging title?
- Does the punctuation make sense?
- Has the story been proofread for correct spelling and grammar, indentations, verb tense, capitalization?

1. Creating Titles

Good titles tell a little about the story while still leaving the reader wanting to know more.

Students will work collectively to create titles for their stories:

- Invite students to come up to the front of the class (one at a time) to enact a section of their text in mime.
- Ask the students watching to call out titles for the piece.
- Discuss the titles as a group.
- Be sure to give the author of the story a chance to respond both to the suggested titles and about the intention of their writing or enactment.

2. Punctuation Changes

Correct punctuation shows the reader how to read the story. This is because different punctuation does different things.

Students will have the opportunity to see that punctuation holds meaning:

- Give the students a passage from *Jeffrey and Sloth* (e.g. “Jeffrey now realized...”).
- Invite students to temporarily change some of their punctuation marks in the story (e.g. add commas, change periods to exclamation marks).
- The teacher will then model the ways that different punctuation is read. For example, when the exclamation is at the end of a sentence the character or the narrator might shout or exclaim! Or a comma might make a reader take a breath, and so on.
- Ask the students to pass their papers to a partner.
- Have the partner read a section of the story with the incorrect punctuation marks either directly to their partner or to the class.
- Discuss with the students what they now know about punctuation.

3. Whatever I write, Sloth has to do

Writing is empowering. Jeffrey finds this out firsthand. In the middle of the book, Jeffrey realizes that whatever he writes Sloth has to do.

Students will have the opportunity to explore the power of writing and to determine if their writing conventions are correct:

- Invite two students to come to the front of the class.
- Assign roles—one becomes Sloth, the other becomes Jeffrey.
- Ask Jeffrey to write a sentence (or for older classes they can write a paragraph) on the black board.
- Invite the class to discuss the writing conventions. Is the author using the correct punctuation, verb tense, capitalization, indentation, spelling, etc?
- When it is agreed that the conventions are correct, the person playing the role of Sloth has to act out the scene.