

# Pie Corbett's Reading Spine

Imagine a primary school where over 7 or 8 years, children are read to, enjoy, discuss and work with around 82 core books. These 'essential reads' would be a store of classics, creating a living library inside a child's mind. This is the 'Reading Spine'.

## Great Books

Great books build the imagination. The more we read aloud expressively, and the more children are able to savour, discuss and reinterpret literature through the arts, the more memorable the characters, places and events become, building an inner world. A child who is read to will have an inner kingdom of unicorns, talking spiders and a knife that cuts into other worlds. The mind is like a 'tardis'; it may seem small but inside there are many mansions. Each great book develops the imagination and equips the reader with language.

## Great Stories

Great stories speak to us as individuals and some children will return to certain books again and again. Great stories also build our language because around 75 per cent of our vocabulary comes from our reading. Reading develops the ability to think in the abstract; to follow lines of thought. Schools that have a reading spine, build a common bank of stories that bind the community together. These are shared and deeply imagined common experiences.

## What is the Reading Spine?

The Reading Spine should be central to every school's book stock, but should also be supplemented by many other books. In the Foundation Stage and Year 1, I have suggested a spine of 12 great picture books with which children should build a strong acquaintance.

Year 2 is a transition year, with both great picture books and 'chapter stories' included. The daily read-aloud programme is supplemented by guided, shared and independent reading.

In the Reading Spine at Key Stage 2, I have selected six novels in each year with a focus on one core picture book. This leaves enough space for teachers to add their own enthusiasms and new finds.



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# Steps to a Reading Spine

## STEP 1

Establish the core of key books that all children will experience: these should be 'must have' reads – the classics. The finest books that you can find! Leave space to add other books that come along or might suit the class. The aim is for every child to experience the pleasure and challenge of great literature.

## STEP 2

Resource the core list: class sets are very useful so that the books can then be used for close study. As well as this, sets of six books can be used for guided reading. Also, try to gather other books/films by the same author for a wider author study.

## STEP 3

On a daily basis develop your ability to read aloud for pleasure with expression on a daily basis, bringing the story alive for children.

## STEP 4

Help children to inhabit the world of the story through book discussion, drama, art, dance, music, writing-in-role and play. Imaginative engagement with the text draws children into the tale, and makes it a deeper, more memorable and meaningful experience.

## STEP 5

Learn how to draw on the core books to teach writing, for example, if you are teaching dialogue, use the core books as exemplars. In this way, both you and the children are constantly drawing on quality models that they will begin to know well. Moreover, the books will help to develop and deepen the children's imaginative world, as well as becoming a key resource for their writing.

## STEP 6

You will also need to thread in poetry. *The Works Key Stage 1* (which includes Reception) and *The Works Key Stage 2* (both Macmillan Children's Books) provide banks of poems for enjoying, performing and discussing, and some may be used as models for writing. At the back of these two anthologies, the poems are organised by year group to create a poetry spine. You may also wish to select core poets for each term. Finally, it is important to thread into the Reading Spine high quality non-fiction. These books could be selected in relation to topics being studied, but there may also be key books that a school wishes to ensure children have encountered, such as *The Diary of Anne Frank*.



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# Top tips for using picture books (1)

**O**f course, any teacher could come up with an activity linked to a book. The key is to think about activities that will illuminate the meaning, help children engage at a deeper level and enter the world of the story. Here is a whole alphabet of activities that should spark your children's imagination:

- A** Show the front/back cover. Ask: *What sort of story is this? What might happen? Tell the story to a partner based on the cover image or start from the title.*
- B** Read through and pause every so often. Ask: *What is going to happen next? Write, tell or draw the next page, then discuss.*
- C** Invite the children to discuss what they enjoyed about the book or what it reminded them of or meant to them.
- D** Explore links and connections. Ask: *Can you find where the story repeats itself? Are there links between this story and our lives, or between this story and other stories?*
- E** As a class list possible questions, such as things we are not sure about and would like to discuss. List the questions and then choose the ones that would be most fruitful to talk about.
- F** Role-play a scene immediately after the book has finished or before the story starts. Alternatively, select an image from the middle of the book. Ask: *What is happening? What might happen immediately before and after?*
- G** Ask children to draw a map of the story and retell in their own words. Change the nature of a

character or alter a key event.

- H** Cover the dialogue with a sticky note before inviting the children to draw a speech bubble and to write, then dramatise the conversation.
- I** Pause the reading and 'freeze-frame' the page, then interview each character that appears on it. Ask: *What are you thinking/feeling/hoping will happen next? What are you regretting?* Alternatively, use thought bubbles to explore the above.
- J** Initiate a group performance using expression.
- K** Use 'what if' statements to raise different possibilities in the narrative.
- L** Re-enact the story by creating a whole-class physical map, using children to represent parts of the story. Then interview bystanders or even objects in role as observers of the story – what did they see happen?



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# Top tips for using picture books (2)

- M** Use percussive instruments and ask children to work in groups to set the story to simple rhythms and musical patterns.
- N** With the whole class create a dance to accompany a story, such as the 'rumpus' in *Where the Wild Things Are* (HarperCollins).
- O** Invite the children to illustrate or create a wall map (using lining paper). Use print-making or patterning to accompany a tale, picking up on an aspect in the story or images.
- P** Let the children choose how they will respond to a text – and add to your own repertoire of possibilities from their ideas.
- Q** Use a shoebox to create a diorama of a key scene.
- R** Fill a story bag with objects or puppets and a map linked to a story, so that children can take the book home and explore the story through play.
- S** Retell the story in small groups with some children playing a role and others providing the narrator's voice.
- T** Display selected images and ask them if they can work out what might happen on the pages before and after. Alternatively, each group is given a picture and develops a telling of the story for that page as they see it. Then, the whole class performs their section of the story in order to see how well the story flows. Another option is to show three images from different parts of the story. Ask: *In which order should the images be placed – and why?*
- U** In role as a character, encourage children to step out of the tale and interact in a different environment or scene. For example, join in with 'tea-time' at the three bears' cottage.
- V** On the first reading use sticky notes to cover key words in a story. Let the children discuss what they think the words might be, or what the effect on the reader will be for their choice.
- W** Rewrite a page but add extra description to compensate for withdrawing a picture. With the class compare the original page with the rewritten page.
- X** Show the class just the pictures in the story. Can the children tell the story using only the images?
- Y** With the children make a 3D model of something from a story, such as objects or settings.
- Z** Provide costumes or hats for the children to use in a role play.





# Top tips for using novels (1)

**D**ecide on where you will stop reading in order to carry out each activity or discussion. Here is a whole alphabet of activities that should spark your children's imagination.

**A** Ask the children to discuss their preferences and to explain their ideas.

**B** Together explore links and connections. Ask: *Are there links between this story, other stories or works of art? How does the tale make a link with your own life?*

**C** Ask the children to list possible questions, such as things that they are not sure about and would be useful to discuss. List the questions and then choose the ones that would be most fruitful to talk about.

**D** In pairs, encourage gossip about the events so far.

**E** In stories where the characters have problems to solve, invite children to work in pairs with one in role as an agony aunt and the other in role as a character who will explain the problem. Encourage the 'agony aunt' to provide some advice.

**F** In pairs, sit the children back to back with one child in role as a character phoning a friend. Encourage the character to explain what has been going on while the friend listens and then responds with advice.

**G** Working in-role as a character, invite the children to write a diary entry or letter to a friend about the main event/what has just happened. Alternatively, they could write to a character offering advice.

**H** In role as journalists, invite the children to interview a character and write a news item – or broadcast it, with an 'outside broadcasting unit' carrying out the interview.

**I** With the class create and film a cartoon or filmed version of the scene.

**J** Build a story museum with the children to represent scenes from the novel by gathering and displaying objects, sounds (use talking tins) and images from the story.

**K** Provide or create with the children news bulletins for key moments in the story.

**L** Together draw 'feelings graphs' showing the ups and down for the different characters in the story.



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# Top tips for using novels (2)

- M** Encourage children to choose their favourite word, phrase, line or section and share. Ask: *Why do you like that part?*
- N** Display images and ask: *Which is the one image that says the most in the story? What does it say to the reader?*
- O** With the class select words that encapsulate the essence of the book. Make a list of these key words and then select the 'best'/'truest' five words.
- P** Let them choose a favourite line, phrase or word from the novel. Invite them to stand in a circle, take it in turns to step into the circle and say the word aloud with a gesture. Encourage everyone else to then repeat the word and gesture.
- Q** Stand the group in a circle and ask each of them to choose an action from an event in the story that is memorable, then step into the circle and mime the action. Then everyone else can imitate the action.
- R** In pairs, encourage them to retell the story word-by-word or sentence-by-sentence, or retell the story in cartoon form.
- S** As a whole class select all the verbs from an action passage and list them in the order that they appear. Can they say them aloud with expression? Ask: *What is the effect?* Now try the same thing with the adjectives or nouns.
- T** Provide time for individuals to create items from a book, including letters, diary entries, news items, postcards – any written item that appears in a story or might appear.
- U** Invite children to role-play any event in a story that takes place in a different setting, but is referred to or suggested by the book.
- V** During a reading session with the class alter a story by stopping, considering possible plot lines and then retelling the story or rewriting it.
- W** As a whole class put especially bad characters on trial.
- X** Ask children to create the back page blurb for the story and design a new cover or advert.
- Y** Invite groups to create a 'for sale' advert for a character or the book itself.
- Z** Provide time for children to write an end-of-term report for a character.



# Reading and sharing the books (1)

**R**ead from the class novel or picture book on a daily basis. It is worth taking the time to read the books through beforehand and thinking about where you might wish to stop for discussion or some sort of activity. Anyone can dream up 50 things to do with a book, but the key is to halt at moments where an activity or discussion is needed to deepen engagement and understanding.

On most occasions, picture books should be read straight through without endlessly stopping – the children want to hear the story! Only occasionally might there be a moment to pause where a situation has been set up and it is worth asking the children to think about the possibilities for what might happen next. However, a good picture book will demand re-reading over a number of days so that you can focus on different aspects of the story.

'Talk for Reading' is a form of comprehension that can be carried out with the class or with a small group. It involves an open discussion about a worthwhile text, intending to develop engagement and the ability to read critically, deepening understanding and therefore appreciation. This form of talk is highlighted constantly in the new National Curriculum in England and should take place often. The skill is for the teacher to become a *good listener*, prompting the children to do most of the wondering, thinking, exploring, suggesting and summarising.

## The principles of 'Talk for Reading'

- All ideas are accepted and given serious consideration.
- Everyone should think, try and 'have a go' at contributing.
- You can build on someone else's ideas.
- You can also challenge someone's ideas by putting forward alternative thoughts.

- Be ready to change your mind.
- Everyone must listen to each other.

The teacher's role is to instigate a conversation, acting as an interested listener and occasionally holding up an idea for further inspection by repeating what has been said. The teacher may also draw attention to certain sections of a book that might benefit from further thinking by focusing the children. The children are trained to read sentence-by-sentence (or image-by-image) from the beginning all the way through, tying ideas together as they go along, revising their thinking in the light of new information and making connections across a text. Much of the talk will hinge around what intrigues us as readers, constantly raising questions and putting forward possible interpretations. Make a list of tentative phrases that might help children talk, for example: *I'm not sure but... We wondered whether .... The writer seems to be suggesting that...*

Over time, the children move to a stage where they carry out almost all of the talking – often interpreting at length and talking through their understanding aloud. At first, this may have to be modelled by the teacher, but very soon the children will latch on to the idea. It is important though that the teacher does not dominate the thinking and talking.

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# Reading and sharing the books (2)

## Things to talk about might include:

- initial ideas, thoughts, feelings, memories, experiences, possibilities and questions;
- what did we imagine, think and feel;
- what might have happened before the passage;
- what might happen next – predicting and clarifying;
- statements about what the words mean – commenting, referring to the textual evidence;
- vocabulary – other words that might have been used;
- key words that provoke interest;
- how the writing is hooking the reader;
- inferences/deductions – work out from the clues in the text;
- possible meanings;
- re-reading constantly for fluency – to emphasise meaning;
- saying a sentence aloud using expression – discussing possible different ways of ‘saying’ the sentence, noticing punctuation;
- changing an idea in the light of new information/ events;
- seeing events from the different viewpoints of characters/sides of an argument;
- visualising – what you can see inside your head;
- reading the pictures, thinking about the effect of the image on the reader and considering the contrast between the words and the images;
- raising questions – wondering;
- making connections with our own experiences or making connections between books;
- reading as a writer – discussing organisation, sentence patterns, word choice in relation to effect – the writing style;
- drawing the threads together – summarising;
- discussing the overarching theme or line of argument – evaluation and personal preferences.

It is important that the children do not have to play ‘guess what is in teacher’s head’. The teacher is interested in developing the children’s thinking, though it is worth remembering that the teacher is not the sole provider of wisdom. Through gradual scaffolding

and building on each other’s thoughts, as well as challenging, we can discuss collectively and co-construct new thinking, deepening understanding. When this is done well, the teacher will find their own understanding deepened with new insights gathered from the children. The teacher’s role is to listen, to reflect, to focus attention and to help children deepen engagement and understanding.

As the Reading Spine has been carefully selected, you will find that there are links between the themes and concerns of many of the stories. *In which ways are they alike or different?* It is this sort of talk that should become a byword for working with the Reading Spine. These are intriguing, deep and challenging books. There will be much to discuss. This should become a habit so that children constantly get the most out of quality literature and think deeply, carefully and cautiously to illuminate their thinking. This should constitute every child’s experience of reading.

**Please note:** for each year group the books have been set out in the order in which they might be read, as the final books in each section tend to be more demanding. Always read the books first to decide if they are appropriate. Read Aidan Chamber’s book *Tell Me* (Thimble Press) for more about oral comprehension.

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