

Halifax Learning



LITERACY SKILLS & CREATIVE WRITING GUIDE

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“There is no friend as loyal as a book” – Ernest Hemingway

Why focus on early literacy?

The skills taught through reading and writing – vocabulary, critical thinking and communication – only become more necessary as children grow. The importance of addressing literacy challenges early is established; students who struggle with reading and writing early in life are unlikely to catch up to their peers without directed intervention.



Students who read below grade level often struggle in classes not related to the language arts. For example, studies consistently find a strong relationship between reading and math achievement. It's not surprising; when students begin to learn more advanced math topics, they are required to learn a brand new vocabulary.

Creativity and Imagination

Early Literacy Enriches and Empowers

Literacy should be at the heart of early education because it provides children with important communication tools and a place to let their imaginations roam.

Readers get lost in books because stories transport us to places we haven't been before, engage our feelings, memories, and spirits in ways that reality sometimes can't. It's rejuvenating.



When children begin creative writing, that outlet expands. For the first time in their young lives, children get to control the action. It's liberating.

How SpellRead™ Works

Halifax Learning

Using the evidence-based SpellRead™ program, Halifax Learning provides an effective breakdown of the phonemes (sounds) in the English language and a comprehensive set of instructional methods that support specific literacy improvements.

Using a scaffolded teaching approach, we build on skills as they are acquired. In this way we continually assess each student's struggles and adjust to their needs, ensuring long-term improvement for every variety of reading challenge.



Founded in 2001, Halifax Learning has helped nearly 3,000 students become skilled and confident readers.

To learn more about the fundamentals of reading skills mastery, please visit:

<http://www.halifaxlearning.com/our-approach>

Foundations and Connections

Two central activities central in the SpellRead™ program are **active reading** and **active writing**. They help students engage the story and develop an array of communication skills.



The goal is to improve your child's reading and comprehension skills, so keep track of their challenges. Consider these questions :

- Does your child read smoothly enough to understand the story?
- Do they substitute or add words regularly (guessing instead of reading)
- Do they recognize punctuation and understand how it works?
- Does the transition between sentences or paragraphs trip them up?

By answering these types of questions, you can choose level-appropriate reading material and address specific challenges.

Active Reading

Adding a few simple practices into your reading can really improve comprehension, vocabulary, word recognition, and fluency. As your emerging reading begins to engage more fully with what they read, they will start to understand sentences as part of a narrative rather than an odd collection of known and unknown words.

Shared Reading

Alternate pages with your child and ensure they follow along when it's your turn. While they read, you can help with unknown words and punctuation. Try to avoid interrupting their fluency.



Choral Reading

Parent and child read in unison. Child mimics the parent's pacing. This is helpful with students who read too quickly or who substitute words. Children begin to associate changes in tempo and tone with sentence structure and punctuation.



Discussion Guide

Maximize comprehension by giving students the information they need before, during and after reading.



Before reading, ask children to predict what's going to happen. If they've read the story before, ask them to describe certain characters or events. This will help them process what they read.

Pause after long or information-heavy sections. Make sure nobody has missed anything. This is particularly useful with children who have trouble remembering details or those who have just moved on to more complex reading material



Discussion Guide

Talking after reading is crucial.

Discussion helps turn reading skills used to interpret text into language skills used to communicate it's meaning. Help kids create a complete summary by asking questions that deepen comprehension. Think the Five W's – Who, What, When, Where, and Why.



Strange Vocabulary

Flip through the book you are about to read and make a list of the difficult words. Show your child the list and explain each word, using examples. Finally, have them write each word a few times. This builds recognition. Over time, readers increase their understanding of whole sentences rather than fragmented words. This is fundamental to literacy development.

Active Writing

Being able to write a complete summary is more useful than you might think. Without it, I wouldn't be able to convey the details and goals of active writing. In a summary, you want to know what happened and why. Details like where it happened and which characters were involved are important. Follow these tips and watch your child's comprehension and attention to detail flourish!

Encourage your reader to tell you what happened in order.

It wouldn't make sense to give directions backwards. Likewise, your child should try to keep a story's events in order.

If they can't remember details or offer them in order, use prompts. Good prompts remind readers of small details; they don't give information away.

Ask for one or two details from each event and move on. Once you've summarized the reading, ask your child to write it from memory. They can always ask questions if they get stuck.



Active Writing

Focus on comprehension, not spelling!

Avoid correcting your child's spelling. Instead, focus on building comprehension. English doesn't always follow easy rules; some words we only learn through repeated exposure. Try to find ways to use these words regularly. This will give your kids a real-life reference the next time they're reading. Focus on legible printing and sounding out difficult words.



Use complete sentences.

Written language skills contribute to general communication skills, so your child's goal should be to write a summary that someone who didn't read the story will understand.

Active Writing Tips

As reading material becomes more complex, so will the summaries. But there isn't a big gap between the language skills needed to write a summary of "Where the Wild Things Are" compared to "Stuart Little".

Encourage your child to use words that express movement of time. These are called sequence phrases or **Red Flags**. *Then, after, suddenly, finally, and the next day* are all good examples.

Children should sound out words they don't know. Using their phonemic awareness, they should be able to get close enough for you to understand their meaning. If it is a particularly tricky word, write it on paper and let them copy it



Creative Writing

Great news! The form that your child's writing takes is less important than the act itself – journaling and writing fiction both develop language skills and require the writer to express thoughts, emotions and events.



There are tons of great reasons for kids to get creative

REASONS TO GET CREATIVE

- 1** Kids don't get to control much in their lives. But this belongs to them. Creative writing allows for greater connection with the story and its characters.
- 2** Describing why characters feel and do things broadens a child's perspective and capacity for empathy. It also helps them practice communicating emotions clearly, a skill they will need all the time. Forever.
- 3** Choosing more descriptive verbs and adjectives expands vocabulary. As kids start to pick words more carefully, their comprehension will skyrocket, improving their ability to learn almost anything.

More Creative Writing

Getting Started

If you happen to have a whiteboard or large sheets of paper handy, it will give you some flexibility to explore creative language. All you really need is a book to write in and a soaring imagination!



The activities below offer some of the tools kids need to come up with new ideas and to craft complete stories. Feel free to add your own touches!

Story Starters

Nobody reads a story that has a boring beginning. It's like a terrible appetizer – it usually leads to to an inedible meal.



Captivating opening sentences are tasty. They make your mouth water as you anticipate the feast to come!

Try using **story starters** to set the scene and **red flags** to keep the story moving.

Story Starters

Story Starters	Red Flags
Once upon a time... One day... In a galaxy far, far away... Long ago... There once lived... In a far off kingdom...	Afterwards... The next day... On the way to... But as soon as... It wasn't long before... Suddenly...

One day James was standing in his bedroom. Suddenly, he heard a loud BANG!

Create a list with a few examples like the one above then play [The Dice Game](#).

The Dice Game (team storytelling)

Alternate rolling dice with your child. Write the number of words you roll. For example, you could write "Once upon a time" with a roll of 4. Your child could add "there was a wicked witch" if they roll a 5. Continue in this manner for a set number of turns or until you want to move on.

Go with it if the game gets silly. If you have trouble getting started, ask your child to describe an activity (swinging on monkey bars, building a snowman etc.) using the words **first**, **next**, **then**, and **last**. This will help them understand how stories progress forward.

Descriptive Language

Writing can be very simple or very descriptive. Using the following examples, ask your child which sentence is more interesting.

Ned went to the store to buy ice cream.

OR

On a sweaty summer afternoon, Ned strolled to the corner store for a double scoop of vanilla-chocolate swirl.

Much of the descriptive language we use relies on our five senses. Create a list using the nine categories below and ask your child to come up with three examples for each. Once the list is complete, move on to the writing activity on the next page.

colour

size

smell

pattern

sound

taste

shape

movement

feel

Descriptive Language



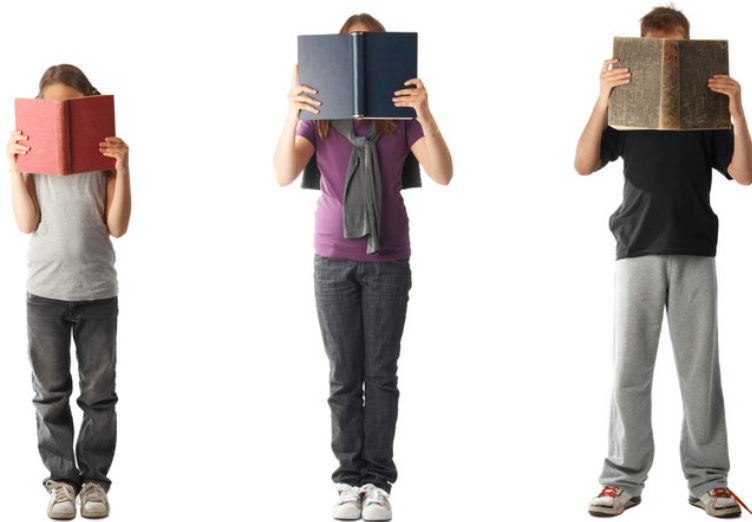
Descriptive Writing

Write 3-5 basic sentences and have your child make them more interesting. Encourage them to use many of the words on the list instead of repeating their favourites. Here are some sentences to get you started:

Julia walked home after school.
Gordon ate dinner with his family.
Will wore a costume to the party.

Elements of a Story

A story has **three** main elements – character, setting, and plot. Ask your child to pick examples from their favourite books. Use the **Four W's** if they have trouble.



Characters are the people, animals, creatures and monsters in the story. You can find the characters by asking **who** is the story about?

Setting is the time and the place of the story. Stories can happen in any location and any time. They can be in the past, present, or future. The setting can be found by asking **when** and **where** does the story take place.

Plot is what the characters do as they move through the story. Plot can include adventures, mysteries, surprises, fights, and dreams. Asking **what** happens shows the plot.

Narrative

Brainstorming Bubbles

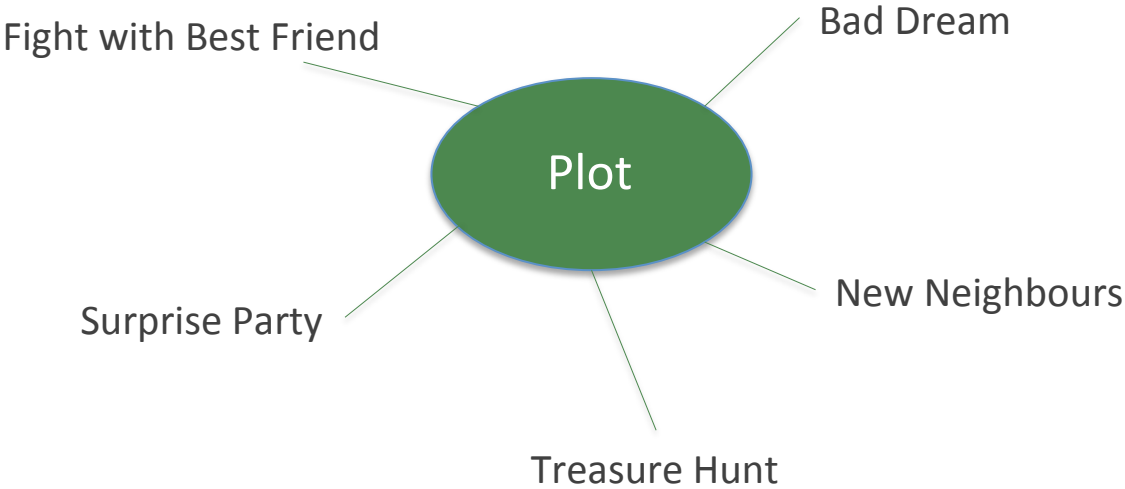
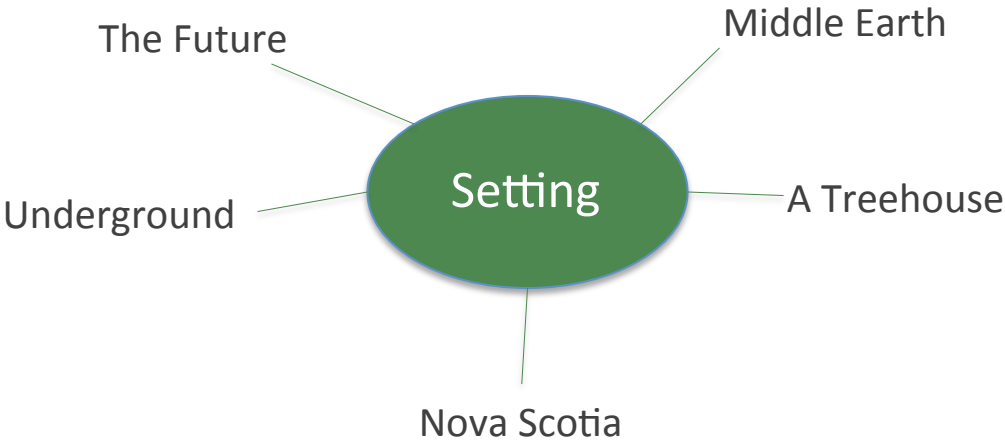
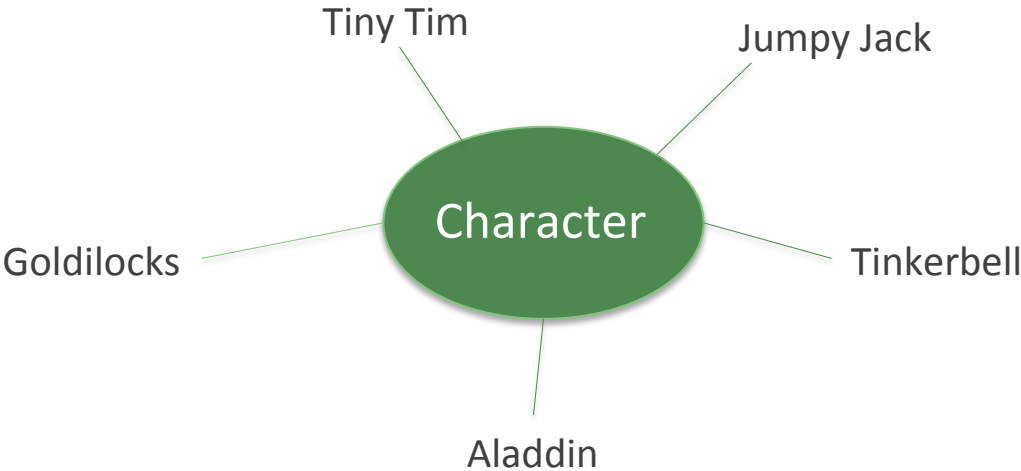
Show your child the three brainstorming bubbles on the next page and have them create their own. Once this is done, have them write a few short stories using **starters** and **red flags** from the first activity. Try to include at least one item from each brainstorming bubble.

If your child gets stuck, ask them questions. Where is their character? What are they doing? Are they going to meet another character?

Try not to focus on your child's spelling and punctuation; it comes with practice. Instead, ensure their narrative is coherent. As long as the story makes sense beginning to end, it can be as silly as they want. Encourage silly!

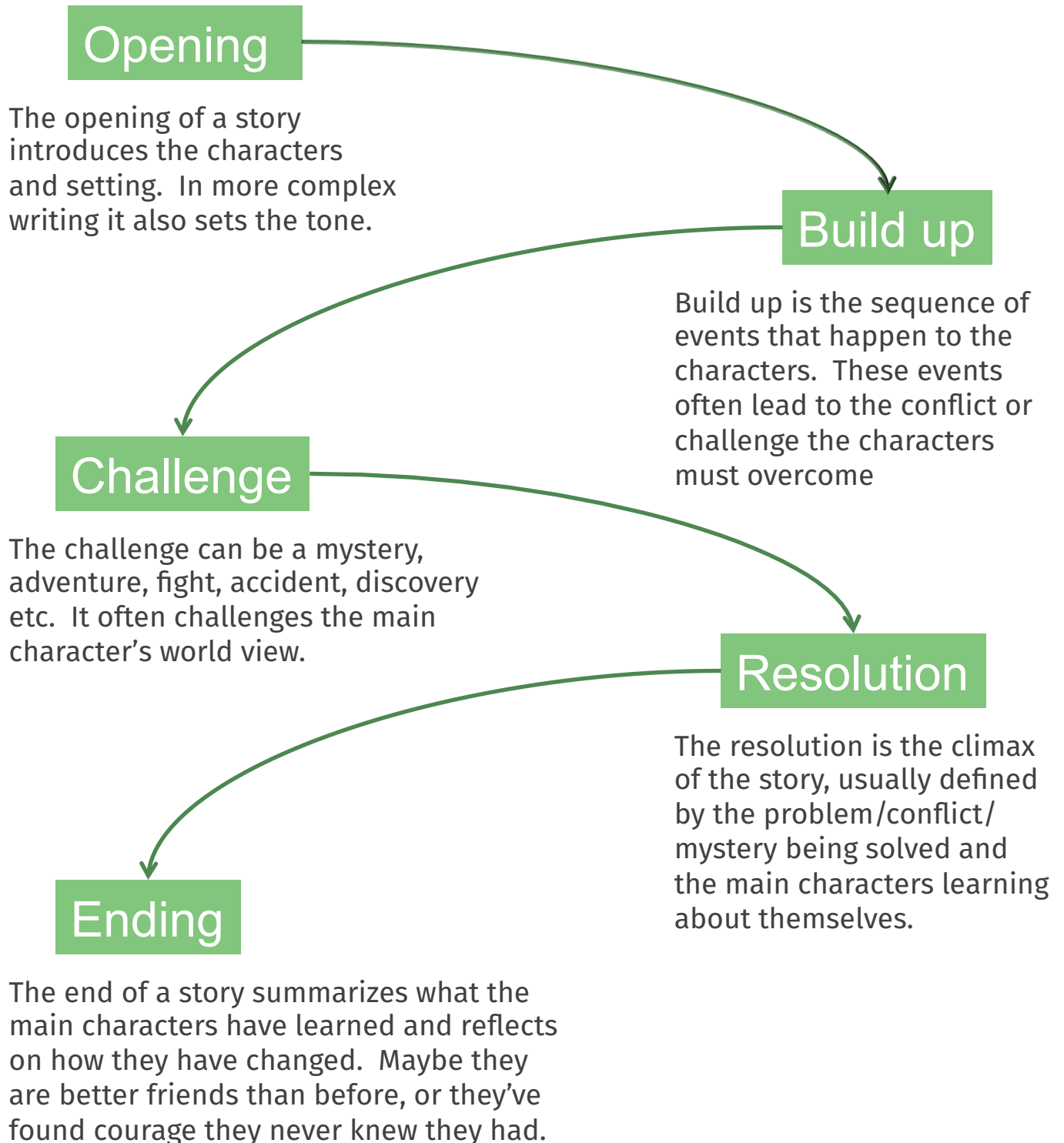


Brainstorming Bubbles



Story Path

Stories have five main elements. Follow this basic structure to create a complete narrative



Make It New

Introduce children to the plotlines of three well-known stories: *Robin Hood*, *The Three Little Pigs*, and *Cinderella*. Have your child choose one fairy tale to re-write from a different character's perspective. For example, they can write from the perspective of the Sheriff of Nottingham, The Big Bad Wolf, or the Evil Stepmother.



Children don't have to remain true to the original story, but it is helpful to keep the character's side of the original in mind. Try discussing their motivations, choices and emotions as a starting point.

Older kids should try to use descriptive language during this exercise. Younger kids can keep it as simple as necessary. Try to choose stories that have clearly opposing perspectives. How about the wild things in *Where the Wild Things Are* seeing Max for the first time? Or Max the dog always being bullied by the Grinch in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*.

Story Time

You've got the skills. You've got the imagination. Let's put them together and have some fun!

Review the previous activities. Don't worry if your child can't recall them all; with practice you'll see evidence of them in the stories your child produces.

Using the prompts below (or anything else you think might inspire some creativity), have your child write for 10-30 minutes. Encourage as much detail as possible and make it clear that this is a creative activity – there's no wrong way to write a story!

Describe your favourite room or place

Size, contents, smell etc.

When I'm famous...

Describe what you'll be famous for, how you'll spend your money, where you'll travel etc.

Something is missing

Pick an object that has gone missing and write a story telling us about the item and how it disappeared



Interview with Vicki Grant

Vicki Grant is the Nova Scotia born, award-winning author of 13 young adult novels including *The Puppet Wrangler*, *Pig Boy* and *Not Suitable for Family Viewing*.

Vicki has generously offered her time to answer some questions about her love of reading and provide some writing tips. Hopefully Vicki's enthusiasm inspires your little one to pick up a pencil and start writing!



Who introduced you to reading?

It must have been my mother. I remember snuggling up in bed with her and my brothers and sister to read *Ferdinand the Bull* and *Sookie the Flying Bunny*. I also very clearly recall going to the old Halifax County library every Saturday. Mrs. Hanrahan filled the book cards out with the borrower's name then used a little rubber stamp on the end of her pencil to record the date. I think I liked watching her stamp the books almost as much as I liked getting the books!

What was your favourite book as a child?

Anne of Green Gables. It was a hand-me-down I got when an older cousin outgrew it. I eventually read the entire series, from the very first "Anne" book to "Rilla of Ingleside" which is all about her daughter. I loved every one of them.

When did you start writing and why?

I've been a writer my entire adult life, but not always of books. I started out writing advertising then moved on to writing television then, on a whim, tried my hand at Young Adult novels. I immediately loved it. That was about 12 years ago. I still do a bit of TV - I particularly love doing documentaries - but I'm primarily an author. I've just finished my 14th novel with a 15th on the way and a 16th percolating in my head!

When did you know you wanted to be a professional author?

As soon as I wrote my first book! The Puppet Wrangler was just so much fun to write. When I'd been in advertising and TV, I always had someone telling me what to do and how to do it. Writing a book was the first time I'd been paid to tell the story I wanted, the way I wanted.

What is the best part of being an author? The worst?

The best part is that I get to spend my days doing what I loved to do as a kid: making stuff up. The worst part is that some days making stuff up isn't easy. Sometimes, it feels like a magic trick that no one ever taught me how to do.

