

Take one ordinary story opening – and then inject some spice. Clare Bevan shows what can happen when children let their imaginations run wild

online

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Author and writer

# What if...?

**C**reative writing, like an exotic plant, needs to be nurtured in the right conditions before it can flourish. If it is neglected, forced or restricted, it will wither. If it is given care, patience and space, it can shoot up and astonish us, like Jack's beanstalk.

First, however, you'll need rich soil and a handful of magic seeds to set your class writing – and the best starting point for any story is often a familiar object or a shared experience. Everyone has a much-loved toy, a favourite food or a secret fear, so everyone can find a few words to say. Once your children feel that they are on safe ground, the fun can begin. Now is the time to set their thoughts free with some unexpected questions: *I wonder if Panda is a superhero? What do you think pirates and wicked witches choose for their favourite foods? What if the hairy spider screamed and ran away from you?*

Suddenly, the ordinary becomes a pathway to the extraordinary – and as your children gain confidence in their own imaginations, their stories will blossom. Then, with luck, you should never again hear the awful cry: 'I don't know where to start!'

## Snappy story starters

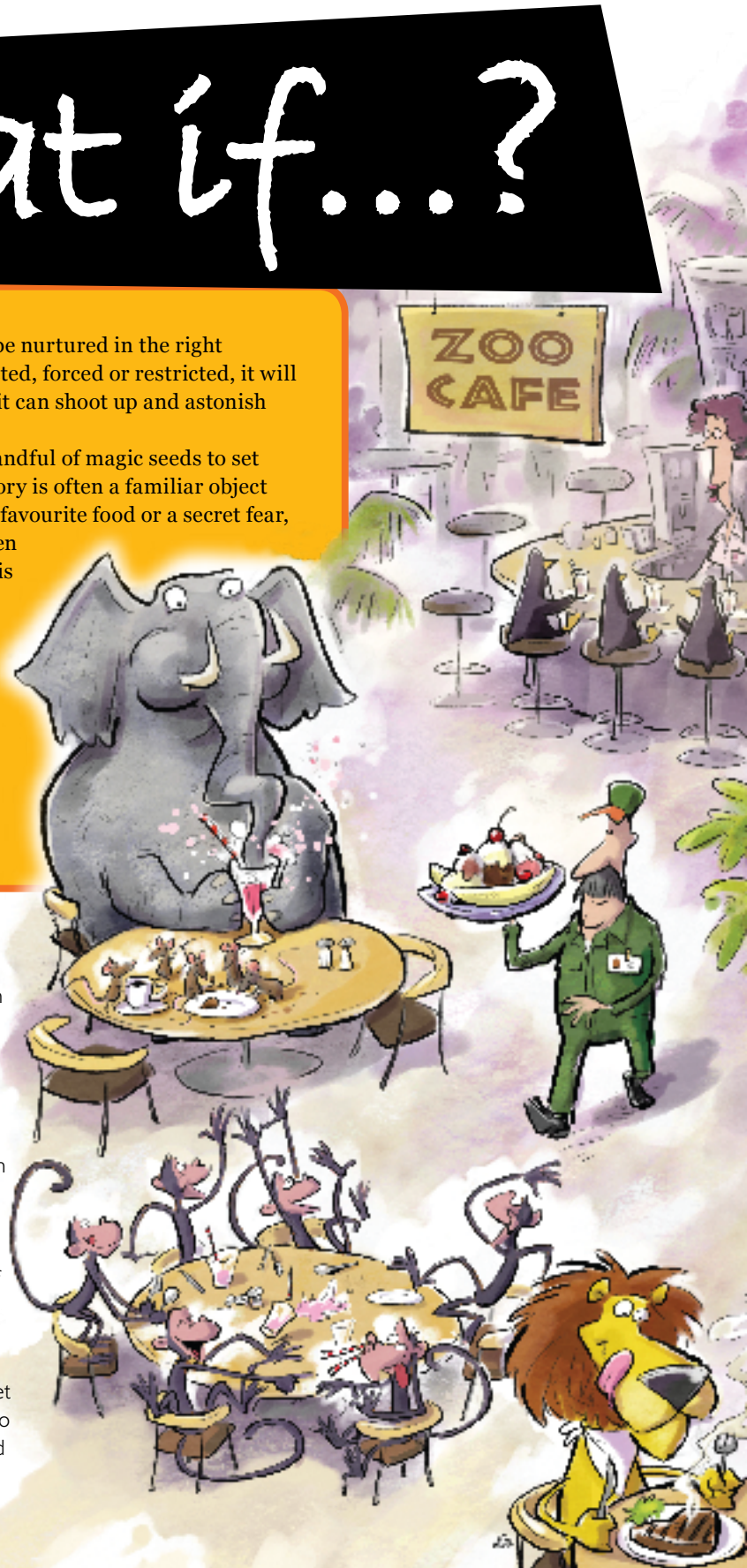
There are nine short story openings, which will help children unleash their imaginations and develop their creativity. They begin with situations and experiences that most children can relate to, and then add the most magical question of all: 'What if?'

### Food for thought

Ask the children to tell you about their favourite café: the queues, the menu, the noise, their chosen meal, and so on. Then let them act out a little scene in pairs. One child takes the order and serves the meal. The other child chooses a dish – and is either pleased or disappointed!

Now ask: 'What if?' What if they were in the Zoo Café! What if all the other customers were animals? Spiders eating fly soup. An elephant blowing bubbles into an enormous milkshake. A mouse family eating crumbs of birthday cake.

Once the ideas start to flow, let the children devise a new playlet – but this time they are all in the Zoo Café. Can anyone guess who the zoo keeper is serving? A snake, a panda, a monkey, a lion? End the exercise by letting the children, in pairs, write and decorate a Zoo Café menu. ▶



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## The day our teacher was ill

Most children will know how different a school day can seem when their usual teacher is away. But what if...?

What if the supply teacher was a bit scary – like a pirate! Would the children learn how to climb ropes and row a boat? If they were too good, would they have to walk the plank and fall into the sink?

Or what if the supply teacher was a fairy godmother? Would she ride a flying horse to school? Could the children make a wish and fly to amazing places?

What if the supply teacher was a clown, or a wizard, or...? Encourage the children to come up with as many ideas as they can, both for characters and for astonishing lessons. Then invent a story together, or let the children write their own.



## Every picture tells a story

Show the children a picture that will provoke a discussion. This can be a reproduction of a famous painting, a funny family photograph, a book illustration or a newspaper cutting. The important thing is – does it ask a question?

Why is Rousseau's tiger racing through a rainstorm? Why is Picasso's lady crying and shaking? What is Uccello's princess thinking, when the silver prince hurts the little dragon? In the newspaper picture, what are the Terracotta soldiers thinking? What is that grumpy camel saying to the naughty sparrow?

At the end of the discussion, let the children take the part of one of the chosen characters. The sad lady can explain why she's weeping. The cross princess can shout at the prince. The camel can complain about the thieving sparrow, who steals her hair for its nest. Trust me, stories will start to grow!

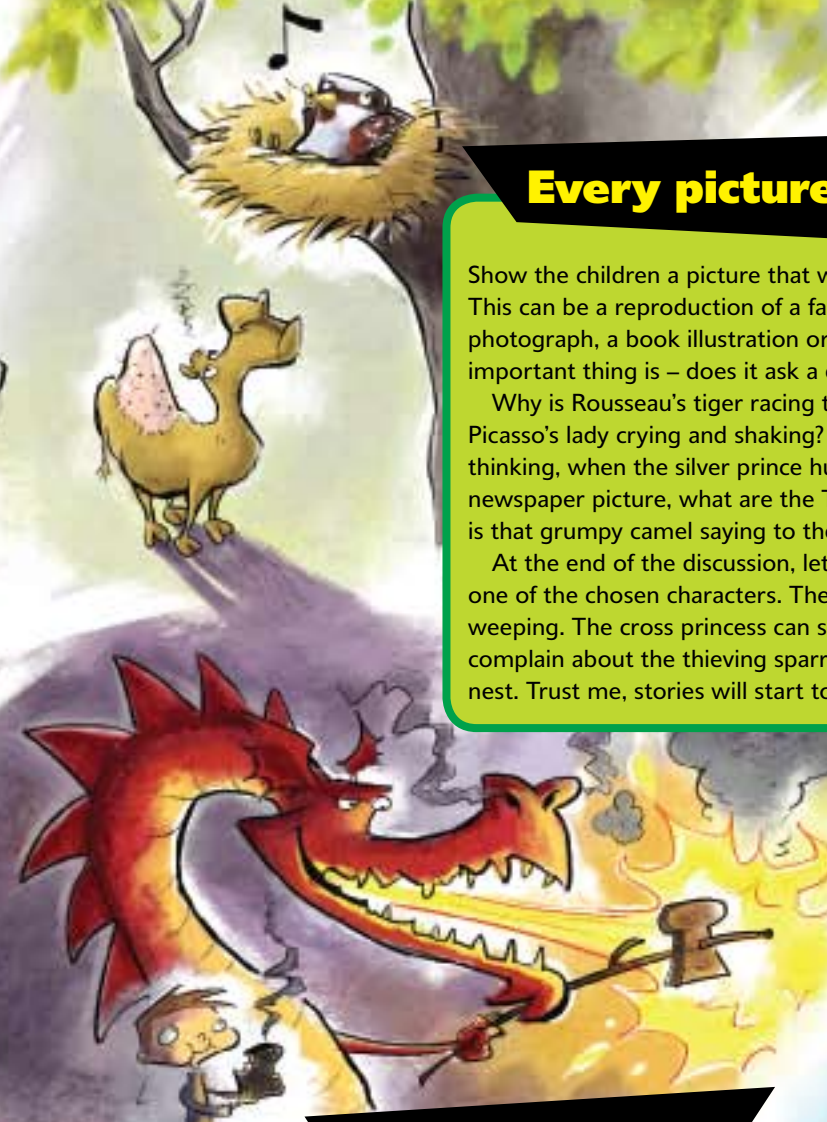


## Peculiar pets

Hold a class discussion about pets. What do they need? (Food, water, a comfy place to sleep, exercise, cuddles.) Do any of the children know an animal that can do clever tricks? A guide dog, perhaps? Or a talking parrot? Now, what if...?

What if they owned a peculiar pet? A small dragon who eats fireworks and is good at making toast. A diplodocus who lets children slide down his neck. A monkey who plays naughty tricks on the neighbours. A lion who scratches the best chairs – but chases burglars away.

Encourage the children to express their idea by drawing a storyboard. Written stories can then follow.



## Curious catalogues

Even children who find reading tricky love leafing through catalogues – and most can remember an exact page, description and price! You can use this brilliant ability to create your own curious catalogues. First, bring in a popular example – then ask: 'What if...?'

What if the fairies have a toy catalogue? What presents will they choose? A leaf-board for skating? A spiky helmet made from conker shells? A pet beetle? A rocking-horse fly? A sword made from a wasp sting?

What if The Big Bad Wolf has a catalogue? Will he want a convincing 'old granny' disguise to wear? Or a special microphone to make his voice extra loud? Or some fireproof trousers to wear when he tries to climb down chimneys?

Ask the children to suggest ideas for their own curious catalogues, and then let them make their own. Good writers can add detailed descriptions – and tell everyone to add surprising prices!

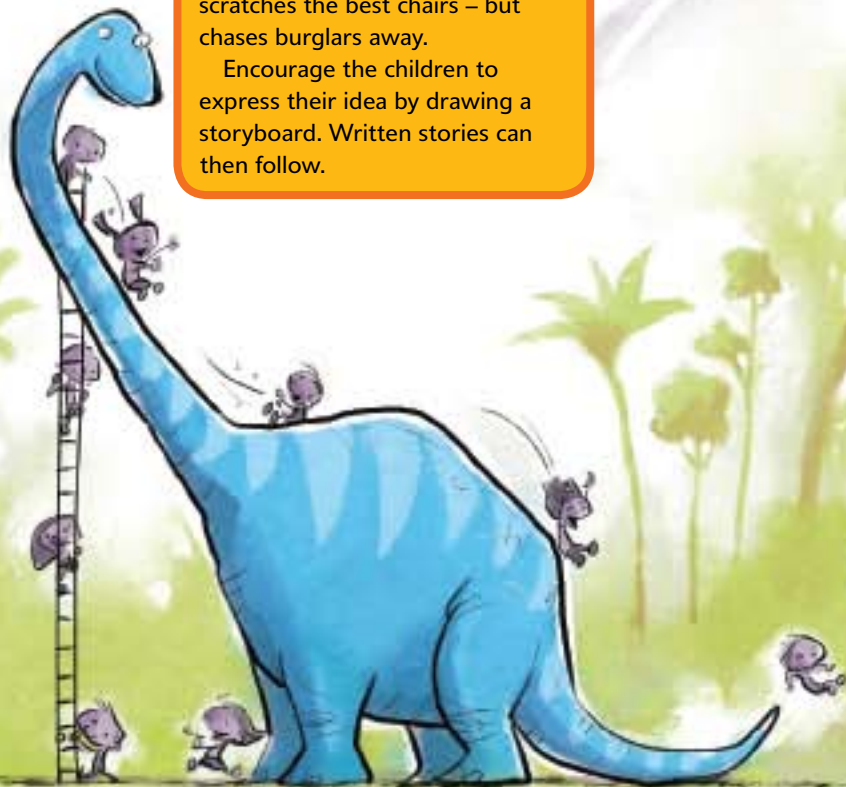


## Fairground fun

All children love playgrounds, funfairs and theme-parks. Invite your class to describe their favourite rides (the ones that make them laugh or scream), and the ones that are just a bit too scary! Can they tell you how they feel inside when they spin, swoop, slide or swing? Now, what if...?

What if the playground was terribly small and you could find it at the end of your garden? Would there be a bouncy caterpillar? A spider-web swing? Bumper-car beetles? A haunted hollow tree? What if there could be a fairground in the jungle? Or under the sea with the mermaids? Or a North Pole playground with icy slides and real reindeer rides?

Encourage the children to choose an unusual playground and invent as many new rides as they can.



## A postcard home

Who wants to write about their summer holidays – especially if the beach turned out to be boring and it rained every day? But what if...?

What if you could go anywhere? Any country, any place? A cloud or an underwater cave. A mystery planet or a faraway time. A story town where princesses sleep and wizards wave wands.

Give each child a blank postcard, and keep one for yourself. In the top-right corner of your postcard, draw a small, magical stamp. Now, turn the card over and on the other side draw your imaginary place. When that's done, turn the card again and write home. There's only a little space (especially if you add an address), so all the children should fill theirs with astonishing news!



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## Embroider and exaggerate

This is the key to it all. Storytellers are people who love to start with the familiar – and see where it takes them! A lonely boy sits in a cupboard, and magical letters arrive. An inquisitive girl climbs inside another cupboard, and discovers Narnia.

So, what if your children take the same twisty path? Ask them to begin with a small, but interesting, incident. *Yesterday, Mum took me to buy some new shoes. On Saturday, our washing machine made a big puddle on the floor. Next week, I'm in a proper football match.* But what if...?

What if a giant was sitting in the shoe shop, trying on some new climbing boots? Or was there an ugly sister, trying to find a pair of beautiful glass slippers? What if a tiny Noah's Ark floated in the kitchen puddle, and it was full of mice and spiders and frightened beetles?

What if? What if? Now that's where the stories really begin....

## Search for a story

Fresh air and exercise aren't just good for bodies – they're good for minds, too. Tell the children that they are going on an ideas hunt, and that they are all story detectives. Then coats on – and off you go. But quietly, as you don't want to frighten those ideas away!

Is that a strange face in the clouds? Or a castle? Or a candyfloss monster? That lady hurrying down the street – has she just won the lottery? Is she trying to catch an escaped lion? And what about the cat on the school wall – could it be a witch's cat? Does it ride on her broomstick at night? Or does it like to dance under the moon with the little school mice?

There are stories everywhere if you look carefully. Quick! There goes another one...

## Taking it further

The suggested snappy starters should certainly set the children thinking, talking and storytelling – but how can you turn all those fuzzy ideas into written stories with beginnings, middles and endings?

Try giving them some good examples. Read them a wide variety of books by favourite children's writers, and talk about the ones they like the best. Do they prefer funny stories or spooky tales? Do they like happy endings or ones that make them shiver?

Also, remember that stories used to be recited rather than written. So, children who are inhibited by tricky spellings or untidy handwriting can use alternative methods, too. They can record their voices. They can dictate their words to an adult helper. They can draw a series of cartoons (as the Egyptians did!) Or they can use a computer with a spell-checker. And please don't worry if your keenest writers produce messy first drafts. Corrections and neat copies come later.

Above all, give your class plenty of time and don't be bullied by bells. They tend to frighten ideas away, as Coleridge discovered. So relax. Take your children to gaze at swirling clouds or shimmering cobwebs – and let the stories begin. ■

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