SCHOLASTIC

Pie Corbett's READING SPINE

ALL NEW

TEACHER'S GUIDE



The best books to read aloud with your class

Contents

A note from Pie..... 3

What is *Pie Corbett's Reading Spine*? 4

The reading school..... 5

The reading classroom 8

Planning for reading..... 11

Final thoughts from Pie 15



A note from Pie

The first *Reading Spine* was published over 10 years ago and it contained the list of key books that I saw as an essential entitlement for primary school children at that time. For me, that list contained the most enduring children's literature, some of which, such as *Charlotte's Web* or *The Iron Man*, will remain as modern classics for another 50 years or more. However, in more recent years, many other books have risen to the forefront that deserve a place in the children's developing canon of literature. In particular, new writers that reflect the diverse nature of society and emerging young talents such as Tom Palmer that have written excellent novels that every child should experience.

This refreshed *Reading Spine* builds upon the principles of the original, as detailed in these notes, and further builds the power of words and the magical world of reading to enrich the imagination and children's lives.

Happy reading!

Pie Corbett



What is Pie Corbett's Reading Spine?

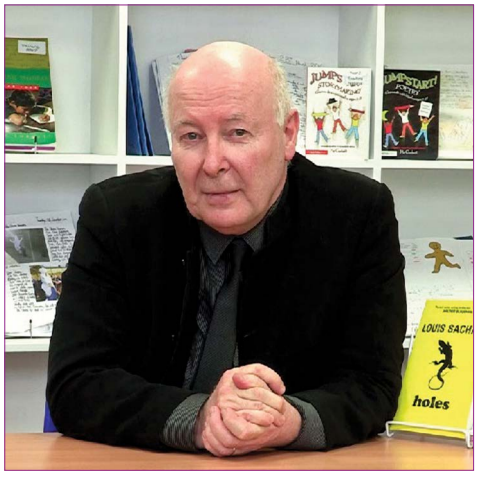
Imagine a primary school where over 7 or 8 years, children are read to, enjoy, discuss and work with around 50 core books. These 'essential reads' would be a store of modern classics, creating a living library inside a child's mind. This is the *Reading Spine*. It should be central to the school's focus on growing a community of readers and in creating the school's 'Read Aloud' programme. 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 where each book develops the child's imagination and equips each reader with rich and expressive language. This central core should also be supplemented by many other books and leave enough space for teachers to add their own enthusiasms and new finds.

A note about 'guided' reading

In our research, the use of whole-class shared reading was highly effective for developing pleasure and deepening understanding. In the Foundation Stage and Year 1, I have suggested a spine of 16 great books with which children should build a strong acquaintance. However, children in the Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 will also need to have daily practice in guided sessions to apply phonics into reading at their level of competency and begin to step up to word recognition and fluency. Year 2 is a transition year and so it includes both picture books and 'chapter stories' in the *Reading Spine*. At Key Stage 2, I have selected eight novels in each year. The main focus is on shared class reading. However, some children will still need extra practice with an adult and others will require extra challenge. We discovered two effective approaches: shared reading was followed by independent tasks, while the teacher worked with a guided group; or, a well-trained team led by the SENCO, moved round the school every 25 minutes so that all children had a daily guided session from a reading expert.

note

It is vital to read the books before sharing with the class in case there is material that might cause distress or prove inappropriate for your context. This fully updated *Reading Spine* collection is centred on new and contemporary stories for their power to spark discussion and inspire curiosity. As such, they have been carefully selected to help children connect with who they are while broadening their understanding of the world around them.



The reading school

If reading is crucial to educational success, then surely every school will want to be a 'reading school'. Reading schools are schools where children love reading; it is central to the lifeblood of the school and leads to higher standards. Setting the *Reading Spine* at the heart of every school's book stock will build a common bank of stories that bind the community together. These are shared and deeply imagined common experiences.

Reading schools have the following characteristics.

1. 'Reading for pleasure' lies at the heart of their approach to teaching reading. This is supported by a well-stocked, updated provision of a wide range of books.	This is developed through the daily Read Aloud programme. Time is devoted to daily quiet reading, even if only for 15 minutes at the start of the day. We know when a school is effectively cultivating 'reading for pleasure'; the children all love reading and read avidly. Book recommendations spread like wildfire.
2. Teachers love reading, believe it is important and are enthusiastic and knowledgeable about books and authors.	The idea of the teacher as a reader is essential. Knowing about books means that the teacher can recommend what to read next, matching books and authors to broaden each child's taste. Through their enthusiasm for reading, they become the significant reader in the children's lives. Reading teachers are grown through constant professional development, attending CPD as well as keeping up to date with the latest research and books about teaching reading.
3. The reading programme is driven by the senior leadership team. It is informed by research as well as what successful schools do and is constantly refined.	The school's programme is non-negotiable, vigorously led and supported by constant ongoing training. This is followed up with in-class support as well as monitoring to ensure that confident teachers support the less confident.

"Reading for pleasure is not a poster or slogan; it is when children read greedily with passion."

"Teachers really need to know their books. Book knowledge matters."

"Reading is central to the culture of school and is directly led by the head and senior staff."

SCHOLASTIC

4. High priority is given to ensuring that children are automatic and confident decoders, reading with increasing fluency.	Phonics is a high priority so children decode and spell using phonics automatically, later on supplemented by teaching spelling, mainly through morphology. This teaching is daily and vigorous. As children begin to take off with simple decoding, effective schools also ensure that children read for meaning, checking for comprehension.	"Phonics and fluency matter massively."
5. Vocabulary is taught explicitly in English, across the curriculum and is part of children loving language.	Generally, children do not struggle with reading comprehension if decoding and vocabulary is well developed. It is taught through developing an interest in and love of words. Where do words come from? How do they work? How are they spelled? How are they used? The deeper children understand the meanings of words, the stronger these words become as frames of reference for linking to and learning other words.	"Vocabulary is developed in context through stories, poems, non-fiction as well as exploration across the curriculum."
6. English teaching and class reading are built around deep discussions of high quality, ambitious texts.	Every Year 6 teacher will inevitably be using great literature but this must be the same across the school. Everyone needs to raise their expectations for shared and guided reading as well as class readers. In one school, we filmed a Year 6 teacher working with a discussion text comparing two opposing philosophical views on heroism. This helped children discuss heroism in their core story, 'Beowulf'.	"Story is an experience – it may make us laugh, cry, feel excited or anxious."
7. Teachers are 'test familiar' but do not just test reading. It is taught and practised, with a strong focus on oral comprehension before children are taught how to write answers.	A common feature of successful reading schools is that the staff all 'sit' the SATs papers and mark their answers using the mark scheme. Question types are sneaked into the daily business of enjoying and interpreting books with formal test preparation during the final weeks.	"Reading schools do not endlessly test children."
8. There is a specific, well-defined programme for the daily direct teaching of reading through shared, guided and independent, focused reading. This is constantly supported by termly CPD that includes in-class follow-up.	Teachers model being a reader, for example, '*The author is suggesting that...*', '*I know this because the author states...*' They read 'sentence by sentence', slowing the text down so that children get into the habit of making links between sentences. Oral comprehension explores open and focused questions, deepening understanding and appreciation.	"Effective teachers use active strategies so that children have to engage with the text, bringing the meaning to life."

9. Reading is also taught across the curriculum.	Reading is also taught daily in other subjects; a paragraph about the current learning containing core vocabulary and subject-specific sentence patterns is read and discussed, for example, '*My hypothesis is...*' This extra reading provides more teaching time and increases subject learning. It is key that such sessions do not dominate time for the subject; they are brief.
10. Parents are encouraged to be involved in supporting reading at home and this continues till the end of Year 6.	Reading schools put effort into motivating parents but because their systems are strong, many children whose families might not be able to support still become readers. Lunchtime 'reading buddies' mean that every child is heard reading at home or in school daily.

"Teachers work on developing content words as well as sentence structures that are needed to think, learn and communicate in different subjects."

"Teachers are determined to get everyone reading, opening the gateway to a life of learning and pleasure, believing everyone can achieve."

Use the blank version of the above table on page 14 to consider your school's strengths and areas for development in becoming a reading school.

Creating your school's reading spine

1. Establish the core books that all children will experience. My new spine helps you create this starting point. Leave space to add other books that come along or might suit the class.
2. Resource the core list. Also, try to gather other books/films by the same author for a wider author study, especially where there is a series.
3. Read aloud for pleasure with expression on a daily basis. Re-read the story, or worthwhile sections, again and again.
4. Help children to inhabit the world of the story through book discussion, drama, art, dance, music, writing-in-role and play.
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.
6. Finally, it is important to thread into the *Reading Spine* high quality poetry and non-fiction. You may wish to select core poets for each term and key books, such as *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

"See the full list of current *Reading Spine* book packs available here: www.scholastic.co.uk/piecorbett"

The reading classroom

When I began teaching, one of the key things that I did in the summer holidays was to seek out the books that I would share with my new class. I always wanted to start with a page-turner in order to grip every child's interest so that we started from the standpoint of loving books. I now know that it helps children sustain concentration, develops abstract thought and helps children make the movement into thinking about things that are not actually there.

> "If children do not love stories then they will never become readers and have no chance of becoming much of a writer."

Since then, plenty of research has reinforced the link between educational success and reading.

'Just Reading' and the **'Faster Read'** research projects were carried out by the University of Sussex[1]. The research looked at the effect of reading to classes of 12–13 year olds (average and lower-attaining students) at a fast pace. The findings suggest that rather than slowing down complex texts, a brisker pace brought about increased comprehension rates and motivation. Amazingly, poorer readers made 16 months progress across the 12 week block and all students made progress (on average 8.5 months). The approach literally involves reading to the class challenging and engaging texts where almost all of the time is spent on the teacher reading aloud and the students following the text.

Being read to in this way makes comprehension easier for some students rather than constantly pausing for analysis, discussion or activities. This can be a particular concern for younger children with picture books where a faster pace seems to help less confident readers follow the flow of meaning more effectively.

Some primary schools have run this approach with similar success at Key Stage 2 for one term per year. It is essential that this is not 'round robin' reading but the teacher reading aloud, expressively, for the sheer thrill of the story.

note

- read to children without pause for a sustained time
- encourage children to follow the reading by finger pointing at the words in their own copy
- text should be pitched at high interest and quality level
- top and tail sessions with brief summary discussions



1. https://www.sussex.ac.uk/research/centres/centre-for-international-education/projects/fasterread/impact

SCHOLASTIC

Developing reading routines

While the daily 20–30 minute slot for the class reader is crucial, children also need time for their own personal reading as a fixed routine. This could be:

- during guided reading
- a useful way to start the day quietly
- a strategy for settling a class after lunchtime
- a silent reading session such as ERIC (Everyone Reads In Class) or USSR (Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading)

Children who read frequently believe that reading for fun is important; they enjoy their reading and have found 'the right books' for them. Where parents cannot play this role, it is vital that you are an enthusiastic role model who shows interest in each child's growth as a reader.

As teachers, we need to know the children as readers. This means that while most guided reading will be based around group oral comprehension, some sessions should involve one-to-one reading where the child discusses and reads a short section from their current book. This might then involve some feedback or brief teaching and enables you to keep in touch with every child as a reader.

Independent reading

Children are not really readers until they choose what to read and develop their own tastes. Don't be too precious about what children read independently.

Provide your class with:

- a garage box of great poetry anthologies and collections
- a range of non-fiction books about things that might interest children beyond the curriculum
- the children's newspaper 'First News'
- a comic box stuffed with everything from 'Batman' to 'The Beano'
- quick reads such as annuals, *Where's Wally?*, puzzle books
- graphic books such as *Dog Man*, *Bunny vs Monkey*, graphic novels
- a range of novels from *Captain Underpants* to those by Michael Morpurgo

Hold weekly 'recommendation' sessions. Put the children on a rota and have a regular slot in which several children 'recommend' a favourite book. They should introduce the class to the book, provide a brief outline and read aloud a short, riveting passage for several minutes. This is a great way to spread the buzz about books, helping children to become familiar with the range available.

You should also recommend a few books each week, modelling the process and broadening the possibilities.

> "Rich reading does not happen by chance."



Reading and the arts

Decide which parts of a story would benefit from extra activity, putting key events under an imaginative lens for closer consideration. Select key moments and pause for dramatic exploration. In this way, the children's experience of the story slows down so that events are not glossed over in one rapid read. Drama helps children re-experience and enter the story imaginatively, becoming characters or witnesses to the events, emotionally engaging in a way that pure reading might not touch.

- illustrate sections
- turn a chapter into a cartoon
- draw the map of the story or create a mural
- design the cover or an advert
- select a section and create a dance or mime
- put percussion to a section
- create mood music for scenes
- create a story museum with objects from the story

> **"If we dramatise a story, dance an event, create music to accompany a character's emotions, then we enter into the story at a deeper level, taking us closer to its heart. For a moment, we become the story."**

Reading as a writer

The *Reading Spine* contains the sort of books that many children enjoy so much that they wish they had written them! Indeed, as children form a deep attachment for an author or a type of book, the more they read and the more this influences their writing. The author builds their imagination and the children internalise the author's style. Capitalise on this tendency in young readers to want to write the same sort of story as those they love to read.

Encourage your class to read with their 'magpie books' to hand so they can jot down vocabulary, memorable turns of phrase or ideas that might be useful for their own writing. Make this sort of reading a habit – training children to think about the effect or the writer's purpose. Ask: *What effect has the writer created and how was it done?* Model how to innovate using interesting sentence patterns, showing them directly how to write in the style of an author, for example,

Curious, the monkey squatted on top of the filing cabinet, watching and waiting.

could become:

Uncertain, the cat crouched below the dining table, peeking out and barely purring.

Try rewriting familiar stories, 'in the style of a favourite author'.



> **"Children want to write like their reading. So, the reading shapes the writing."**

Planning for reading

Reading and sharing the books

Read from the class novel or picture book on a daily basis. Ideally, you need enough books so that the children can share at least one copy between two. Always read each book through yourself, and decide what to focus upon and how this can be achieved. Think about the particular demands and challenges of the book. At what point will you need to stop and with which activity?

The principles of 'Talk for Reading'

'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 'Reading Framework' (DfE) and should take place often so that it becomes a habit of mind. The skill is for you, the teacher, to become a good listener, prompting the children to do most of the wondering, thinking, exploring, suggesting and summarising.

"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. Ask: *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."

Agree on your 'Rules for Book Discussions'	Collect 'ways to talk about books'
All ideas are accepted Everyone should 'have a go' Be ready to change your mind Listen to each other It helps to be tentative, e.g. '*we wondered whether...*'	*It reminds me of...* *I'm not sure but...* *We wondered whether...* *I like that idea but...* *It is the same as...* *It appears to be...* *We think that...* *The writer suggests that...* *Perhaps,...* *It makes me think of...* *The main point might be...* *We know this because the text says...*
You can a. Suggest new ideas b. 'Build' on someone's ideas c. Explain your ideas d. Ask questions e. Refer to the text	

Vocabulary

Tackle difficult vocabulary in various ways. For instance, you might help children understand words by showing an object, toy, picture or film. Some words are better understood by listing examples or by acting something out. Make lists of similar words or opposites and try the word in other sentences. Sometimes reading on, or re-reading, will provide clues to a word's meaning. The most powerful strategy is to try and relate the tricky word to the children's own experience. Get them to explain the word to their partner, display the word and rehearse using it in sentences over a number of days to add it to their repertoire.

Planning to use a picture book with children aged 3–7

Re-read a picture book over a number of days. Deepen understanding and appreciation by choosing a well-loved book. You might take a different focus for each re-reading. Different books lend themselves to different approaches – for example,

DAY 1 – initial responses	DAY 2 – settings
Discuss expectations of the content from the cover/title then read the book through, for the pleasure of a great story. Focus on prediction, with only occasional pauses to discuss what might happen next. After reading, take initial reactions to the story – ask children to discuss their preferences, anything that concerned them (raising questions and 'wondering') and possible links to their own lives. Focus on the story in the pictures compared to the story in the words.	Re-read the book, encouraging children to 'join in'. Point to words as you read them. Thread in work on 'vocabulary' across a number of readings. Which words or phrases need to be discussed so that the children understand? You might discuss settings. Do they change? How does the setting and images make us feel? What colours, shapes or words are used to create the atmosphere?
DAY 3 – character	**DAY 4 – dilemma and resolution**
Re-read with children increasingly joining in and you withdrawing. Try saying sentences in different ways in relation to their meaning – loud, soft, quick, slow, with differing expressions. Read with expression: contrast by reading in a dull voice. Focus on character: how does the character feel? What might they be thinking? How do we know?	Ask the children to re-read more fluently. Discuss the story from different viewpoints. Use drama to bring scenes alive, e.g. hot seat, freeze frame, phone call, role-play. Focus on dilemma and resolution – what goes wrong or needs sorting? What problems are there? What advice would we give a character?
DAY 5 – summarising and evaluating	**WARNING!**
Ask the children to re-read with you. Make links with other books. What is the main idea, message or theme? Find key images, words or parts of the story. Look at the underlying pattern. Story map the book and ask them to retell it in their own words.	Try not to ruin a good story by 'teaching'. If they like the story, read it as often as possible.

"Children who have not experienced much reading at home should experience daily 'snuggly reading' and need to be identified for extra close reading experiences."



Planning to use a novel with children aged 7–11

Think about whether you need to do any activities **BEFORE** you start the novel, to tune the children into the context. Then plan what activities you need to do **DURING** the story and what you will do **AFTER**. Note that some of the novels are meaty; in which case, do not be afraid to just read aloud for enjoyment, without running the risk of ruining a cracking read by over analysis.

1. Activities BEFORE reading

Do we need to develop the context so that the story makes more sense? For example, reading *After the War* is enriched by knowing something about World War II. Explore 'expectations': what is the book about from the title, cover or chapter headings?

2. Activities DURING reading

a. Picture it: activities to help us 'imagine'

- draw scenes and rewrite a section from the imagination
- draw and label a scene
- respond to illustrations and describe
- track a plot by creating a timeline, story board or map
- display a story museum of objects and costumes from the story
- draw a 'role on the wall' with character quotes and clues
- use costumes, props and devise artefacts for the story, e.g. a letter, message, map mentioned in the text

b. Live it: activities that help us become part of the story

- create story artefacts, e.g. a message/email arrives or an object is found
- drama (phone calls, hot seat, news reports, role-play, freeze frame, agony aunt, etc.)
- write in role (letters, diaries, news items, etc.)
- create a blog for the main character or a character tweets
- internalise language through children preparing group performances of key sections

c. Understand it: activities to deepen our appreciation

- hold 'book discussions' at key moments
- predict the next events, connect and tie up clues across a section
- create character profiles or graphs, using quotes and clues
- focus on the author's style through cloze procedure

3. Activities AFTER reading

- rewrite the story as a mini story of 150 words
- write a character's end of year school 'report'
- write and design the book 'blurb', front cover or advertise the story
- compare the 'start' to the 'end' and discuss 'changes'
- select the key line/passage and discuss what the story is about



SCHOLASTIC

Planning to become a reading school

Use this blank version of the table from page 5 to consider what your school already does well and in what ways it could do better.

1. 'Reading for pleasure' lies at the heart of their approach to teaching reading. This is supported by a well-stocked, updated provision of a wide range of books.	
2. Teachers love reading, believe it is important and are enthusiastic and knowledgeable about books and authors.	
3. The reading programme is driven by the senior leadership team. It is informed by research as well as what successful schools do and is constantly refined.	
4. High priority is given to ensuring that children are automatic and confident decoders, reading with increasing fluency.	
5. Vocabulary is taught explicitly in English, across the curriculum and is part of children loving language.	
6. English teaching and class reading are built around deep discussions of high quality, ambitious texts.	
7. Teachers are 'test familiar' but do not just test reading. It is taught and practised, with a strong focus on oral comprehension before children are taught how to write answers.	
8. There is a specific, well-defined programme for the daily direct teaching of reading through shared, guided and independent, focused reading. This is constantly supported by termly CPD that includes in-class follow-up.	
9. Reading is also taught across the curriculum.	
10. Parents are encouraged to be involved in supporting reading at home and this continues till the end of Year 6.	

Final thoughts from Pie



Reading is the most important part of the curriculum. Thorough grounding in phonics helps children make an early and successful start with decoding and segmenting for spelling. This has to be matched by oral comprehension from the start, based on plenty of daily, rich sharing of books. The focus in the brain then shifts from trying to decode into understanding and thinking and imagining and responding. For this to happen, there has to be plenty of motivation, encouragement and for some children a considerable amount of practice.

Alongside this important work, the comprehension strand has to be developed from the earliest days in school. As long ago as 1984, Gordon Wells' longitudinal research into early language[1] found that:

1. The frequency with which children had **stories read to them** before starting school was the single strongest predictor of their subsequent reading achievement and general academic success at age ten.
2. The most successful children were those whose parents didn't just read to them but engaged them in **conversation about the books**.
3. Early reading experiences provided children with a 'literate' register of language – specifically, **more complex vocabulary** and an understanding of how written language is structured – which gave them a significant advantage in formal schooling.
4. Early advantages in literacy and language persisted throughout the child's primary education, influencing **success across the entire curriculum**, not just in English.

The implications from this research, and every other piece of research into reading and language since, are quite clear. There must be a balance between learning to read words and to understanding them. From our early reading provision, we must include:

- daily 'snuggly reading' of great texts, often repeated
- one-to-one daily reading and book conversations for linguistically vulnerable children
- 'book of the week' to ensure that children experience at least 36 books a year in the Early Years Foundation Stage
- strong *Reading Spine* that children work with intensively and learn to know and love
- excellent books at the heart of the school's provision
- rich conversations around worthwhile texts
- linger with great texts using repetitive reading and discussion
- intense and rich interest in gaining and using vocabulary
- teaching writing from great reading

Or to put it simply:

"Read children plenty of great literature and have rich and thoughtful conversations about them. Where children come from homes with little reading, then read even *more* great books, often repetitively, and have even more rich and thoughtful conversations to deepen understanding."

Pie

1. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249496197_Talking_and_Learning_A_discussion_of_young_children's_language_at_home_and_in_the_classroom

SCHOLASTIC

First published in the UK as *Pie Corbett's Reading Spine* and *Pie Corbett's Page-turners* by Scholastic, 2015 and 2017

This electronic edition published by Scholastic, 2026

Scholastic, Bosworth Avenue, Warwick, CV34 6UQ
Scholastic Ireland, 89E Lagan Road, Dublin Industrial Estate, Glasnevin, Dublin, D11 HP5F

SCHOLASTIC and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

Text © Pie Corbett, 2026

Pie Corbett's Reading Spine is a registered trade mark of Pie Corbett Consultancy Limited and is used under licence.

The moral rights of the author have been asserted by them.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-9-999-61095-7

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this ebook on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter discovered or invented, or used to train any artificial intelligence technologies without the express written permission of Scholastic Limited. Subject to EU law, Scholastic Limited expressly reserves this work from the text and data-mining exception.

Due to the nature of the web, we cannot guarantee the content or links of any site mentioned.
We strongly recommend that teachers check websites before using them in the classroom.

Scholastic does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for any third-party websites or other platforms, or their content.

Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders for the works reproduced in this book, and Scholastic apologises for any inadvertent omissions.

www.scholastic.co.uk

For safety or quality concerns:
UK: www.scholastic.co.uk/productinformation
EU: www.scholastic.ie/productinformation

Author
Pie Corbett

Editorial
Rachel Morgan, Audrey Stokes

Design
Andrea Lewis

Cover Design
Scholastic

Paper background © Lifestyle Graphic/Adobe Stock