

# Project 2: Write a fable

Focus: story sequence and moral

## Introduction

### IN THIS SECTION:

- Preview the task

Fables are short, simple stories that teach a moral lesson. In the most popular fables the main characters are animals. Some well-known animal fables are “The Hare and the Tortoise” and “The Fox and the Grapes”. Because they use animal characters, fables are commonly used as stories for young children, but they can be effective with readers of any age.

Writing a fable is a good starting point for your training as a writer. The skills needed to write a fable provide a foundation for many more complex tasks.

**Goal:** Write a short fable that presents your reader with a clear moral lesson.

### Skills you will learn from this project:

- creating a story through *allegory* and *dramatisation*
- controlling diction through *word choice*
- using simple mathematics to check your *style*
- adding variety to sentences through *opening phrases*
- writing suitable *dialogue*

**Special terms:** *allegory, dramatisation, maxim*

## Step 1: Read a model

### IN THIS SECTION:

- Read three examples
- Explore their features and usage

Below are three ancient fables. They come from a collection first published in Greece around 600BC under the name of Aesop. It isn't clear whether the storyteller named Aesop was real or legendary. Even so, these *Tales from Aesop*, as the ancient Greeks called them, have become the classic model for this type of story.

### Activity 1

Read the three fables carefully. They will provide the model for your own writing.

#### The Mice in Council

The mice once met together in a great council to discuss how to defend themselves against the attacks of the cat. After much debate, a loud young mouse declared that they should fasten a bell around the cat's neck, so that they would have warning whenever she approached. The proposal drew great applause, until an old mouse asked, "Who will volunteer to bell the cat?" At once, the mice all fell silent.

*Moral: He who proposes an action should be prepared to carry it out.*

#### The Fox in the Well

A fox fell into a muddy well and was unable to get out again. Soon a thirsty goat came by and, seeing the fox in the well, asked him if the water was good. "It is the sweetest and freshest water I have ever tasted," the Fox lied. "Won't you come in and share it with me?" Thinking only of his thirst, the goat jumped into the well to drink. Immediately, the fox jumped onto the goat's back, and onto his head, and then leapt out of the well to freedom.

*Moral: A desperate man will easily take advantage of a fool.*

#### The Bat and the Weasles

A bat fell from the sky and was caught by a weasel. The bat begged to be let go, but the weasel said that birds were his favourite food. "But I am not a bird," the bat declared, "I am a mouse!" Seeing that he did indeed look like a mouse, the weasel set him free. Some time later, the same bat was caught by another weasel. He begged for his life, but the weasel said that mouse was his favourite food. "But I am not a mouse," the bat declared, flapping his wings, "I am a bird!" Seeing that he did indeed look like a bird, the second weasel also set him free.

*Moral: The wise man acts according to the circumstances.*

## What's the use?

Fables like these have a long history, and they are told in all human cultures. In fact, the word fable comes from the Latin word *fabula*, and simply means “a story.” The main use of fables is to teach people about human behaviour and the values that guide our actions.

In your own writing, fables will be most useful on those occasions when you are *advising other people how they should act*. A good fable will make your writing more effective in two ways: it will capture your reader’s attention, and it will make your meaning clearer by condensing complex ideas into a simple story. Speeches, essays, and advertisements can all have fables included in them.

### Activity 2

1. Here are two situations where a fable could be used to gain attention and present a clear lesson. Which of the three fables you have just read would you use in these situations? Tick your choice of fables below.

#### Situations

- a. A school principal is unhappy that so few students have volunteered to join the school council, even though many students have made suggestions about how the school should be run. The principal has asked you to give a short speech on this topic at the next school assembly. Which fable would provide a good introduction to your speech?
- b. Students at your school have been tricked out of money by text messages that promise large cash prizes in return for sending a \$10 “postage fee”. Your school council is planning an advertising campaign to warn about the dangers. Which of the three fables would be a useful part of the campaign?

#### Fables

	a.	b.
“The Mice in Council”	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
“The Fox in the Well”	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
“The Bat and the Weasles”	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

2. What other occasions at your school, or in your community, could involve giving advice to others? Make a list of at least six. (Here are some possibilities: a school valedictory? a church sermon? a wedding speech? a funeral?)

.....	.....
.....	.....
.....	.....

## What kind of lesson?

The best fables present lessons that are both universal and practical. *Universal* means they convey ideas that people everywhere are likely to understand and agree with. *Practical* means they are intended to guide people's actions rather than merely shape their attitudes.

For example:

*Honesty is the best policy.*

This lesson is *universal*, because the concepts of honesty and dishonesty are familiar to people everywhere. It is *practical*, because it suggests how we should act. A fable designed to teach this lesson could be adapted to many topics and situations.

*Users are losers.*

This lesson, from an anti-drugs campaign, is not universal because drug-taking, and the word “user”, are not familiar to people everywhere. It is also not practical, because it implies an attitude rather than an action. A fable designed to teach this lesson would have limited uses.

### Activity 3

1. Based on the rules of *universality* and *practicality*, which of the following ideas would be a suitable basis for a classic fable? Number them from best (1) to worst (6).
  - a. Always look on the bright side of life.
  - b. People often belittle the things they cannot have.
  - c. A liar will not be believed even when he tells the truth.
  - d. He who betrays another should expect betrayal in return.
  - e. Some see life as a glass half full, other see it as a glass half empty.
  - f. Life sucks, then you die.

Compare your rankings, and discuss the reasons for your choices.

2. List some common human vices and virtues that you could build a fable around. Here are some starters: loyalty/disloyalty, generosity/greed, compassion/cruelty.

Now that you have explored the features of some classic fables and considered their \_\_\_\_\_ you are ready to learn about writing your own.

## Step 2: Ideas and design

### IN THIS SECTION:

- Learn to organise your ideas
  - Learn to make a plan
  - Write a first draft
- 

Before you can learn to write fables you need to study how the classic fable is constructed. We will start by looking at the ideas in the fables you have read, and how the story elements are arranged.

### Ideas: teaching a lesson

Classic fables teach us about human vices and virtues, such as pride, envy, jealousy, or honesty. Each fable offers the reader a lesson on one of these common topics. To make the fable entertaining, the lessons are disguised in a variety of ways. The main techniques of disguise are *allegory* and *dramatisation*.

#### *Allegory*

Instead of directly naming qualities such as greed and stupidity, fables use animal characters to represent the ideas. Thus, greed might be represented as a pig, or stupidity a goat. In this way the ideas are gently disguised, and readers are less likely to feel threatened by the story.

This kind of storytelling, where elements and events in the story have two parallel meanings, is called *allegory*. The word allegory comes from the ancient Greek *allos agoria*, which means “speaking otherwise” or speaking in code. There are many types of allegory, but fable is one of the simplest forms.

Using animals to represent human qualities results in a story that conveys two meanings at once. The written text tells about the actions of an animal or group of animals. At the same time, readers know that the story is also illustrating some aspect of human behaviour. For example, the fable of “The Mice in Council” is a story about mice; but it is also simultaneously a story about human behaviour. The animal commits an action which has a consequence that teaches a moral lesson for the reader.

Examples of other animals commonly found in fables, and the qualities they represent are: pig – greed; donkey – stubbornness; goat – stupidity; owl – wisdom.

## Activity 4

- Match the following animals to the qualities they best represent. Choose from these: *timidity, bravery, deception, cunning, hard work, loyalty.*

Animal	Quality	Animal	Quality
lion		mouse	
snake		fox	
ant		dog	

- Name some animals that could be used to represent the following human qualities. (*Suggestion:* choose animals that people already associate with these ideas, or whose appearance and behaviour match that of humans with those qualities.)

Quality	Animal	Quality	Animal
laziness		anger	
honesty		mischievousness	
wisdom		jealousy	

### Dramatisation

We have seen that animals in fables represent human qualities. They also perform human-like actions. They trick one another, hold meetings, make deals. They win and lose, teach and learn. These actions and events demonstrate the moral of the story. Instead of *telling* the reader how to act (be honest! work hard!), the writer *shows* the action and its consequences. Lazy animals starve, cunning animals outwit their enemies, and honest animals are rewarded.

This storytelling technique is called *dramatisation*, which means *presenting ideas by acting them out*. Dramatisation is a basic technique of all storytelling.

Here is an example.

- Idea:** People who are proud often belittle the things they cannot have.
- Dramatisation:** A fox who cannot jump high enough to reach the fruit on a tree branch decides that the fruit must be too sour to eat anyway.

**Activity 5**

1. Match the following *ideas* to their most suitable *dramatisations* printed below.

*Ideas*

- 1. A vain person is easily fooled by flattery.
- 2. He who betrays another should expect betrayal in return.
- 3. A lazy person suffers most when times are tough.

*Dramatisations*

- a. A fox helps a lion to catch an ass, in the hope of saving his own life; but the lion eats the fox first, saving the ass for later.
- b. A grasshopper plays all summer while the ants store food; in the winter, the ants have food but the grasshopper starves.
- c. A fox sees a crow with food in its beak; the fox praises the noisy bird's "beautiful" voice, and catches the food when the crow opens its beak to sing.

Idea	Dramatisation	Idea	Dramatisation	Idea	Dramatisation
1.		2.		3.	

2. Choose one of the ideas above (a, b or c) and create a *different* dramatisation, using your own animals and actions to convey the idea. Follow the examples of dramatisation shown above.

You might also find the following suggested outline useful:

*Animal:* .....  
(name a suitable animal)

*Action:* .....  
(say what the animal does)

*Result:* .....  
(describe the consequence of the action)

Now that you have a list of ideas and possible dramatisations, you need to learn how to organise your fable. A fable involves careful design.

## Design: arranging the ideas

The ideas dramatised in a fable are presented in the form of a *story sequence*. There are typically four basic steps in the sequence.

### The story sequence

1. *An animal has a desire or goal, or is confronted by a problem or puzzle.*
2. *The animal tries to achieve its goal or solve the puzzle, often by interacting with another creature.*
3. *The animal succeeds or fails in a way that teaches a lesson.*
4. *The lesson is stated as a moral for the reader to remember.*

Here is an example of the story sequence in the fable called “The Mice in Council” on [page xx](#). In this fable the animal is actually a *group*.

### The story sequence: “The Mice in Council”

1. *An animal has a desire or goal, or is confronted by a problem or puzzle.*

The mice once met together in a great council to discuss how they might defend themselves against the attacks of the cat.

2. *The animal tries to achieve its goal or solve the puzzle.*

After much debate, a loud young mouse declared that they should fasten a bell around the cat’s neck, so that they would have warning whenever she approached.

3. *The animal succeeds or fails in a way that teaches a lesson.*

The proposal drew great applause, until an old mouse asked, “Who, then, will volunteer to bell the cat?” At once, the mice all fell silent.

4. *The lesson is stated as a moral for the reader to remember.*

Moral: He who proposes an action should be prepared to carry it out.



## Activity 6

Mark out the four parts of the story sequence in each of the two fables reprinted below. Compare your decisions to those of others in your class or group.

a. *The Fox in the Well*

A fox fell into a muddy well and was unable to get out again. Soon a thirsty goat came by and, seeing the fox in the well, asked him if the water was good. "It is the sweetest and freshest water I have ever tasted," the Fox lied. "Won't you come in and share it with me?" Thinking only of his thirst, the goat jumped into the well to drink. Immediately, the fox jumped onto the goat's back, and onto his head, and then leapt up out of the well to freedom.

*Moral: A desperate man will easily take advantage of a fool.*

b. *The Bat and the Weasels*

A bat fell from the sky and was caught by a weasel. The bat begged to be let go, but the weasel said that birds were his favourite food. "But I am not a bird," the bat declared, "I am a mouse!" Seeing that he did indeed look like a mouse, the weasel set him free. Some time later, the same bat was caught by another weasel. He begged for his life, but the weasel said that mouse was his favourite food. "But I am not a mouse," the bat declared, flapping his wings, "I am a bird!" Seeing that he did indeed look like a bird, the second weasel also set him free.

*Moral: The wise man acts according to the circumstances.*

The story sequence	
1. An animal has a desire or goal, or is confronted by a problem or puzzle.	
a.	
b.	
2. The animal tries to achieve its goal or solve the puzzle, often by interacting with another creature.	
a.	
b.	
3. The animal succeeds or fails in a way that teaches a lesson.	
a.	
b.	
4. The lesson is stated as a moral for the reader to remember.	
a.	
b.	

## Planning your own fable

Now that you have analysed the ideas and design of three fables, it is time to try planning your own.

Look firstly at the following example of a plan using one of the topics from Activity 5.

### Ideas

<i>Idea:</i>	A vain person is easily fooled by flattery.
<i>Dramatisation:</i>	A fox sees a crow with food in its beak; the fox praises the noisy bird's "beautiful" voice, and catches the food when the crow opens its beak to sing.

### Design

1. *An animal has a desire or goal, or is confronted by a problem or puzzle.*

Hungry fox sees crow with food.

2. *The animal tries to achieve its goal or solve the puzzle.*

Fox knows that the crow is vain. Decides to trick the crow out of food. Tells crow she has a beautiful voice. Asks her to sing.

3. *The animal succeeds or fails in a way that teaches a lesson.*

Crow is flattered, opens beak to sing. Food falls out. Fox grabs it.

4. *The lesson is stated as a moral for the reader to remember.*

Moral: A vain person is easily fooled by flattery.

## Activity 7

Use the "Plan for a fable" on the next page to plan the outline of your first fable following the example above.

## Plan for a fable

### Ideas

*Idea:* The lazy person suffers most when times are tough.

*Dramatisation:* A grasshopper plays all summer while the ants store food; in the winter, the ants have food but the grasshopper starves.

### Design

1. *An animal has a desire or goal, or is confronted by a problem or puzzle.*

2. *The animal tries to achieve its goal or solve the puzzle.*

3. *The animal succeeds or fails in a way that teaches a lesson.*

4. *The lesson is stated as a moral for the reader to remember.*

*Moral:*

- Once you have made your plan, go on and write the first draft of your fable. Do your best to imitate the design and the writing style of the fables you have read.

**you have written your draft, put it to one side. You will return to it as you work through the following section on style.**

### Copying or dictation

Study closely "The Mice in Council" on [page xx](#). Pay attention to these things:

- The length and wording of the sentences
- The punctuation (especially of the dialogue)
- The spelling (especially the spelling of unfamiliar words)

Copy the fable into your notebook, checking against the original as you go. Make sure you capture the wording and punctuation exactly. Alternatively, copy the fable as your teacher reads it aloud. When you are done, discuss any features of the writing that have come to your attention.