

Johnny Swanson: The Letter

Fiction

Content domain focus:

- 2b** retrieve and record information/identify key details from fiction and non-fiction
- 2c** summarise main ideas from more than one paragraph
- 2d** make inferences from the text/explain and justify inferences with evidence from the text

Text summary

This is the third extract taken from *Johnny Swanson*, and it completes the episode begun in Summer Test 2. Having sent off for details of how to instantly increase his height, and having stolen money from his mother to do so, Johnny receives his reply and realises both the mistake he has made and the cost of that mistake.

As anyone reading on will discover, however, Johnny's response is not the obvious one: he decides to use the technique to trick other people into sending him money. The real drama of the book begins as Johnny attempts to free his mother from a murder conviction.

Unit summary

The unit links with Spring Test 6 and Summer Test 2. It can be used as a free-standing test, but works best if the children have read the previous episodes, particularly Summer Test 2.

The focus is on the feelings of the characters and the reader's response to these: hence the priority given to inferential questions and the final question, which asks the reader to sum up their feelings at the end of the passage.



Teaching prompts

- Quickly summarise (or ask the children to summarise) the situation from the previous episode, in which Johnny takes the money.
- Explain that he sends the money off to the address on the advert, and then has to wait for a reply.
- Ask the children to put themselves in Johnny's shoes. Ask: *How would he be feeling as he waits? What would be worrying him?*
- Ask the children to role-play scenes between Johnny and his mother, as the time approaches each day for the postman to call.
- Note that the passage itself is quite long, so the full impact might be lost on less-able readers. You may choose to read the passage to the children, asking them to follow in their copies, before they answer the questions.

Revisiting the text

- Once they have finished the task, you may wish to move straight to a debrief with the children, so that the reading and response to the passage are immediate and self-contained.
- Take the questions in turn, hearing and discussing the children's responses as you go. Encourage them to build on the views of others and, where necessary, modify their own views. They should not change their written answers, though, as these reflect their independent thoughts.
- Where necessary, ask the children to look again at the text to reconsider an answer.
- Ask how they would feel and react in the same circumstances. The purpose here is to model the thought processes of an experienced and reflective reader responding to a dramatic text, but also to demonstrate how, collectively, the children can successfully achieve a full understanding of a challenging text.
- Avoid the reading out of answers, and encourage more reflective thoughts that build on the experiences the children have built up through prior reading and consideration.
- Be prepared to model the writing of the answer to question 10 in order to demonstrate how such an answer should be structured.



Answers

1. excited/nervous/apprehensive [2d]
2. He is anxious – he just manages to hide the envelope in his pocket before his mother sees it. [2d]
3. The writer wants to increase the tension before we find out what reply Johnny receives; she also wants to let both us and Johnny know how difficult life is for Johnny's mother, before he opens his letter. [2d]
4. The landlord is putting up the rent after Christmas. [2b]
5. The rent rise is exactly the same amount as Johnny has stolen (three shillings). [2d]
6. She thinks Johnny is wondering if they could pay the extra money from their savings. [2d]
7. On the one hand, Johnny is relieved that his mother is not going to look in the jar until December. On the other hand, he is ashamed of having taken the money. [2b]
8. He says he needs to go to the lavatory/toilet. [2b]
9. It is written on a piece of paper that looks as if it has been torn from a notebook; it is not an official-looking letter. [2d]
10. Accept any reasoned, well-argued response. Look for recognition of the humour – evidence that the reader understands the joke – but also an emotional response to Johnny, whether that is sympathy or criticism, or a mixture of the two. [2c, 2d]



Assessment

This is a challenging task. The passage is quite long, and the situation described is complex, combining Johnny's anticipation and disappointment with Winnie's response to the news of the rent rise. The questions necessarily focus on what lies below the surface, to see how well the children respond to the skill of the writer. There are, therefore, few 'easy marks' to be had.

However, the reading and discussion of previous episodes should have created a context within which the children can view and understand events, and this should encourage both reading stamina and insight into the character's reactions. In marking, it is worth erring on the side of generosity as the children strive to express their thoughts about the passage. Their response to the final question, in particular, will provide a good indicator as to whether they are becoming secure in their learning at this stage.

Next steps

The outcomes from this test should provide an indication of the progress the children have made in their reading and interpretation of imaginative writing.

Look for indications of their ability to:

- sustain interest in their reading
- use their own experience to interpret the thoughts and actions of characters
- notice how writers use their skills to influence the reader.

There will also be indications of the children's growing ability to manage a reading comprehension task within a specific time to:

- read a passage of some length quickly and efficiently
- return to the passage to locate, interpret and retrieve information
- answer questions clearly and concisely.