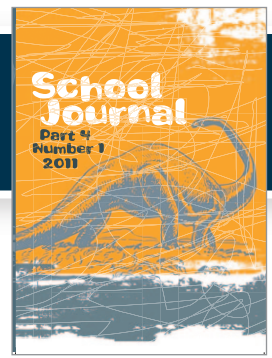


Losing Nemo

by Debbie Cowens

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Noun frequency level: 9.5–10.5
Year 7



Overview

This deceptively simple story reveals the special relationship that exists between Sarah and her brother, Pete. When Pete's goldfish dies, rather than trick Pete as Aunt Vera suggests, Sarah helps Pete to deal with Nemo's death.

By using the clues in the text, the students will realise that Pete is different: Aunt Vera does not understand him at all, but his sister does and is sensitive to his needs. Students will draw

on their own experiences of family relationships to make inferences about the characters, their relationships, and their ways of responding to a difficult situation. The story provides opportunities to explore the concept of "accepting difference" and the importance of honesty, understanding, and empathy. It supports the key competency of relating to others.

Texts related by theme

"Weird" SJ 4.1.04

Text characteristics from the year 7 reading standard

academic and content-specific vocabulary

elements that require interpretation, such as complex plots, sophisticated themes, and abstract ideas

I imagined the dead Nemo flushed down the toilet, swirling down the pipes until he was spat out into the dark sewers. I thought about Pete and what Nemo meant to him.

I went back into the room and stood next to Pete. Nemo was still staring at Nemo. "Fish have swim bladders," he said. "Sometimes they float sideways when they're sick."

"I think Nemo's dead," I said.

Pete said nothing, but I guessed he understood.

"They'll get you a new fish if you want," I offered after a few moments of silence.

"No," Pete said.

"We should bury Nemo," I said. "Give him a proper funeral."

Pete nodded.

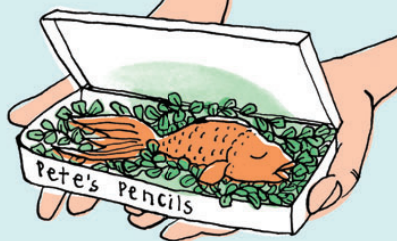
We were not ready for our fish funeral. Pete pulled Nemo's thin, shiny body out of the water and laid him in his *Finding Nemo* metal pencil case, which he'd carefully lined with a bed of oxygen weed. We dug a small hole in the backyard and waited until sunset, then we buried the coffin.

"Goodbye, Nemo," was all that Pete said. It was all that needed to be said.

We filled in the hole and patted down the loose earth until it was smoothed over. I stuck a small wooden cross at the top of the grave. Pete had written "Nemo" on it with a black felt-tip pen.

"Come inside, you two. It's time for dinner," Aunt Vera called from the house, bringing our quiet ceremony to an end. We walked back inside together.

"You'd better go and wash up," Aunt Vera said, looking at our dirt-covered hands. "I don't know what you've been up to out there."



"We were burying Nemo," Pete told her. Aunt Vera looked taken aback. She didn't understand and why he sounded so pleased about it. She didn't understand why I had told him his pet was dead.

No one else understood why Pete never wanted another fish or why he kept Nemo's empty bowl on the top of his dresser. Or why he went out to the backyard every third morning at exactly 7.15 a.m. and put five fish flakes on Nemo's grave. No one else really understood about Pete and Nemo at all.

But I did.



Illustrations by Kat Chadwick

sentences that vary in length, including long, complex sentences that contain a lot of information

metaphor, analogy, and connotative language that is open to interpretation

Reading standard: by the end of year 7

Possible curriculum contexts

HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

(Relationships with other people)

LEVEL 4 – Relationships: Identify the effects of changing situations, roles, and responsibilities on relationships and describe appropriate responses.

ENGLISH (Reading)

LEVEL 4 – Purposes and Audiences: Show an increasing understanding of how texts are shaped for different purposes and audiences.

ENGLISH (Writing)

LEVEL 4 – Purposes and Audiences: Show an increasing understanding of how to shape texts for different purposes and audiences.

Possible reading purposes

- To identify how a brother and sister deal with the death of a pet
- To explore the characters and relationships within the story
- To explore how people and deal with difficult situations
- To identify the author's purpose and how she has conveyed the message in the story.

See [Instructional focus – Reading](#) for illustrations of some of these reading purposes.

Possible writing purposes

- To write a scene or short story about an incident or event that reflects people's different attitudes and responses
- To write a reflection about the death of a pet
- To describe an important person in their lives, how they behave, and how they responded to an event or situation.

See [Instructional focus – Writing](#) for illustrations of some of these writing purposes.

Text and language challenges

VOCABULARY:

- Possible unfamiliar words or phrases, including “lounge”, “earnest”, “comfy”, “memorised”, “obsessed”, “gaze”, “oxygen weed”, “fascinating”, “fish flakes”, “recommended”, “dreaded”, “doubted”, “routine”, “an unbearable disaster”, “gulped”, “react”, “digital watch”, “calculations”, “relieved”, “claimed”, “weird”, “agitated”, “ostrich”, “loo”, “imaginary”, “sewers”, “funeral”, “coffin”, “ceremony”
- The use of words associated with funerals: “bury”, “funeral”, “coffin”, “ceremony”, “grave”
- Colloquial and idiomatic phrases, including “give me a hand”, “giving me a look”, “I’ll pop down”
- The similes: “like an ostrich drawing away from something unpleasant”, “like an imaginary fly was buzzing around her face”.

Possible supporting strategies

- The vocabulary in this story should be within the reach of most year 7 students. However, if some students need support, identify words that may be challenging, including the colloquial or idiomatic expressions and the use of figurative language.
- The students could look at the illustration on pages 2–3, read the first sentence, and make predictions about what the story is about. Create vocabulary sets for funerals, thoughts, feelings, and characters. Before reading, have the students scan the text to see if they can find any of the words.
- Have the students choose five to ten words that they want to focus on and record them in their vocabulary notebooks. Remind them to record the word, an example sentence or two, and a definition and/or a translation. If appropriate, offer the students guidance on which words could be most useful for them. But keep in mind that it’s useful for students to make decisions about their learning.
- *The English Language Learning Progressions: Introduction*, pages 39–46, has some useful information about learning vocabulary.

SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE REQUIRED:

- Knowledge of family relationships
- The experience of owning a pet that requires care
- The experience of a family pet dying
- Experience of reading stories that convey a deeper level of meaning
- Experiences of people whose behaviour may be challenging.

Possible supporting strategies

- Ask students to share stories about how people respond to events or situations differently. These may or may not include the death of a pet!

Students may refer to others in the school who are similar to Pete: support them to generalise rather than focus on individuals. Help students to explore the concepts of understanding and empathy in all relationships.

TEXT FEATURES AND STRUCTURE:

- Told in the first person, past tense
- The action taking place in one day, with a reflection at the end that shows time has passed
- The use of dialogue and details to convey information about characters’ attitudes and relationships
- The use of hyperbole (exaggeration) for effect – “a billion facts”
- The opening sentence that establishes the setting and the problem
- The implied relationship between Aunty Vera and the children.

Possible supporting strategies

- Review the ways that an author sets up a narrative. For some students, it may be useful to explicitly identify the problem and resolution structure typical of a narrative in English. Many languages and cultures may also have this narrative pattern, but some may not.
- If necessary, support students to identify how the details and dialogue are used to reveal the characters’ attitudes and relationships. Create a graphic organiser with columns for page numbers, characters, thoughts and feelings, and evidence from the text. Share read a section of text and fill in the graphic organiser for one character. Model making inferences about a character’s thoughts and feelings from what the character says or does. During reading, support students to complete the graphic organiser. Provide opportunities for them to work in pairs or small groups to discuss and check their ideas. The graphic organiser could be used as the basis for a speaking frame after reading, modelling sentences like “I think Aunty Vera was/thought _____ because she _____.”

Instructional focus – Reading

Health and Physical Education (Relationships with other people, level 4 – Relationships: Identify the effects of changing situations, roles, and responsibilities on relationships and describe appropriate responses.)

Text excerpts from “Losing Nemo”

Every three days, at exactly 7.15 a.m., he carefully counted out five fish flakes to feed Nemo. It was the precise amount recommended in the dreaded book, but I doubted a fish would notice if his breakfast was late by a minute or two. Pete would. To him, messing up a routine was an unbearable disaster.

“Nemo won’t swim,” Pete said again.

Aunty Vera looked at me.

“He’s just floating on top of his bowl,” I explained.

“Oh, it’s your little fishy you’re talking about.” Aunty Vera smiled one of her special smiles at Pete.

No one else understood why Pete never wanted another fish or why he kept Nemo’s empty bowl on the top of his dresser. Or why he went out to the backyard every third morning at exactly 7.15 a.m. and put five fish flakes on Nemo’s grave. No one else really understood about Pete and Nemo at all.

But I did.

Students (what they might do)

Students make connections between the text and their own experiences of feeding pets to infer that Pete is unusually precise. They confirm this inference as they read the last sentence in the paragraph.

Students link “the dreaded book” with the book named earlier. They make connections with their own experiences of people to infer that Sarah “dreads” the book because Pete refers to it so often.

Students notice that Aunty Vera looks at Sarah, not Pete. They ask and answer questions and integrate information in the text so far to help understand Aunty Vera’s behaviour. They link Aunty Vera’s words with information earlier in the text and make connections with their experiences of human behaviour to make further inferences about Aunty Vera.

Students slow down their reading as they encounter the repetition. After reading, they think critically about the behaviours of the characters. They synthesise ideas from the text and their own experiences of relationships to understand how Sarah felt about her brother. They make conclusions about understanding other people, respecting personal differences, and empathising with others.

Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching)

PROMPT students to make inferences to deepen their understanding of the text.

- Remember, in order to understand more about Pete and Sarah, you will need to make inferences.
- Look at the first sentence. What time did he feed him? How did he count the fish flakes? What are the adverbs in this sentence? What do the adverbs and the whole sentence suggest about Pete? Read to the end of the paragraph to see if what you thought still seems true.
- Who is the narrator – who is telling us about Pete? What does that suggest about her?
- Is Sarah just being sarcastic or is there another reason for her attitude towards Pete, his use of the “dreaded book”, and his care of the goldfish?

DIRECT students to work with a partner to identify places in the text where the author reveals Aunty Vera’s true nature.

- What is Aunty Vera like?
- How do you know that? Does the author actually say what she is like?
- What does she think of Pete?
- Is Aunty Vera all bad? What other clues to her nature does the author give you? Why do you think Aunty Vera is the way she is?

See notes about graphic organisers (under Text features and structure) for students who need more support.

PROMPT students to review the clues about the relationships between the characters provided throughout the text. Ask them to discuss the text, based on these clues and their own experiences of human behaviours and relationships.

Students could refer to their notes in their graphic organisers (if completed) and discuss the characters in pairs or small groups. You could ask each pair or group of three to focus on one character and prepare to present their ideas and the evidence from the text. For students who need support, model a sentence and then erase the variable sections to create a speaking frame.

- What conclusions can you make about the characters in the story? What conclusions can you make about the relationships in the story?
- Does the author have a message or purpose? What is it?
- Do you think a story like this can help us to understand people better? How?

GIVE FEEDBACK

- You went back to cross-check what you’d read earlier as you learned more about Pete. That’s a good strategy for clarifying information to help you really get an author’s message.
- Thank you for sharing your opinion of Aunty Vera. It’s important to understand that people’s actions that seem unkind can be well intentioned. This is the sort of prior knowledge that is useful for understanding characters.

METACOGNITION

ASK QUESTIONS to develop students’ awareness of the strategies they used as they read.

- How did asking yourself questions help when you weren’t sure what was going on with Sarah and Pete?
- What did the author mean by, “It was all that needed to be said”? How did you work that out? What helped you?
- What image did you have in your mind as Sarah imagined Nemo being flushed down the toilet? How useful are mental images when you read?

 Reading standard: by the end of year 7

 The Literacy Learning Progressions

 Assessment Resource Banks

Instructional focus – Writing

English (Level 4 – Purposes and Audiences: Show an increasing understanding of how texts are shaped for different purposes and audiences.)

Text excerpts from “Losing Nemo”

“No!” Pete started shaking his head, and I could see he was getting agitated. Aunty Vera pulled her head back like an ostrich drawing away from something unpleasant.

“Perhaps it’s best we leave it for a while,” she said, giving me a look. “Maybe he’ll get better,” she suggested to Pete.

We got ready for our fish funeral. Pete pulled Nemo’s thin, shiny body out of the water and laid him in his Finding Nemo metal pencil case, which he’d carefully lined with a bed of oxygen weed. We dug a small hole in the backyard and waited until sunset, then we buried the coffin.

Examples of text characteristics

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

The use of a strong and/or unusual simile or metaphor can help the reader to understand a character. Making the comparison unusual or exaggerated gives the reader an even stronger image to help them “see” what the person is like or how they react.

IMPLICATION

Writers imply ideas so that the readers can infer information. The writer can give the reader clues, but they also expect readers to make connections with their own knowledge and experience to understand what the writer is implying.

USE OF DETAILS

By using carefully selected details, the writer builds up a picture in the reader’s mind. This helps the reader to understand the characters’ actions and how they relate to the overall theme of the story.

Teacher

(possible deliberate acts of teaching)

PROMPT students to consider their writing intentions.

- What idea or message do you want to convey in your writing?
- Which do you consider first, the audience or how you want to shape your writing? Why do you do that?
- Will you use planning to develop your idea before you start the first draft? If so, how?

PROMPT the students to use figurative language to help convey characters and their actions.

- Using a metaphor or a simile can give your readers an insight into a character. It helps the reader to visualise or imagine the person and their reactions.
- Sometimes using exaggeration (hyperbole) adds to the effect.
- How could you include a metaphor, a simile, or hyperbole in your writing?

EXPLAIN to the students how, as readers, they sometimes need to infer meaning from the text. Clues can be given in the dialogue (what the person says) as well as in the surrounding text. Sometimes the message is carried entirely through implications.

- Using implication is often more effective than telling the reader something directly, and in fiction it can be a good way of “showing, not telling” what a person is really thinking.
- Let’s look at what the writer is showing us about Aunty Vera. How does this relate to the overall theme or message in this story?
- How can you change or add to your story so that the reader has to infer some of the information or ideas?

EXPLAIN that details help the reader to understand importance in a story.

- The author shows us how carefully Sarah and Pete buried Nemo. As well as helping us build a picture of the funeral, these details help us to understand that Sarah was taking Pete and his grief seriously.

If students need support to understand the effect of adding details, model by rewriting this extract into shorter sentences without the detail, then comparing this with the original extract. You may also want to offer support with adding phrases with prepositions or using relative clauses to add details.

GIVE FEEDBACK to affirm students’ choices of ways to select, develop, and communicate ideas in their writing.

- Sam, your mind map helped you to explore your idea. How will you use it as you draft the story?
- You hinted at what was really happening but the ending was still a surprise. Your use of implication worked well.
- I’m impressed with the way you asked for and used feedback. It really made your message a lot more powerful.

METACOGNITION

ASK QUESTIONS to help the students think more deeply about the strategies they use to communicate ideas in their writing.

- Why did you choose this incident to write about? How does it illustrate the message or concept you wanted your readers to understand?
- How much did you assume your readers already knew? Have you given them enough help to understand the points you have made?
- What processes have you used to edit, revise, and proofread your writing? How do you decide when you’ve finished your writing?
- Why did you choose to imply information about the relationship between ... rather than state it directly?

Writing standard: by the end of year 7
The Literacy Learning Progressions