# Waiting for Toni

by James O'Sullivan

## Overview

This play is a parody of *Waiting for Godot,* the classic play by Samuel Beckett in which, famously, nothing happens. In addition to being performed by a group of students, all plays are literacy texts and can be used to explore ideas, language, and dialogue. This play was designed first and foremost with that in mind. Most students will benefit from revisiting the text several times, independently or in a group.

This play:

- includes the standard features of a play but has an unconventional structure (there is no obvious rising tension leading to a climax and denouement)
- includes absurdist humour
- makes playful use of language
- uses repetition.

A PDF of the text is available at www.schooljournal.tki.org.nz

**Texts related by theme** "The Royal Extraterrestrial Exploration Society" SJ L4 Oct 2011 | "Baa-mite" SJ L3 Oct 2015 | "A Real Steal" SJ L4 May 2013
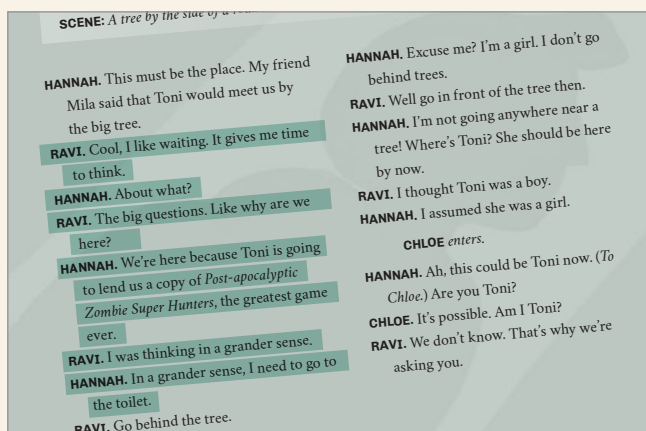
# Text characteristics from the year 8 reading standard
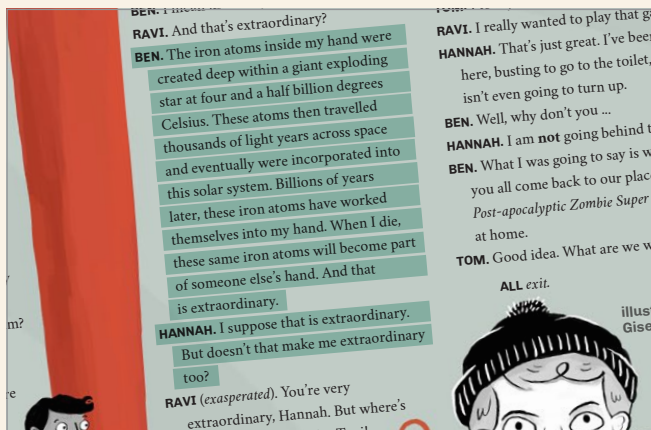


elements that require interpretation, such as complex plots, sophisticated themes, and abstract ideas



complex layers of meaning, and/or information that is irrelevant to the identified purpose for reading (that is, competing information), requiring students to infer meanings or make judgments



words and phrases with multiple meanings that require students to know and use effective word-solving strategies to retain their focus on meaning
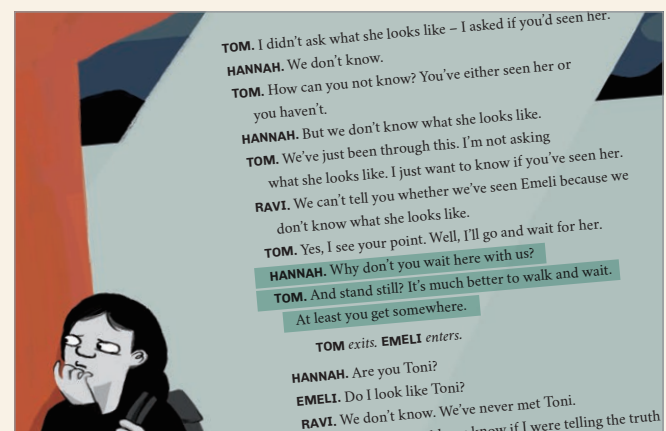


metaphor, analogy, and connotative language that is open to interpretation

**Reading standard: by the end of year 8**

# Possible curriculum contexts

**ENGLISH (READING)**

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

– Language features: Show an increasing understanding of how language features are used for effect within and across texts.

**ENGLISH (Writing)**

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

– Language features: Use a range of language features appropriately, showing an increasing understanding of their effects.

– Structure: Organise texts, using a range of appropriate structures.

**Possible reading purposes**

- To read for entertainment.

**Possible subsequent reading purposes**

- To investigate the use of repetition as a feature of plays
- To investigate what makes the play funny
- To identify and evaluate the author's purpose
- To read aloud with clear pronunciation, intonation, and pace.

**Possible writing purposes**

- To write a play with humorous dialogue
- To write unattributed dialogue to advance a narrative
- To take a known story and turn it into a play or take a play and turn it into a story
- To write a critical review of the play.

# Text and language challenges

(Some of the suggestions for possible supporting strategies may be more useful before reading, but they can be used at any time in response to students' needs.)

**VOCABULARY**

- Possibly unfamiliar words and phrases, including "post-apocalyptic", "iron atoms", "grander", "extraordinary", "exasperated".

**Possible supporting strategies**

- Remind students of word-solving strategies to work out the meaning of words they don't know, such as reading on and rereading, breaking words into syllables and parts, and making connections with their prior knowledge.
- *The English Language Learning Progressions: Introduction*, pages 39–46, has useful information about learning vocabulary.
- See also ESOL Online, Vocabulary, for examples of other strategies to support students with vocabulary.

**SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE REQUIRED**

- An understanding that nothing really happens in the play
- Familiarity with the structure of a conventional play and an understanding that the structure in this play differs from what's conventional
- Awareness that writers use words in a certain way for humour and that language can be used in unexpected ways to be funny.

**Possible supporting strategies**

- Review the structure and conventions of a typical play with the students.
- Remind students of other examples of wacky or nonsensical texts, such as those by Edward Lear, Dr Seuss, or Monty Python. Facilitate a discussion about what makes them funny or interesting.

**TEXT FEATURES AND STRUCTURE**

- An unconventional structure
- The use of repetition
- An ambiguous use of language and complex layers of meaning.

**Possible supporting strategies**

- Explain to the students that words will be repeated throughout this text and used in different ways.
- Explore the ambiguous use of language and complex layers of meaning by unpacking an example of how the same word can be used to mean different things depending on the context (for example, "grander" on page 38).
- Read the first page and then go back and explore it as a class. Identify and discuss the playful use of language.

# Instructional focus – Reading

**English** Level 4 – Purposes and audiences: Show an increasing understanding of how texts are shaped for different purposes and audiences; Language features: Show an increasing understanding of how language features are used for effect within and across texts.

## First reading

- Tell the students that the play is deliberately unconventional and absurdist, and that this is what they are looking for.
- Read page 38. Ask students to identify what is humorous or what is confusing, then have a discussion about why it is funny or confusing.
- Have the students read the rest of the play individually or in pairs.

**If the students struggle with this text**
- Refer back to the supporting strategies on page 2 of these notes to draw out specific knowledge.
- Read the play aloud to model where the humour is found.
- Discuss funny or confusing sections in the rest of the play and examine why they are humorous or why they are difficult to follow. Situations where characters confuse words can be particularly confusing for English language learners and may need further explanation.

## Subsequent readings

How you approach subsequent readings will depend on your chosen reading purpose.

**The teacher**
Go back and explore some of the parts that are humorous. For example, the humour derived from connotative language such as "then go behind the tree" or the absurdity of the boy walking backwards so that his clothes are pointing in the right direction.
Encourage the students to evaluate the success of the play:
- *What has the author done to make it funny?*
- *Has he succeeded? Do you think it's funny?*

Note: Word connotation (for example, multiple meanings or cultural understandings) can be very challenging for English language learners. Check regularly that students have understood the humour. Giving word definitions or dramatising or illustrating the humour will help to make the meaning more concrete.

**The students:**
- identify and evaluate unexpected responses characters make to other characters' questions, for example: "It's possible. Am I Toni?" They describe why these responses are unexpected and provide various interpretations of what they could mean
- find examples of characters talking at cross-purposes or instances where the author is using language playfully. They discuss the impact of these interactions, suggesting what makes them funny or not. They discuss what might have been said instead to establish why the writer deliberately created some confusion
- analyse the structure of the play to establish that it does not follow a conventional play or narrative structure
- identify particular interactions and discuss the particular type of humour the author is creating (absurdist humour)
- evaluate the author's use of language overall throughout the play and make statements about whether or not the author was successful in creating a humorous play, backing up their statements with examples from the text.

**The teacher**
Have the students read the text, in pairs or groups, with a particular focus on expression. Challenge students to create meaning through the way they express the dialogue. You could have them record audio versions of the play in pairs or small groups and then replay and compare different versions. Help English language learners to "notice" how English is spoken. You may need to be very explicit in demonstrating this. Shadow reading will help English language learners to hear the pattern and intonation of spoken English. Allow plenty of opportunities for repeated practice.

**The students:**
- in pairs, pull out some interactions between two characters and try different ways of reading them aloud that emphasise the humour and to find the most entertaining or humorous version
- record audio versions of the play in pairs or small groups and replay and compare different versions.

**The teacher**
Show students a video clip of a play or improvisational theatre to familiarise them with the conventions of a play and how actors can perform and deliver their lines. If possible, it could be instructive to show two different versions of the same play.

**The students:**
- use what they have learnt from the video clips to improve their delivery of their lines.

**GIVE FEEDBACK**
- *Your delivery improved each time you tried out that line. You managed to make it funnier each time by the way you emphasised different words.*

**METACOGNITION**
- How does speaking the lines aloud help you to understand their meaning?
- How did you decide which was the best way to say them?
- Is it possible to analyse what makes something funny or does it spoil the humour if you start pulling it apart and examining it?

**Reading standard: by the end of year 8**

**The Literacy Learning Progressions**

**Assessment Resource Banks**

# Instructional focus – Writing

**English** Level 4 – Purposes and audiences: Show an increasing understanding of how to shape texts for different purposes and audiences;
Language features: Use a range of language features appropriately, showing an increasing understanding of their effects;
Structure: Organise texts, using a range of appropriate structures.

| Text excerpts from "Waiting for Toni" | Examples of text characteristics | Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching) |
|---|---|---|
| **CHLOE.** I have a message from Toni.<br>**HANNAH.** You've met Toni? Is Toni a boy or a girl?<br>**CHLOE.** I've never seen Toni. I communicate with Toni by email.<br>**HANNAH.** Does Toni spell his or her name with a "y" or with an "i"?<br>**CHLOE.** With three e's actually – as in T-O-E-N-E-E.<br>**RAVI.** Why would Toni do that?<br>**CHLOE.** I don't know. But have you seen my brother Ben?<br>**HANNAH.** What does he looks like? | **DIALOGUE**<br>In any writing, dialogue can be used to move the action along and to reveal character. If dialogue is unattributed, there are often clues to indicate who is speaking, such as when the speaker is responding to a previous line. | Choose a section of text for an exercise in unattributed dialogue. Delete the characters' names and then ask the students to read it.<br>• *Do you have any problem following who is speaking?*<br>• *If so, could you add some words to make it clearer?*<br>• *Can you work out what is happening while they are talking?*<br>• *Does dialogue move the narrative forward?*<br>Have the students retell a story using entirely unattributed dialogue.<br>English language learners may benefit from finding chains of reference in a sample text in order to show who the pronouns refer to, for example, "I" and "I've" refer to Chloe while "he" refers to Ben. |
| **RAVI.** Why are your clothes on back to front?<br>**HANNAH.** And why are you walking backwards?<br>**TOM.** Isn't it obvious?<br>**HANNAH.** No.<br>**TOM.** I'm walking backwards so my clothes will be pointing in the right direction.<br>**RAVI.** Why don't you just change your clothes round?<br>**TOM.** I haven't got time to change my clothes round. I'm too busy looking for my friend Emeli. Have you seen her? | **THE HUMOUR IN LANGUAGE**<br>Writers often use language playfully or in unexpected ways to generate humour. For example, writers might use repetition or connotation to create humour. | Discuss what makes writing humorous.<br>• *How does an author make something funny?*<br>• *How do you use your writing to entertain with humour?*<br>• *Run a line past a friend and see if they think it is funny. If they do, can they tell you what makes it funny?* |
| **RAVI.** Why don't you wait here?<br>**EMELI** (*pointing*). But what if he goes over there? I'd look pretty stupid waiting here if he turned up there. No, I've got a much better chance if I wait there. | **SITUATIONAL HUMOUR**<br>Humour can be built around the situation. In this case, the writer makes the characters deliberately confuse things or say things that are ambiguous or ridiculous. | Ask the students to evaluate the text.<br>• *Why was it written, and why would it be performed?*<br>• *What was the author's purpose in writing the play? Does he achieve his purpose?*<br>• *Think about the pointlessness of the text. How does that make it funny?*<br>• *How could you make it funnier?*<br>• *What elements could you use from the text to make your writing funny?* |

**GIVE FEEDBACK**

• *It is great that you are trying to use unattributed dialogue, but I am having some trouble following it. Can you reread it with a partner and see where you might add some more detail so the reader can follow it more easily.*
• *I laughed when I read this part. You have made it so funny by creating confusion between the characters. I am dying to see how you resolve the confusion.*

**METACOGNITION**
• Find a part in your text where you deliberately tried to inject some humour. Tell your partner how you did it and why.
• How did you make it clear to the reader who was speaking? What did you find tricky?

**Writing standard: by the end of year 8**

**The Literacy Learning Progressions**