

Lesson Plan

Level 6



The Best of Times? Alan Maley

Aims

- to encourage students to try some creative writing
- to practise writing a newspaper article
- to stimulate students to read the book

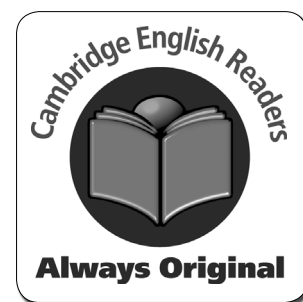
1. Tell students that the title of the book is *The Best of Times?* Make sure they realise that the title includes a question mark. Now ask students what the title makes them think about. (For example, some of them might be familiar with Charles Dickens' novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, which starts 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times'. Or they may think the title suggests someone looking back over his/her life and seeing things differently.) Write students' suggestions on the board.
2. Bearing in mind what students have come up with in Exercise 1, ask them what genre they think this story is. (You might want to work with them to construct a list of genres on the board.) Now ask them to read Extract 1, which is the 'blurb' of the book. (Teach 'blurb' if necessary: the publisher's description on the back of the book.) Ask them what kind of 'mood' they think the story will have. What kinds of emotions might the main character experience (e.g. anger, happiness, sadness, joy, despair, anxiety, disappointment, hope)? Have they changed their minds about the genre of the story now? If they haven't thought of 'human interest' as a possible genre, tell them now and ask them to work with a partner to decide on a definition for a story in this genre.

Possible definition: a story about relationships and emotions / a story that focuses on a person or people in an emotional manner, with the aim of creating an empathy between the reader and subject matter.

Ask them what other human interest stories they have read. Do students feel the story will be relevant to their lives? If so, why? If not, why not?
3. Ask students to read Extract 2. Tell them that the extract reveals how Chee Seng views four of his friends. Now ask students to work in pairs to discuss and then list what they have learned about these four friends. (NB: don't tell them that Raj is a dog at this stage – let them guess that for themselves!) Next, ask them to discuss what Chee Seng gets from his friendship with each of them, and share these ideas with the whole class.
4. Now, ask the pairs to think of other details about the four friends – i.e. to invent some information that will tell us more about them, e.g. their physical characteristics, favourite food, best and worst qualities, etc. Afterwards, ask two pairs to join together to share this extra character development with each other. How similar/different are their ideas for the characters?
5. Working alone, ask students to write a short scene where the friends talk to each other. If you feel the students need guidance about what the friends should talk about, you could suggest they talk about some trouble that broke out in class that day, or a plan for a trip out together. (If students haven't guessed yet that Raj is a dog, you could tell them now, although he can, of course, be in the scene.) Point out that in the extracts, Chee Seng is *telling* us about his friends. In their writing they should try to *show* the characters of the different boys, in the way that they speak and act towards each other. They should use both direct speech and direct action. When everyone has finished, put students into small groups and ask them to read out their scenes to each other. Do the other people in the group think they have been able to show the different characters of the friends?
6. Ask students to read Extract 3, which is a conversation between Chee Seng and his mother. Ask them to say how each character is feeling in this scene (e.g. angry, resentful). What do students think the relationship between mother and son is like?

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Suggested answers: hostile, confrontational, a relationship where ‘real’ feelings aren’t discussed, etc.

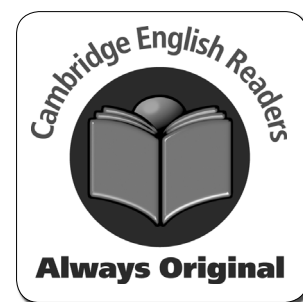
What do they think the ‘telephone incident’ referred to in the extract might have been?

7. Divide the class into two groups. Tell students that they are now going to do a piece of writing, to follow directly on from the end of Extract 3. The scene should build towards a crisis which will change Chee Seng and his mother’s relationship forever. For those in Group 1, this crisis will be negative between mother and son – e.g. something is said or done that means they can never have a close relationship again. For those in Group 2, this crisis will be positive – something is said or done that will break down all the barriers and reveal their true feelings, so that mother and son are united.
8. Divide students into small groups or pairs, with equal representatives from Groups 1 and 2. Ask them to read out their scenes to each other and then to discuss them. Which is the most powerful and convincing, and why? Share these scenes with the whole class.
9. Ask students to read Extract 4, and then ask them who they think Chee Seng is talking to (he is being interviewed by a police officer). Now ask students to speculate about what has happened at the party, and to write their suggestions up on the board.
10. Ask students to choose one of these suggestions and to think of a suitable newspaper headline for it. This should be a short, attention-grabbing statement about the event. Share these headlines with the whole class. Now ask students to write a newspaper article about the events at the party using their headline. First, briefly discuss how newspaper articles are written. Tell students about the triangle or inverted pyramid, i.e. that unlike in a story, in a newspaper article all the most important information comes at the beginning, with explanation and additional information after. Why do students think this style of writing is used?
Suggested answer: because most people do not read the article all the way through.

The ‘lead’ paragraph has all the who, what, when, where, why (and sometimes how) (5 Ws) information in it. Students must find the answers to these questions and include them in the opening sentence(s) of the article. They should try to hook the reader by beginning with a clever, or, in this case, shocking statement or provocative question. Explanation and details should follow. Remind them that writing should be in the third person and that they should be objective, giving facts rather than opinions and using quotes to express others’ opinions. The last paragraph should wrap things up somehow with a quote or a catchy/sobering phrase.
11. Now ask students to exchange news stories and to check that the ‘lead’ paragraph answers the 5 Ws. Ask them to answer the questions, ‘Did this article “hook” you into reading more? Why/why not?’ You may want to supply a check sheet that the students can fill in and return to the article writers. Students can then revise their articles if necessary.
12. If there are enough copies of *The Best of Times?* to go round, give them out and ask students to start reading.

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Extract 1

'Until about a year ago everything was perfect – or at least that's how it seemed to me.'

Chee Seng, a 16-year-old Malaysian boy, has to grow up fast as he lives through the best and the worst of times. He suffers heartbreak as his parents' marriage falls apart and experiences the joys and heartaches of first love.

Extract 2

Dev

His dad was some sort of accountant in a big law firm in the city. I liked his dad. He was a big man, always laughing and joking. Dev's mum made the most delicious samosas I'd ever tasted. Dev was tall and thin and told the funniest jokes ever. I think he must have got them from his dad. He was a great hockey-player too. He even played for the Selangor State junior team.

Faisal

His mum was quite strict with him. As a Muslim, he had to be back for his evening prayers, so sometimes he couldn't join us for our games. He was really good at drawing and painting. I especially loved the cartoons he drew of our teachers! Sometimes we went round to his place to do our homework together – that is, when I did any homework! His mum was a widow. Maybe that's why she was so strict with him, but she was nice too. Anyway, it always felt very friendly round at Faisal's.

Ka Choon

Ka Choon was quite different. He was short and fat with thick glasses. His dad was a very wealthy businessman in the building industry, and they lived in a really expensive housing development in Mont Kiara. They had a fantastic apartment with a big terrace, and had the use of all the club facilities like the swimming pool, fitness centre and games room. But Ka Choon's biggest interest was computers. He was a real expert when it came to the latest programs. He was really good at maths too – a mathematical champion.

Raj

Raj had lovely dark liquid eyes, so full of expression. I know sometimes people laugh when I say this, but I could swear Raj knew what I was thinking before I said anything. He would turn his head on one side and look at me with those eyes full of expression as if to say: 'It's time for us to play football, isn't it?'

Extract 3

Because of the incident with the telephone, Mum got more and more watchful and suspicious of everything I did. Every day we played a game of cat and mouse. I would try to get away with as much as I could, and she would try to catch me out.

'Why do you leave your computer on the whole time?' she asked me one day.

'Why not?' I replied, without thinking.

'Don't you start answering me back all the time,' she complained. 'I have to pay the electricity bills around here. And I notice you never turn off the lights either. You leave the TV on even when you're in your own room. I can't stand all this waste.' I mumbled some sort of apology and started to go back to my room.

'Hey! I haven't finished with you yet!' It was really aggressive, the way she spoke to me, getting worse every day. It made me feel angry and defensive, and I was finding it hard to hide how I felt.

'When do you intend to do your homework, by the way?'

'I'll do it when I'm ready,' I replied.

'You'll do it when I say so!' she was getting really angry.

'No, I won't,' I said. 'Don't keep telling me what to do and when to do it. I'm not a child, you know.'

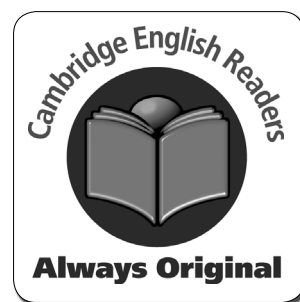
Extract 4

'Name?'

'Yeo Chee Seng.'

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He checked the paper in front of him. 'We'll be contacting your parents later. Is this your home number?' He read it out and I nodded. 'Who invited you to this party?'

'Ka Ting,' I replied.

'How do you know him?'

'We're in the same class at school,' I answered.

'How many people did you know at the party?' he asked, looking me directly in the eye. I looked down. 'Come on. How many?' he asked impatiently.

'Maybe four or five,' I mumbled.

'What are their names?'

'Ka Ting, Chee Lick, Wendy, Ruby and Jessica, the girl who...'

'Ah yes, Jessica,' he said thoughtfully. 'Tell me about Jessica.'

'She was my...I mean we were close friends. We were...'

'She was your girlfriend, right?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And Ka Ting?'

'He invited us to the party – Jessica and me.'

'Had he ever invited you before, or was this the first time?'

'He'd invited me maybe twice before,' I confessed.

'What about these?' he asked, throwing some pills on the table. 'Do you know what they are?' It was useless to lie. He already knew the answer.