

How to Write a Graded Reader and Graded Reader Activities

by Anne Collins

Getting started

Writing Graded Readers is a specialized skill, whether you are writing an original story or adapting an existing one. Adaptations can be of modern or classic novels, plays or movie stories. Graded Readers can be funny, serious, contemporary, historical, biographical, factual or fantastic. Each type of Reader presents its own challenges and, for the author, demands patience, careful planning, close attention to detail and – occasionally – ingenuity.

Being prepared

Never attempt to write a Graded Reader ‘cold’. If you are new to the game, you can help yourself enormously by doing some research first. Find out which ELT publishers produce Graded Readers and the name of the editor of their Graded Readers series. First, you need to contact the editor and ask them to send you their company’s guidelines for writing a Graded Reader. These guidelines should come with a list of vocabulary and grammatical structures for each level. You must study this material carefully as it will give you vital information about what is required. These guidelines will not be the same for all publishers. The length of the text at a particular level, the number of pages and the number of words, the wordlists and structures all vary from publisher to publisher.

Next, you need to obtain the Graded Readers catalogues of the main ELT publishers and check through them to see what titles have already been published, and at which levels. Catalogues can usually be ordered in printed form from the publisher or found online on their websites. If you have a particular story that you want to write, or an existing story in mind that you want to adapt, suggest it to the publisher before starting to write it. If it is an original story, provide a brief synopsis. It may be that your idea, although brilliant, is for one reason or another not suitable for a Reader, perhaps because of the subject matter. If you are planning an adaptation, it may be that the publisher has already commissioned it, or perhaps too many other publishers have already published it. You can save yourself a lot of time and effort by finding out these things *before* starting to write.

Being commissioned

If you are intending to write an adaptation, the editor may ask you to provide a sample of your work to ensure that you can write to the standard required. This sample may be based on a work which is not likely to be published, it is simply for the editor to find out whether you are capable of writing good quality adaptation material. In this case you need to be aware that, while you should get an acknowledgement for your sample, you may not get an immediate ‘yes’ or ‘no’. It may be that the editor feels there are no projects suited to your interests and capabilities at that time but thinks you could be suitable for a later project.

As you gain experience and become more successful in writing Graded Readers, publishers may offer you commissions. They will specify whether they want an original Graded Reader or an adaptation, and at which level to write it. Some writers will eventually find themselves in the fortunate position of being able to turn down stories which don’t appeal to them. Everybody has their favourite genres. My own are detective stories, mysteries, romance, humorous stories, adventure stories and the classics. I am less comfortable with sci-fi because I am not so interested in this genre.

Being in tune with your audience

Another point to remember about Graded Readers is that the majority of students who read them are teenagers at secondary school level. Publishers are therefore most interested in subjects which will appeal to this group. You should also keep in mind that in many markets certain topics are unacceptable – e.g. swearing, sex and the drinking of alcohol – and incidents involving them should be omitted wherever possible. Sometimes, at higher levels, such incidents are essential to the storyline and cannot be left out, but you should still tone them down as much as possible. Stories involving religion also have to be treated with caution. The publisher will offer you guidance concerning their policy towards these sensitive subjects.

Writing an original story

If a publisher likes your synopsis and commissions your idea for an original Reader, ask them to send you a couple of Readers at the level they require. Take time to study these carefully and observe how they are organized – how much text, how many chapters, how many pages of illustrations – and use that format as a model for your own Reader. Depending which publisher you are writing for, you may be asked to provide art briefs. If so, as you write, think about possible illustrations and how they will support the story. Graded Readers at lower levels are short and contain a large number of illustrations. The more learners progress, the fewer the illustrations.

To write a successful original Graded Reader, you must be good at telling stories as well as controlling language. Stories which make good original Readers are often about crime or mystery – anything which keeps the reader turning the pages and wanting to find out what will happen. Your story must be interesting and entertaining, with a strong storyline that is easy to follow. It must flow at a good pace. Events must happen in a logical sequence and not jump back and forth in time too much, as this will only lead to confusion. Each new character should be clearly introduced, and remember – when it comes to how many there are, ‘less is more’!

Before you write, make a plan of your Reader. Divide it into chapters and write down what will happen in each one. It is essential to work to a written plan because you can follow it like a map and it will make writing your Reader considerably easier. Some people have the mistaken idea that writing a Graded Reader at beginner or elementary level is easier than writing at a more advanced level. But writing lower level Readers can be equally challenging and you still need to plan. You also have to write in language that is simple but never stiff or wooden. Whatever level you are writing at, keep the publisher’s guidelines close beside you. Refer to them constantly to ensure you are writing within that publisher’s specified vocabulary and structural controls.

Adapting an existing story for a Graded Reader

Planning and research

Adaptation is a skill. A successful adaptation of an existing story is a book in its own right. It does not necessarily follow that, because a student enjoys an adaptation, they will enjoy the original book. One of the secrets of success is to know the original story inside out. As you read, think about the purpose of the events and characters ...

- Is this event necessary to move the action forward? Is this character necessary to the plot? If the answer is no, omit them from your adaptation.
- What about the time sequence? Will you need to do some reordering of events to make them clearer in your Reader?
- Does the original author assume cultural knowledge which someone learning English as a foreign language might not have? If so, do you need to give a brief explanation within the text of the story?

Sometimes you can be asked to adapt a story about an unfamiliar subject. So this will involve a lot of research. I was asked by Macmillan to adapt the story of *Touching the Void* which is about mountaineering. This was challenging because it involved a basic knowledge of mountaineering which I did not have. However, doing some basic research was interesting, fun and gave me the necessary understanding of the background to the story. Similarly, when adapting *The Perfect Storm*, I did research into the fishing industry on the east coast of North America. This enabled me to make a much better job of my adaptation.

Structure

As with an original Reader, planning is essential. Before you start your adaptation, make a written plan, chapter by chapter. Refer regularly to your plan as you write – especially if your writing extends over a period of weeks. It is amazing how much of your original planning you can forget. A written plan is essential to keep you on track. Try to think how many chapters should be in your Reader – probably fewer than in the original story. It is helpful to look at other Readers of the same level and see how many chapters they have. You will probably have to compress events into one chapter in your adaptation which in the original may run over two or three. If an original story has twenty-two chapters, then your adaptation will probably have eleven or twelve. As a general rule, a Graded Reader should not have more than twenty chapters.

Drafts and editing

Write your first draft. This is the hardest and most time-consuming part of the whole process. At this stage, try to conform to the vocabulary controls specified by the publisher, but don't worry about the grammar in too much detail. Grammar can be fixed later. Having said that, if you are writing a Reader at Level 3, for example, and you find that you are constantly using the past perfect, it is a good idea to check that it is appropriate for that level before going on. As far as possible, as you write, try to retain the original author's style. For example, if the original story relies heavily on dialogue, make sure your adaptation does the same. If humour is important, as for example in the *Bridget Jones* stories or *The Princess Diaries*, retain it in your adaptation.

Once you have completed a draft, close the original book and work from your manuscript. Check the publisher's specification for the number of pages and number of words for the level and make sure your text conforms to the requirements. If it is too long, you will have to do a lot of pruning, but make sure that as you are doing so, you don't cut out essential events and characters.

Consider your style – is it coherent? Does your story hang together? How about the sentence length? Sentences should not be convoluted and should be kept very short and simple at the lower levels. Check your grammatical structures against the publisher's requirements and amend them if necessary.

An important point to remember is not to write at a level *below* the specified level. Try to make full use of the permitted words and structures. Otherwise, your adaptation will not be challenging enough for students at that level. At the same time you also need to make sure that your writing isn't *too* challenging. Some Graded Readers writers have a tendency to rely on the editor to simplify their words and structures. This creates unnecessary work for the editor and he or she may not commission you again.

Introduction, glossary and artwork

A publisher will often require you to write an introduction to your Graded Reader. This will probably include information about the original author's life, the background to the Reader and a note about the story itself. The length of the introduction will vary according to the level and the publisher. Some publishers require you to provide a glossary of words outside the permitted wordlist, others do this in-house. As far as artwork is concerned, some publishers require you to give detailed art briefs; others expect decisions about the artwork to be made by the editor.

Activities

Depending on the publisher, you may be asked to provide activities that go with your Graded Reader. Some publishers, however, commission a second writer to write these activities. If you are mainly interested in writing activities that accompany the Graded Reader, rather than writing the Reader itself, you still need to go through the above process of researching the publisher and contacting the editor.

Before you start writing, read the activity pages carefully in Readers of the same level to get a feel for what is required.

To write good activities, you need to be aware of language controls, but you also need a good imagination. Your activities should be as varied and as interesting as possible, as their main purpose is to help students to understand and enjoy the book. The activities should be centred round the main characters, their relationships and motivations, the main action in the plot, important events, settings etc – and not focus on insignificant details.

The number of activity pages will vary according to the readers' level and each publisher's specifications. Activities can consist of several different types. Examples of common activity types are:

- Comprehension questions – students answer questions about the text.
- Ordering activities – students put a series of jumbled events into the order in which they occur in the text.
- Gap-fill activities – students read a short summary of part of the text and fill in the blank spaces with a suitable word.
- True/false activities – students read a number of statements and decide whether the information they contain is true or false, according to the text. They can also be asked to correct the sentences containing false information.
- Multiple choice activities – students choose the correct answer from a number of options.
- Matching activities – students match characters with actions, or characters with dialogue, or match broken halves of sentences.

In addition, grammar activities, oral and aural activities, writing activities and ideas for projects may be required, depending on the publisher. Grammar activities focus on the grammar used for that particular level. Examples of oral activities are retelling the story, role-playing scenes from the story and interviewing key characters. Aural activities may include listening exercises on a related website or CD.

Writing activities relate to events in the story. They can take a variety of forms, such as a newspaper report of a key event, a police report or a letter from one character to another. Projects can be done individually or in groups. Although they are related to the story, they also move away from it. The types of project depend on the level and age of the students. Some suggestions for projects, depending on the level, age and type of Reader, follow:

Lower levels/ages

- Colour a picture.
- Draw and label a picture.
- Make a finger puppet.
- Make a mask.

Intermediate levels

- Draw and label a map.
- Design an invitation.
- Create an advertisement.
- Plan an itinerary for a journey.

Advanced levels

- Plan a movie.
- Plan a promotional campaign for a new product.
- Plan a campaign to raise money for a charity or to help protect the environment.
- Write part of a play, radio show or TV programme.
- Design a website.

See the Projects section at www.macmillanenglish.com/readers/teachersite/projects.html for examples of past projects which have been written for Macmillan.

For would-be writers, writing Graded Readers has many advantages. They are not huge literary works which take forever to produce. Writing a Graded Reader is a skill that can be learnt, has clear guidelines to follow and gets easier with practice. Graded Readers are fun to read and are also fun to write. Good luck!

For more information about Anne Collins, see her Author Data Sheet at www.macmillanenglish.com/readers/teachersite/resourcefiles/authorinformation/ads.annecollins.pdf. For a list of titles which Anne Collins has written for Macmillan, see the Macmillan Readers catalogue.