

The Houdini Box - Y6 Biography and autobiography

Prior Knowledge - Check that children can already:

Identify and discuss the language and organisational features of information texts.

Understand how texts are and can be adapted to suit different purposes and audiences.

Recognise the difference between biography and autobiography, and when and why these may be written.

Experience - Set up a 'magic corner' Leave space on the wall for children to add notes/questions/interests etc which can be referred to during the reading of the book. If possible, invite a magician (or someone who can do magic tricks!) into the class. Children question visitor, just as an author would research a particular aspect of a famous person's life. Record questions asked, and at a later time the children consider which questions were most effective for eliciting information.

Familiarisation and immersion in text

- Introduce the book 'Houdini Box' Discuss cover . predict what the book may be about and who the characters might be on the front. Use picture clues to support predictions. (Encourage discussion around fiction and non-fiction text types)
- Look at the first two pages, and the last two (posters for shows). What do we know now? What do we want to know? Was Houdini real, or is this a story?
- Read the book with the children. Explore text in detail . enjoy the humour of Victor's escapes; consider using Community of Enquiry; the opening sentence suggests it is a story . which elements are story-like? Which elements could be real?
- Compare the illustrations of Victor and Houdini (and look for photos of Houdini to compare with Selznick's drawings).
- Read 'AN INTERESTING NOTE' by Brian Selznick. How does this add to the story? What do we want to know now?

Phase outcome

- Children engage with the text, raising questions, deciding on its value, quality or usefulness
- Raise questions for further research

Capturing ideas Oral Rehearsal

- Create a class 'life-line' of Houdini. Make notes and adapt or extend the information on the life line as new information and insights are gained
- Assemble several different biographical sources of information on Houdini.
- In pairs or groups, children undertake further research to answer the key questions using a range of the sources. They make notes to collate evidence and possible conclusions.
- Relate research to what they have read in 'The Houdini Box' how much is the story based in fact?
- Explore contrasting versions of Houdini's life (for example, contemporary accounts, news accounts, the accounts of rivals and how they viewed Houdini's tricks, biographies put together by fans). Discuss the purpose and audience of each, different perspectives, possible bias, etc. and relate these to the language and other communication devices used.

Phase outcomes:

- Children can evaluate the reliability and usefulness of biographical information from different sources.
- Children can understand the terms 'biography' and 'autobiography' and can use them appropriately.
- Children can extract and interpret information effectively from biographical and autobiographical sources.

WRITING: Model, scribe, support INDEPENDENT

- Model the writing of part of a biography or autobiography based on the research findings about the life of Houdini. In demonstrating, show how to construct sentences in a variety of ways to convey subtlety of meaning and use punctuation to clarify that meaning.
- Discuss the audience and purpose for the writing, and model various alternative formats, for example multimodal presentation, paper recount or autobiographical diary of a weblog.
- Write a section of Houdini's biography, deciding on viewpoint. Children write same section as an autobiography. As a result, they will explore constructing sentences in a variety of ways to convey subtlety of meaning and using punctuation to clarify that meaning.

- Children work in pairs to produce a biography and autobiography of Victor from the story. Use the story to help construct Victor's early life, then focus on what happens to him after he discovers the Houdini Box. How does his life change? The work should be similar, but reflect different viewpoints about the situations Victor has encountered.

Unit outcome

Children can write an effective biography or autobiography selecting language, form, format and content to suit a particular audience and purpose.

Further challenge:

Children plan, draft, write and improve a biography or simulated autobiography, based on the material about a person they have selected, and make their own selection from the range of explored and demonstrated mediums and styles (including ICT and multimodality) as appropriate to their purpose and audience.