

# A Classroom Guide to Dr. Seuss

Compiled by Simon Adorian

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## Introduction

For nearly fifty years the books of Dr. Seuss have both delighted and fascinated young readers with **hypnotic rhythms and zany rhymes**. Titles like *The Cat In The Hat* have become classic texts for beginners, at the same time accessible, simple and unique.

Dr. Seuss started his series in 1957 after he read an article complaining about the idiotic and pallid quality of the reading material being used in American schools. He took 223 scheme specified words and wrote a fresh and original book called *The Cat In The Hat*. He also created the equally distinctive illustrations where his use of colour and handling of perspective add to the **surreal mood of the narrative**. Dr. Seuss's landscapes and texts are eccentric and timeless, with very few references to the details of "realistic" contemporary life by which books can be dated.

To date over  $\frac{1}{2}$  billion Dr. Seuss books have been sold worldwide and the recent success of the American feature film *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* is further testimony to the enduring appeal of Dr. Seuss. Recent recordings of Dr. Seuss texts by American comedian Robin Williams, alternative comic Adrian Edmondson and by the rap superstar Ja-Rule confirm that Dr. Seuss commands a loyalty, even a cult status, far beyond what might be expected from a writer of "Beginner Books".

## The Appeal of Dr. Seuss's Books

The appeal of Dr. Seuss's books lies in the **zany energy of their language and storylines**, and the way in which the tension and humour build relentlessly:

- *The Cat In The Hat* brings more and more chaotic mess to the house until it seems impossible that things could ever be sorted out.
- In *How The Grinch Stole Christmas*, the list of stolen goods being packed into the Grinch's sack grows unfeasibly and the pictures become busier and more chaotic. This mounting tension is reflected in the rhythms of Dr. Seuss's sentences as the pace accelerates towards the climax.

His books are a **delight to read aloud**: it's almost impossible not to join in those punchy sentences with their repeated phrases and inviting rhymes.

At a time when there is much concern about finding "**boy friendly**" texts to support the teaching of early reading, the **robust and crazy world of Dr. Seuss is worth exploring**.

It offers a model of reading that is both **free-spirited and positive**:

"You have brains in your head.  
You have feet in your shoes.  
You can steer yourself  
any direction you choose.  
You're on your own. And you know what you know.  
And YOU are the guy who'll decide where to go...."  
- *Oh, The Places You'll Go!*

## Using Dr. Seuss books in the Literacy Hour

The Literacy Strategy Framework text range specifies the use of stories with predictable and patterned language throughout Key Stage 1, and **Dr. Seuss titles are definitive texts for Shared Reading**. Audiotapes can also be used to support guided or independent reading and for children to practise reading aloud with appropriate pace and expression.

### Shared Reading

Dr. Seuss's strong, **recurring patterns of rhyme are easily identifiable in Shared Reading** and can be exploited for developing young children's phonic awareness.

An obvious activity is to cover up the final rhyming word and let young readers join in; this can be consolidated through games using onset and rhyme. Indeed, Dr. Seuss favours such perfect rhymes that he will conjure up surreal combinations like:

"You can learn about ice.  
You can learn about mice.  
Mice on ice.  
And ice on mice."  
- *I Can Read With My Eyes Shut!*

He will even invent strange new names and words to make the rhyme work as in:

"My name is Ish.  
On my hand I have a dish."  
- *One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish*

These are **ideal models to initiate your own rhyming games** and to relate the rhymes to common spelling patterns. The frequent invented words give regular opportunities for the teacher to model and children to apply phonic and other word level skills in the reading process.

## Shared Writing

The pattern of Dr. Seuss's stories can easily be adopted for Shared Writing activities, for example:

"You can read about trees...  
and bees...  
and knees.  
And knees on trees!  
And bees on threes!"  
- *I Can Read With My Eyes Shut!*

This verse can become the model for new verses (for example, "You can read about cats/ mice/ boots") where common spelling choices are reinforced through analogy.

## Grammar Skills

Zany sentences can be chopped up for children to re-order and apply their developing awareness of sentence grammar.

For example:

I	would not	could not	in a box.
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I	could not	would not	with a fox.
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I	will not	eat them	with a mouse.
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I	will not	eat them	in a house.
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These lines from *Green Eggs And Ham* lend themselves to a number of different permutations that would still match the rhymes and pattern of the original.

## Confident Readers

It is also worth considering the value of Dr. Seuss's titles with older and more confident readers. By the end of Key Stage 1, the Framework requires children to: **"look at a range of titles by the same author to compare and identify features"**

In Year 2, Term 3 the Framework specifies:

**"to compare and contrast work by the same author..."**

and in Year 5, Term 1:

**"to discuss the enduring appeal of established authors and "classic" texts"**

A series of picture books for young readers can be fruitful sources for this sort of investigation, and not just for the less confident readers. A discussion of the appeal of classic texts for early readers should develop pupils' understanding of the process and nature of reading. More sophisticated readers are likely to detect more humour and satire than in their previous encounters with Dr. Seuss. Objectives in Year 5, Term 3 relating to the **rehearsal and performance of choral poetry** could be adapted to allow older pupils to prepare and perform Seuss texts for younger children. These can be enhanced with music, percussion or rap techniques. Some could make tapes to be used as early years resources.

## On-line Resources

Another attraction for using Dr. Seuss as a teaching tool is the wide range of electronic resources freely available on the internet:

- 10 free Dr. Seuss lesson plans written by Peta Lloyd and Ellie Goodridge, who are both LEA Primary Literacy Consultants for Dorset County Council, are available for downloading from:

[www.collinseducation.com/childrensfiction](http://www.collinseducation.com/childrensfiction)

## About Simon Adorian

Simon Adorian is an experienced English teacher who is currently Deputy Headteacher of a large 9-13 Middle School. He has worked as an LEA Literacy Consultant and has written numerous playscripts for schools. He has recently edited an Anthology for the Collins Cascades Collection.

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