

## Teaching ballads

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### Overview

Adapting a project that he had used previously, Chris Mackinder sought to exploit the power of ICT to help students write their own ballads. Within a carefully-structured approach which included studying both traditional ballads and a film retelling, students used a number of simple tools to help them with their compositions. Students found this made the activity both easier and more enjoyable. As a result they took considerable pride in their achievements. The activity lends itself to sharing across classes and schools.

### Introduction

The initial documentation for this project talked about topics that can be ‘notoriously hard to teach’ and went on to explain that solutions can ‘be found through the use of appropriate technologies and the novel methods that spring from them’. In this case study I propose to share some ways in which the teaching of ballads might be enhanced, made potentially even more interesting and better understood by pupils.

I am a great believer in the practical and friendly application of technology and am certainly no computer ‘whiz kid’ so all of my solutions have been what I like to call ‘lo-tech’. I believe that they can be applied in any classroom with computer access by English teachers and/or non-experts in the ICT field. When I was Head of English, Drama and Media, part of my brief was to increase ICT usage throughout the department, assisting colleagues to develop their ICT skills whether they were advanced or basic. On this basis I always tried to find meaningful solutions that would actually work in front of real classes and didn’t require a vast array of technical resources which weren’t readily available in a regular classroom environment.

### Context

In this case study I propose to share some of the things I have recently done with my Year 8, Set 2 class using basic ICT capacity to enliven a topic and put across challenging ideas. I consider that the way I have worked could be a model for other areas of the English curriculum where the technology and techniques can be quickly and easily adapted for other purposes.

### The hard-to-teach topic

The aim of the topic is to allow pupils to explore the ballad form, differentiate it from other poetic forms and then have an opportunity to create their own ballad. Once initial definitions have been offered and some important oral work has been carried out, one can move on to the writing/word-processing phase which youngsters really enjoy.

## Background

I well remember trying to teach this topic some years ago with an ordinary whiteboard and board marker, discussing pupil choices and suggestions, adding alternative lines, etc. and though enjoyable and capable of producing pleasing results, it was hard and sometimes frustrating work for pupils and teacher alike. With the increased availability of word processing facilities, memory sticks and access to the Internet both in school and home, it has become not only easier but more satisfying to teach this (and other) topics.

## Method

### Step 1

Pupils are introduced to the topic and allowed to carry out some **Internet research** on ballads alongside classroom teaching. The main aim is for pupils to have a definition of ballads so that they can apply this in their own poem when they come to write it. A **Google search** of 'Ballad Poems' will bring up several basic websites that provide this as well as some examples of traditional and other ballads that can be spoken aloud. You may need to clarify ballads as poems rather than 'pop song ballads' - though these could be a fertile ground for exploration anyway! These sites are useful:

- [www.types-of-poetry.org.uk](http://www.types-of-poetry.org.uk)
- [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)
- [www.poetryarchive.org](http://www.poetryarchive.org)

### Step 2

As so many ballads tell a story, the use of a film as a focus for the pupil poems is a good starting point. I use a DVD of *Edward Scissorhands* (Tim Burton) but have also used *The Night of the Hunter* (Laughton) and *The Elephant Man* (David Lynch). All are quality films, suitable for use in school, though *Elephant Man* is not suitable for younger pupils (KS3).

Pupils can carry out **Internet research** on the focus film but they need to be aware that they are watching the film with a view to writing their own ballad: 'The Ballad of...Edward Scissorhands?'

Possible tasks are :

- looking at Internet reviews of the film
- Internet research on the director, main actors, etc.
- finding and saving a plot summary
- creating a simple PowerPoint slide show of images from the film. These images can be used later on in the unit when pupils will want to illustrate their own ballads. (Sometimes due to restricted Internet access, especially for images, it is a good idea to create a folder of images yourself and place it on a resource drive from which pupils can access easily and select pictures.)

### Step 3

After sharing some previous examples of pupil work (e.g. on an interactive whiteboard), you can start to create the poem with the pupils. At this stage, and depending on how many computers and how often you have access to them, it is time to decide whether this is an individual or group endeavour; either can yield great results.

#### Step 4

Give the class your 'free gift': the first stanza of the ballad (of 'Edward Scissorhands').

Just look at him, there he stands,  
Edward with his scissor hands.  
So sad that his creator died  
Before his hands had been applied.  
Alone at night he'd look down  
From his mansion o'er the town.  
Yet what a tale there was to tell  
When the Avon Lady rang the bell.

I like to read this aloud with the group: we have some fun with choral reading, parts of the class reading a line each and so on. This first stanza acts as the model for remaining stanzas which, with support, the class will go on to compose.

This opening stanza provides the number of lines, the end couplet, **rhyme scheme**, a sense of **rhythm** and establishes the idea of using the film's unfolding plot as a way of **structuring** the poem. Pupils need to be held to the structure as this underlines the discipline needed to write original poetry.

#### Step 5

Pupils now move on to begin to word process their own Stanza 2 : they can find this quite challenging and some joint work on the interactive whiteboard using some initial pupil examples is often a big help to those who are struggling with the concept.

A further and essential piece of support is to give the class a series of prompts for the next and the following stanzas, in respect of *Key Events* in the film:

#### Example of pupil prompts for Stanzas 3, 4 and 5

##### Stanza 3 prompts

*In Stanza 2 you have covered – Edward is coming down to town with Peg, how the neighbours all were talking about him, etc.*

*In Stanza 3 you might cover some or all of the following :*

- *When Edward sees a picture/photo of Kim – love at first sight?*
- *How Edward tries to cope with everyday things such as eating and drinking.*

*In Stanza 4 think about :*

- *The family barbecue with Ed using his scissor hands as a skewer.*
- *How the neighbours surround Ed and invite him to their houses.*
- *Edward's flashback when opening a can to how he was 'made' by the inventor.*

*In Stanza 5 think about :*

- *Edward is in the garden cutting a tree/bush into a shape (sculpture).*

- *Kim arrives home from a trip (early) and is terrified by Edward who is in her bed!*
- *Kim screams – Edward bursts the waterbed.*
- *While Kim is comforted, her Dad gives Edward a strong drink and he collapses, drunk.*

The above basic prompts usually enable most pupils to begin writing. Their creativity and imagination flows. You can enhance the atmosphere with suitable music if appropriate – don't forget, the evocative soundtrack (by Danny Elfman) is easily available.

### Step 6

As pupils continue with their original writing on the computers they can use Internet sites such as [www.rhymezone.com](http://www.rhymezone.com) and an Internet thesaurus to help with the process. In my class the youngsters had been using the Rhymezone site previously and simply applied it to this task. Well done guys!

### Step 7

Pupils now proceed to write individually, in pairs or groups (your choice) the rest of 'The Ballad of Edward Scissorhands'. I suggest about eight stanzas in total but this very much depends on the class and resources (such as computer room time and access).

### Conclusions

Having taught this unit over several years with increased use of ICT I can genuinely say that it has not only become easier to teach but more enjoyable – not least because the pupils really become engaged and are extremely proud of the discoveries they make on the poetic journey and the professional end result. It is nice when pupils ask to take their ongoing work home to show parents and carers and also share each other's efforts with interest. Understanding is increased and takes root – the classroom becomes a place of discovery.

### Next steps

My next step is to get more formal written feedback through a survey and I would like to do more display work, as well as sharing pupil work with other schools using ICT.

**Appendix: an example of a pupil's *almost* complete, illustrated ballad.**

Just look at him! There he stands,  
Edward with his scissor hands.  
So sad that his creator died  
Before Edward's hands had been applied.  
Alone at night he'd look down  
From his mansion o'er the town;  
Yet what a tale there was to tell  
When the Avon lady rang the bell...

In the mansion peg opens the door  
A shadow is seen on the floor.  
A figure stood the looking dead  
All the way from toe to head.  
Peg brought Edward to town  
Edward hasn't been this far down  
Yet what a tale there was to tell  
When the Avon lady rang the bell...

Edward had a big crush  
While he was in love he was cutting a bush  
He really likes to trim trees  
But really afraid of the bees  
He has trouble eating meet  
But can't take his shoes off his feet  
Yet what a tale there was to tell  
When the Avon lady rang the bell...

Ed helps everyone making the barbeque  
With his big long skewers.  
All the neighbours gather round  
And no one made a sound.  
They tasted all the food  
They were in a good mood  
Yet what a tale there was to tell  
When the Avon lady rang the bell...

Edward was cutting a bush  
But he had a big crush  
Kim arrived early back from her trip  
Edward busted the bed and had a dip  
Her dad gave Edward a drink  
The colour was pink  
Yet what a tale there was to tell  
When the Avon lady rang the bell...

Ed starts to style the people's hair  
The ladies thought Edward very rare.  
Next day their dogs get a trim  
The scissors move the scissor skim.  
Next day he was on tele  
But he had butterflies in his belly  
Yet what a tale there was to tell  
When the Avon lady rang the bell...

Jim pressures Ed in robbing a house  
Edward was a quiet as field mouse.  
The alarm goes off and Ed caught by the cops  
All the neighbours come out there pyjamas tops.  
Edward gets let off with a warning  
Then he comes back in the morning.  
Yet what a tale there was to tell  
When the Avon lady rang the bell...

Ed saves Kim's little brother from Jim's van  
But things were going as plan.  
Ed is chased from the town  
He feels sorry deep down.  
Ed and Jim have a fight  
And Jim goes out the window for a flight.  
Yet what a tale there was to tell  
When the Avon lady rang the bell...

*Jamie 25/4/08*