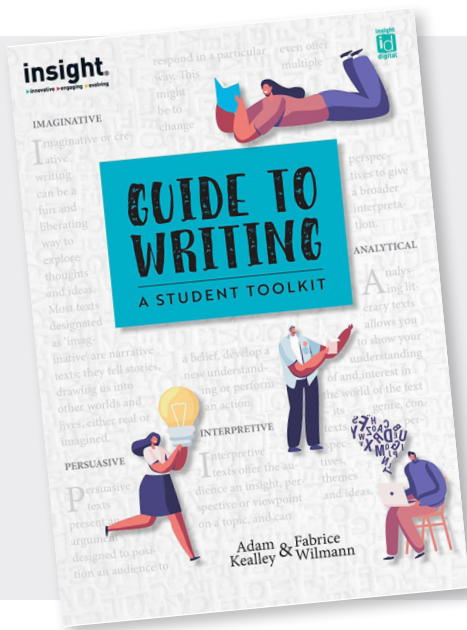


VATE member book reviews

June 2022



Guide to Writing: A student toolkit

Reviewed by Lee Crossley, Penleigh and Essendon Grammar School

WRITERS: Adam Kealley and Fabrice Wilmann | **PUBLISHER:** Insight Publications, 2021 | **RRP:** \$29.95

Aimed at middle-years students and supporting the Australian Curriculum for English, *Guide to Writing: A student toolkit* is designed to help students become capable and confident writers. Combining the comprehensiveness of a textbook with the practicality of a workbook, the text explores the four main types of writing: imaginative, persuasive, interpretive and analytical. Each section focuses on a different type of writing and includes strategies, techniques and activities to develop and hone students' writing skills.

Imaginative writing

If your students are like mine, then they're not too keen on creative writing. This is not helped by the fact that it does not feature on the VCE English Exam and therefore many schools pay this area of the English course lip service. Given that, there is often a dearth of ready-made resources to assist in the teaching of creative writing. I gave *Guide to Writing: A student toolkit* a test-drive, using my Year 12 students as guinea pigs. (They were responding creatively to Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*). I found the resources helped

weaker students, giving them structures and tips for how to introduce setting and character in the orientation stage of writing their vignettes. They also found helpful the tips on writing dialogue, and advice on how to end their stories strongly. My students benefited from seeing the worked examples the book provides and then were able to use these as a launching off point for their own writing.

Persuasive writing

'But I don't know what to write.' 'How do I start?' 'And then what?' Sound familiar? This section is really helpful at giving students a nudge in the right direction. Again, it's more aimed at Years 7-10 students; however, weaker VCE students or those requiring more structured activities might benefit from this section too. There are tips on how to develop a point of view, supporting a contention with reasons, and how to embed evidence. There is a table with argument strategies and a list of persuasive techniques, which are by no means exhaustive. Perhaps the most useful part is the advice and resources to help students construct their Issues Oral, particularly the pages on Crafting an Engaging Voice. There are also resources on how to write a Letter to the Editor and how to write a debating speech.

Interpretive writing

This section was a little bit confusing because it contains advice on how to form an opinion, which I think belongs with Point of View writing. They have included advice on Reflecting Personally On a Text, which could come in handy when the new Study Design is rolled out. There is also advice on Writing Critical Reflections, useful for whenever students have to produce a Statement of Intention.

Analytical writing

The resources on how to write an Argument and Language Analysis essay provides a good starting point for Years 7-9 students with little experience in the task. There are worked examples on how to unpack various argument techniques and language techniques, but these aren't always helpful for students who need to practise the skill of writing an analysis of unseen material. The pages on Analysing Visual Elements are very comprehensive, but could be considered overkill when a couple of sharp sentences can often suffice when analysing the visual in a VCE exam essay. The Analytical Text Response resources are clear and would benefit students who crave structure; however, all English textbooks are hamstrung in this department as their examples will



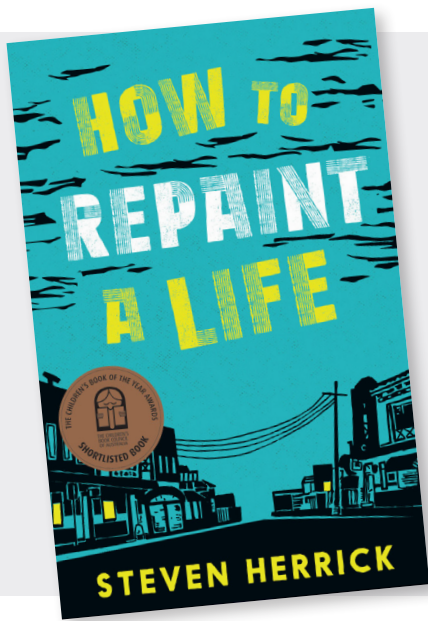
be text specific and some students may struggle to apply the examples to the texts they are studying. There is some really helpful advice on Expanding on your Points and Writing Formally.

Editing and proof reading

This section will come in handy with the new VCE Study Design when students will be asked to craft their writing over multiple drafts. Proof reading, editing and drafting work is not often students' preferred way to operate so a checklist never goes astray.

Overall comment

To booklist or not to booklist? That is the question. At the end of the day, it depends on what families at your school can afford. At \$29.95, it presents value for money and will get used regularly in the English classroom. My main concern is that there are quite a few pages that I wouldn't need in my practice as a VCE English teacher. A middle years English teacher may have a different view on this and I intend to send my copy to the middle years English coordinator so he can make a call on that. Even though we won't be booklisting it in our VCE English faculty, we have a few copies on hand as it's a terrific resource fit for a number of purposes.



How to Repaint a Life

Reviewed by Laura Wilcox, Marymede Catholic College

WRITER: Steven Herrick | PUBLISHER: University of Queensland Press, 2021
248 pages | RRP: \$19.99

Steven Herrick's *How to Repaint a Life* was written as a prose 'independent sister-book' to his verse novel *The Simple Gift*. The chapters alternate between the third person perspectives of Isaac, Sophie, and Sophie's father Gerry

Isaac, escaping his abusive father, leaves home with no plans other than starting over someplace far away. On arriving in a country town, Isaac's instincts for self-preservation assist him to survive sleeping rough, and he soon finds work with Joan, owner of a local café whose business has suffered since the opening of a glitzier café across the road. Sophie, a talented linocut artist, is in Year 11 and aspires to study art in Melbourne. Isaac's arrival coincides with the recent departure of Sophie's best friend, and her loneliness is as evident as her love for art. Gerry, Sophie's father is a local councillor and former poet, who enjoys punk music, frequents Joan's café, and strikes up a friendship with Isaac. As Isaac continues to work at the café, his hard work, intelligence and warmth endear him to Joan and the locals, and he begins to form those connections with which he can 'repaint his life'.

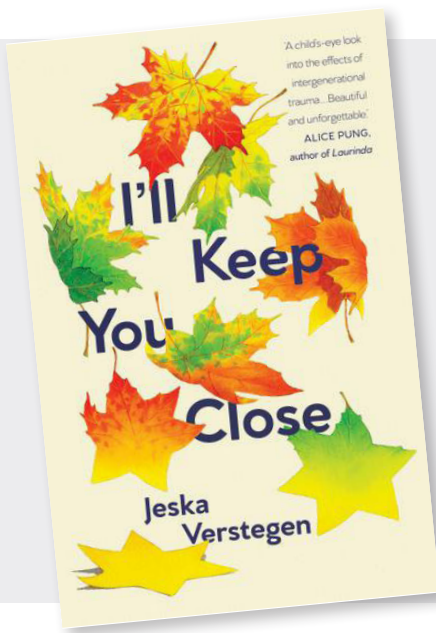
When Isaac and Sophie meet, they are immediately drawn to one another.

Isaac, hiding the truth of his living circumstances, doesn't refuse Sophie's invitation to attend a schoolmate's party. When the host, the thuggish Butler, responds aggressively to his presence, Isaac refuses to engage; a restraint Butler does not reciprocate when he harasses Sophie at school, smashes Joan's window and threatens Isaac. Isaac is forced to admit to Joan that he is homeless; instead of dismissing him, she offers him a place to stay. Meanwhile, Isaac's confession to Sophie that he is living rough only draws them closer. Thanks to Isaac and Joan's efforts, and Gerry's support, the café's fortunes improve. Sophie's courage in standing up to Butler earns admiration and several friends.

The most striking aspect of *How to Repaint a Life* is the sensitivity with which it handles the social issues dominating the storyline. Through Joan's, Sophie's, and Gerry's responses to Isaac's homelessness, Herrick removes the stigma surrounding homelessness and presents direct examples of empathy. We glimpse not only the daily struggles, but also the hopes and dreams of a person living rough; the author clearly intends to encourage our own empathy for the plight of the homeless. Isaac's experiences of

family violence, which we witness through his frequent flashbacks, are especially poignant as we contrast it with Sophie's devoted family life and Gerry's irresistible good humour. We admire Isaac even more, since he has emerged from an abusive home as a caring person who emphatically vows to avoid responding with violence. The novel also references aspects of the #metoo movement, as Sophie's teachers discuss. Sophie's triumph over Butler is especially satisfying, and nicely inverts the damsel-in-distress trope – Isaac is more at risk from Butler than Sophie is. This novel would provide a solid reinforcement of these issues to students, as well as highlighting the contemporaneous nature of the novel. We are left with an overwhelming sense of optimism and faith in human nature, that individuals can overcome hardship to fashion themselves a positive future.

The novel is appropriate for mixed ability classes and could especially appeal to marginalised students. If didactic literature is a particular focus, then *How to Repaint a Life* has powerful messages and would be a valuable class text. Due to themes of underage sex and family violence, and some explicit language, this novel is suited for Year 10 as a class text or wider reading option.



I'll Keep You Close

Reviewed by Melissa Wray, Newcomb Secondary College

WRITER: Jeska Verstegen | PUBLISHER: Allen and Unwin, 2022, 176 pages | RRP: \$16.99

This is Jeska Verstegen's debut young adult novel that is based on her own family history. Verstegen uses the voice of eleven-year-old Jeska who visits her grandmother one day, only to be called a name that does not belong to her. This prompts the young girl to try and uncover the history of her family and the reasons nobody wants to talk about it. What starts out as a simple visit to her grandmother soon leads to a much more complex web of family secrets.

Jeska is a serious sort of character who seems older than her eleven years. It is the perfect age, though, for the protagonist to discover a harrowing time in history through the eyes of her young self. Jeska's world is filled with attending school, hanging out with her friend Lienke, caring for her cat Moz, and avoiding the moods of her mother who prefers to keep the curtains drawn rather than allow the outside world in. Jeska goes about her days with no thought or knowledge of her Jewish heritage. That is, until one day she visits her grandmother, Bomma, who

mistakenly calls Jeska by the name of Hesje. It is a seemingly innocent mistake, however Jeska refuses to let it rest and sets about trying to discover who Hesje is. Nothing can prepare her for the fate of young Hesje.

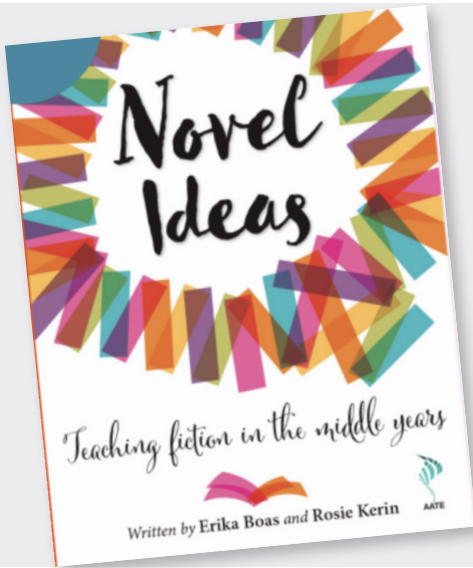
Slowly, Jeska starts to piece together parts of the puzzle until she realises she is Jewish and that for her parents and grandparents, that meant a harrowing time for them before Jeska was born. It also means ongoing trauma that members of her family still live and that Jeska cannot understand. Verstegen intimates this trauma through expressions such as, 'It's dark in my head,' and, 'Mama can sometimes get really angry and upset. I don't usually know exactly why.' It is the simply written responses that come from using a younger character's perspective that make this book different to others and accessible for the lower to middle years of secondary school.

Readers might have some prior knowledge of the Holocaust, but this novel offers an extra sensitive take on the atrocities through Jeska's detective work. She pieces her understanding together from the knowledge of those around her. Her young mind

must make sense of the information she is collecting. The reader has the opportunity to understand the references at the same time as the main character.

The writing style and short chapters in this novel make it easy to access for all reading abilities. The language is suitable for a wide age group but sophisticated enough that it offers points of discussion, interpretation and analysis. It is an introduction to the incomprehensible Holocaust that took place during the Second World War. It opens a conversation with students to help them make sense of the horrors that took place and the human spirit that, at times, prevailed.

I'll Keep You Close is suitable for the 12+ age group. It is particularly suitable for the Years 8-9 curriculum with a focus on racial tensions, genocide and inter-generational trauma..



Novel Ideas: Teaching fiction in the middle years

Reviewed by Sophia Marsden-Smith, Geelong Grammar School

WRITERS: Erika Boas and Rosie Kerin | **PUBLISHER:** Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE) , 2021, 206 pages | **RRP:** \$39.95

Novel Ideas: Teaching fiction in the middle years is an invaluable resource for middle school English teachers with strategies to help our readers in the middle years of varying abilities.

The aim of this text is to inspire readers to reflect on current practices, to use, adapt and discover ideas for teaching novels in new and creative ways. The authors pose the question: 'How might we provide creative options for students to actively engage with and through the novels we teach?'. This book is similar to the RSC Shakespeare Toolkit for Teachers in terms of giving teachers creative, new and engaging ways to teach reading in a time where reading rates, especially in the middle years, are in decline. This is a struggle many English teachers are facing; that is, getting our students to read the assigned novel or play or poetry anthologies.

Key chapters include:

- Teaching novels in the middle years
- Selecting and launching novels
- Becoming independent readers
- Collaborative reading approaches
- Teaching the literary elements
- Understanding the writer's craft and literary genre

This text has many wonderful chapters, but the most exciting is the first one on 'Teaching novels in the middle years'. There are wonderful ideas such as 'The culture of a reading school' with getting teachers and librarians to share their reading recommendations to inspire our students. 'The fiction effect' discusses how students have got out of reading practices and that it takes time with reading consistently and daily for 20 minutes to reset those habits and practices. We need to do this with our students as well as teachers. The next chapter is 'Teaching the literary elements'. As a Literature teacher, I am very passionate about helping students learn the vital metalanguage of literary devices and using these terms correctly. Ryan Collins (2021) has an English teacher uses a key list of terms that you can use with your students such as 'juxtapose,' 'evoke' and 'connote'.

The next exciting chapter is 'Establishing a collaborative reading culture' which has many practical tips and strategies that you can implement in your classes immediately. Some of the great ideas include implementing a 'Literature Circle' or 'Book Club Pedagogy,' which I have used in a previous school with great success, as well as close-reading and annotating strategies. The 'Using novel extracts' works perfectly alongside the aforementioned chapter and helps

create that engagement of reading over various different novels, like tasters that the students can enjoy. Boas and Kerin use various activities to unpack these novels for our students, ones that will engage them on different kinaesthetic, intellectual, critical and social levels.

The References section is invaluable for further resources for middle school English teachers as well as finding novels for our students to read. I would recommend working closely with your middle school librarian to acquire some of these novels and support reading in some form or another, whether that be a weekly or fortnightly reading period to help instil and encourage that passion for reading in our students.

My final recommendation is that this text is ideal for both middle school English teachers and teacher librarians, and also for English teachers at the senior level, where getting our students to read texts in VCE/IB can be similarly challenging! Teachers and students can benefit from this text and hopefully those good reading habits can filter up to the senior year levels and filter down too.



My Spare Heart

Reviewed by Melissa Wray, Newcomb Secondary College

WRITER: Jared Thomas | PUBLISHER: Allen & Unwin , 2022, 384 pages | RRP: \$19.99

Jared Thomas's latest YA novel introduces us to Phoebe, a seventeen year old girl who has just moved in with her father and his girlfriend, away from her mother, friends and all that she is used to. As she tries to navigate her new world, her old world starts to spiral out of control. Before long, Phoebe is juggling so many lies, and they all begin to come crashing down around her.

Phoebe's mum likes to have a drink, usually too many. Phoebe's dad has moved on with a new health-obsessed girlfriend in a town full of hippies. Phoebe loves to play basketball and is very proud of her Aboriginal heritage, but between staying connected to culture, making new friends, covering for mum's lies and avoiding the judgment of her dad, life has got really complicated for Phoebe.

The story begins with Phoebe reluctantly moving to a new town and new school and moving in with dad and his girlfriend, who Phoebe tries very hard to dislike. Everything about this new life is different from her old one. Her mum makes promises about keeping

things the same, but as the story progresses, mum becomes increasingly unreliable. Phoebe is vulnerable with the upheaval but protective of her mum. She knows her dad will get angry if he discovers the missed pick-ups and late-nights home and might enforce tougher restrictions to deal with mum's erratic and alcohol-fueled behaviour. To avoid this, she weaves a web of small lies to protect herself and her mum, but in doing so, creates tension and stress.

Each character in this story is very different from the other. Thomas has done a wonderful job of creating a rich breadth of characters, nice and not-so-nice, in Phoebe's world, from the supportive new teachers to the seemingly charming crush she meets. Her new friends are different to her old friends but each one subtly helps Phoebe to see that she can't continue supporting and covering the behaviour of her mother. While she tries to get picked for basketball, expand her singing abilities, connect with dad's girlfriends and stay true to her own Aboriginal culture, things begin to unravel. Slowly at first, then in a big way, until one day Phoebe realises she has to come clean about everything and get help.

My Spare Heart touches on issues of addiction, alcoholism, teenage peer pressure and Aboriginal culture. It does so in a way that could easily provoke discussion within a classroom. It provides opportunity for the analysis of themes, discussion of the complexities of family and relationships and what drives the characters in the story. Thomas writes with sensitivity about these issues, but doesn't avoid the hard-hitting discussion necessary to propel the story forward, although these topics might require a trigger warning for some students and caution would need to be applied by the teacher.

This easy-to-read narrative encourages the reader to consider adult topics such as responsibility, addiction, peer pressure, family, but most importantly, asking for help. *My Spare Heart* is particularly suitable for the 14+ age group as it does have some adult themes. It could be included within both the middle years English and Humanities curriculum.



Those Kids from Fawn Creek

Reviewed by Belinda Engelman, Geelong Lutheran College

WRITER: Erin Entrada Kelly | PUBLISHER: Text Publishing , 2022, 336 pages | RRP: \$16.99

The front cover of this latest offering from Erin Entrada Kelly, a professor of children's literature, is reminiscent of Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* and *Secret Seven* series. The epitaph: 'Be nice. The world is small town' – Austin Kleon, hints at the exploration of what it is like for young people growing up in a tiny town.

The plot centres around the arrival of the new girl, Orchid Mason, who has an air of mystery surrounding her. The other 'kids' in the town are enthralled with the exotic escapades of Orchid who supposedly hails from New York City and smells 'like citrus', yet in reality is from small country towns just like them. The text is useful in terms of being able to discuss the intricacies of small towns and the stereotyping that can happen in the seventh grade; especially with only 13 students at the school. In addition, self-esteem and the importance of identity are explored in the text. The two narrators and best friends, Dorothy and Greyson, demonstrate the complexities of living in a small town with a label. Dorothy experiences low self esteem and says that metaphorically she is 'the dirt.' It is through forming a relationship

with Orchid that Dorothy finds the inspiration to rebrand herself 'Didi' and learn to feel confident about who she is and what she is capable of as a person. Greyson is labelled by his brother and father who consider him 'soft, the way you go around' as he declined going duck hunting. Both characters, inspired by the arrival of the new student, forge a new identity and are beginning to develop their sense of self and what they aspire to become in the future.

The text is divided up into short, easy-to-read sections: Week 1 -3 and then The Dance and Monday. The sections make it achievable for young readers to plough through the novel, with neat intervals that allow them to read a single chapter quickly. The cartoon drawings at the start of the novel also appeal to young readers and offer a visual of what the characters look like, alongside the cover that reveals the nostalgic Fawn Creek, or Yawn Creek as it is referred to by the characters.

The novel has several tensions that are explored that will keep a young reader's interest, such as the solving of the mystery of who the character Orchid is, the impending dance, Dorothy's transformation as a character, and Greyson's acceptance of his identity. A

highlight in the text is the scene where Greyson finds comfort in his mother's sewing room and him sketching designs in secret. His courageous idea, to design an outfit to wear to the school dance, is testament to the character's outgoing and daring nature as a young person who faces being mocked by his peers.

Overall, the text is inspiring for those who identify with living in a small town and enjoy working out where a mysterious character has come from and what their real story is. The novel explores age-old tropes such as bullying, being true to yourself and pursuing your dream. Erin Entrada Kelly writes in simple prose that is appealing to young readers and allows their imagination to open up and explore the trials and tribulations of growing up in a small town.

I would recommend this text as a wider-reading selection for middle school readers who are interested in reading about small towns and teenage issues. There would be an opportunity to discuss the issues with middle schoolers, especially in terms of bullying and the importance of believing in oneself.



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