

1. Read the information about blackbirds below and then look at the video screenshots that follow and try to think about the connection between the two. Are they compatible and, if so, in what way? If not, why? Discuss your suggestions in class.

Suggested answer

The screenshots are compatible with the information in the short text, as they both present the blackbird as a solitary, yet melodious animal. All of the screenshots show the blackbird flying alone, while in the second screenshot we can see it singing.

2. Can you see the story behind the images? You can make a note of the steps of the narrative in the flow chart provided. You can add as many steps/boxes as you choose to. What verb forms will you use in your narrative? Work in groups.

Suggested answer

The verb form mainly used in the narrative is the Simple Past form. It is the construction used to build the storyline part, which is the backbone of any narrative.

It was a starless, summer night and the moon was shining bright in the sky. A blackbird was sitting on a tree branch, looking at the sky.



It was the middle of the night and the blackbird felt free and not wary of predators. It started singing in short, happy, carefree chirps. Soon, other blackbirds joined it in a melodious chorus.



Suddenly, it stretched its wings and flew into the dark sky, celebrating its freedom. Who knows where it was heading for?

3. Can you now develop your story further to include a background, monologue, description as well as a flashback? Some examples are provided for you but you should not think of them as binding. What verb forms will you be using? Work in your group.

Suggested answer

Background (it includes basic, introductory information about the story, such as the characters, the setting, the time and place. It may involve the use of verbs that describe states, situations or action verbs that express habits)

There was a blackbird once, which lived in a dense forest. It led a solitary existence, perching on tree branches, singing to itself.

Zooming in on the story (this is how the main storyline is introduced. It may involve the use of past continuous forms)
 One starless night, as the wind was blowing through the branches...

Storyline (it constitutes the backbone of the narrative. It usually contains past simple forms that develop the story)
 ...it looked up in the sky and realised it felt utterly lonely and miserable. This realisation made it start to think that maybe it was time to find a mate.

Flashback (it contains information that relates to events prior to the story in the narrative, like memories or past experiences) It usually contains past perfect forms
 It had never looked for a mate before and the idea of having offspring had never crossed its mind.

Description (in this part of a narrative, the action "freezes" and there are no events that develop the storyline. It may involve the use of past continuous forms)
 A flock of birds was flying in the distance. Maybe its mate was one of these soaring birds.

Monologue or dialogue (it is put in quotation marks and often makes use of present or future forms. It reveals the feelings or thoughts of the character(s))
 "Perhaps the time has come that I must find a mate. Perhaps it's time to fly away and try my luck" it thought to itself.

4.a. Go back to the forms you used in your enriched story framework in the previous activity. Can you draw any general rules about the use of narrative tenses? Here's an example:

Suggested answer

- When you talk about the steps in the storyline, you use **past simple forms**.
- When you pause the storyline and introduce a description, you use **past continuous forms**.
- When you provide the background of a story, you use **verbs that describe states, situations or action verbs that express habits**.
- When you zoom in on the story, you use **past continuous forms**.
- When you make a flashback, you use **past perfect forms**.
- When you introduce a monologue or dialogue, you use **present or future forms in quotation marks**.

b. Do you think the same generalisations might hold across time? Can you think of

examples for the other forms used in 3 above, in conjunction with the general rules you formed in 4a?

Suggested answer

Yes, the same generalizations might hold across the present or the future. For example, continuous forms are used to describe a scene, which means that present continuous is used to describe a scene in the present (e.g. A flock of birds is flying in the distance) and future continuous is used to describe a scene in the future (e.g. Tonight, the blackbird will be singing its lonely song on the same tree branch). Similarly, when past simple forms describe habits or past states, (e.g. A blackbird lived in a dense forest), their use can be transferred to the present (e.g. Blackbirds often lead a solitary existence) or the future (e.g. From now on, the blackbird in our story will share its nest with its mate).

5. What is the moral of your story? Discuss it with the other groups. What made you give the story the specific twist?

Suggested answer

The moral of the story is that loneliness is difficult to endure and that we all need a soul mate in life, someone who can support us through difficult times and stand by us. I decided to give the story this twist because I feel that this is an important message to convey.

6. Here are Paul McCartney's words about the "Blackbird" song the screenshots were based on. Are these words related to your story? How would you need to change it so as to fit in the composer's original idea?

Suggested answer

My story has nothing to do with the civil rights movement, but, in a way, it is related to the symbolism that Paul McCartney's song contains. McCartney intended the song to talk about encouraging people to keep trying, to persevere and keep their faith. To do so, everybody needs a companion, somebody who will support them and share their vision. This is what the blackbird in my story is looking for; a companion that will help it go through the hard journey of life and support it in making a family.

Now listen to the Beatles song ("Paul McCartney - Blackbird (Live)") on YouTube and make a note of words or phrases expressing positive or negative ideas. Then enrich your list of phrases by going through the lyrics. Which do you believe agree with the spirit of the text you wrote in 3 above? Go back to it and see how you could fit in the phrases you have made a note of in this step.

Suggested answer

Positive ideas	Negative ideas
singing, learn to fly, learn to see, to be free, fly into the light	in the dead of night, broken wings, sunken eyes, dark black night

This is how some phrases from the lyrics could be incorporated in my story.

There was a blackbird once, which lived in a dense forest. It lived a solitary existence, perching on tree branches, **singing** to itself, often **in the dead of night**. One starless night, as the wind was blowing through the branches, it looked up in the sky and realised it felt utterly lonely and miserable, like a bird with **broken wings**. This realisation made it start to think that maybe it was time to find a mate, and together they could help their offspring **learn to fly**. It had never looked for a mate before and the idea of having offspring had never crossed its mind. A flock of birds was flying in the distance in the **dark black night**. Maybe its mate was one of these soaring birds. "Perhaps the time has come that I must find a mate. Perhaps it's time to fly away **into the light of the dark black night** and try my luck", it thought to itself. **All its life it was only waiting for this moment to arise**, the moment to mature and find a soul mate.

8. Below you will find the full lyrics of the song. You will need them to perform one or more of the tasks that follow:

Suggested answer

- a. Rewrite the song, replacing the phrases you had made a note of in activity 7 with phrases of your own.

Blackbird **trilling in the still of the night**

Take these **hurting** wings and **fly away**

All your life

You were only waiting for this moment to arise

Blackbird **trilling in the still of the night**

Take these **weary** eyes and learn to see

All your life

You were only waiting for this moment **in the tree**

Blackbird fly, blackbird fly

Into the unknown of a **moonlit night**

Blackbird fly, blackbird fly

Into the unknown of a **moonlit night**

Blackbird **trilling in the still of the night**

Take these **hurting** wings and **fly away**

All your life

You were only waiting for this moment to arise

- b. Set the lyrics to music you compose yourself. If you have done activity 7a, you could set your version of the lyrics to music.

Students provide their own answers.

- c. Replace the lines that repeat themselves in the song with phrases of your own making sure the song still makes sense as a whole.

Blackbird **trilling in the still of the night**

Take these **hurting** wings and **high up rise**

All your life

You were only waiting for this moment to arise

Blackbird **warbling when the night is new**

Take these **weary** eyes and learn to see

See the world

The sea, the land that's stretching beyond your tree

Blackbird fly, blackbird fly

Into the unknown of a moonlit night

Blackbird sing, blackbird sing

Sing your lonely heart out in the night

Blackbird **sitting on the dark tree branch**

Take **these powerful wings and fly far**

Fly away

Fly far, far away with all your might.

9. Now take a look at the paragraph that follows, from Bach's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, and do the following:

Suggested answer

- a. In my opinion, the dedication refers to every person's need to try to improve themselves perhaps distancing themselves from society. This is an inherent quality of each one of us as it relates to our need for personal development.
- b. Perhaps he was practising flying, in an attempt to improve, or even perfect, his flying skills.

Answer

- c. The opening paragraph could be placed in the background information section of the story framework, while the opening line of the second paragraph could be placed in the zooming in of the story section.

10. Can you predict what happens next in the story? Form groups and write down a possible continuation. Then present it to the rest of the class, explaining what drove you to the specific scenario.

Suggested answer

He was trying to perfect his flying manoeuvres, and fighting for bits of food among the crowd of seagulls that followed the fishing boats didn't seem to interest him. He had never wanted to conform to the norms of the flock, he had never been satisfied with spending his days just looking for food, like most seagulls did. More than anything else, Jonathan Livingston Seagull wanted to fly better and higher and explore the world.

The other seagulls were flying behind a couple of fishing boats, waiting for scraps of food the fishermen would drop into the sea, while Jonathan was reaching higher and higher. He was flapping his wings as hard as he could and looking at the other seagulls down below, when disaster struck. Debilitated by the extreme fatigue, his right wing failed and Jonathan plunged into the dark, blue sea. His right wing might have broken, but it hurt half as much as his broken heart. "Is this the end of my dream?", he thought to himself. But Jonathan Livingston Seagull was no ordinary seagull. He knew he was destined for something bigger. Maybe this mishap would stop him for a short while, but after a few days, when his wing healed, Jonathan knew he would start practising again. He wasn't going to give up on his dream.

11. Now read the rest of the text below and compare it with yours. How accurate were you in your predictions? Can you now re-evaluate the comments you made on the dedication in 9a above?

Suggested answer

I believe my predictions were fairly accurate. Re-evaluating my comments on the dedication in 9a, I wouldn't change anything.

12. Reflect on the text as a whole. Can you draw Jonathan's portrait? Which of the words below would you use? You can add more of your own.

Suggested answer

Jonathan Livingston Seagull seems to have a **headstrong**, **single-minded**, **revolutionary** personality. As a **dynamic non-conformist**, he refuses to be satisfied with flying low behind fishing boats fighting over food. He leads a **solitary** existence, and is happy doing **daring**, **bold**, **risky** flying manoeuvres in his effort to become a more competent flyer.

13. Compare the text above with the Blackbird poem. Discuss how the two are similar. If you were to draw the blackbird's portrait, would it be the same as Jonathan's above? Would you borrow any of the adjectives in activity 12 in drawing this portrait?

Suggested answer

There are certainly similarities between Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* and the *Blackbird* lyrics. In both texts, the characters lead **solitary** lives. The seagull seems to have always had a **headstrong, non-conformist** personality, which pushes him to do **daring, risky** things, while the blackbird doesn't provide evidence of such qualities in its personality. Both texts, however, talk about the characters' need to go beyond their limits and their need to be free, distancing themselves from what the rest of their peers do. If I drew the blackbird's portrait, I would probably use these adjectives: **solitary, decisive, revolutionary, daring and bold**.

14. Have you felt the need to "fly"? Does the real Jonathan Seagull really live with-in us all? What are the obstacles on one's way to freedom and non-conformity? You can get more ideas for your discussion from the book blurb below:

Suggested answer

I believe that in adolescence, everybody is hiding a Jonathan Seagull within them. It is the very nature of adolescence that makes teenagers want to rebel against society, break free from norms and become independent. For teenagers, the obstacles are their parents, who expect them to fulfil their dreams, and the conventions of society, which expects them to behave in specific ways.

15. Jonathan's parents were "dismayed", desperate, unhappy and disappointed at their son's behaviour. Is this parents' reaction to their children's "flight" generally?

Suggested answer**Group A (the children group):**

- I have the right to make my own mistakes.
- I will gain experience and learn from my mistakes.
- I am a different person, with different needs and aspirations.
- I will not become responsible unless I face the consequences of my actions.
- I feel trapped by your over-protectiveness.
- I feel that you don't trust me and that you don't believe in my abilities.
- I can only find out what I want to do in life by experimenting and trying new things.
- I don't want to be ridiculed by my peers, who may believe I lack in initiative.
- I cannot learn to protect myself from danger unless I am exposed to it.
- If I continue to depend on you, I will never be able to make my own decisions.

Group B (the parents group):

- You are too young to be on your own.
- You have practically no experience of life.
- There are too many dangers, many more than you can imagine.

- As long as you live in our house, you have to follow our rules.
- As an adult, I know better, so you'd better listen to me.
- What will our friends and relatives say if we let you on your own? We will be considered neglectful parents.
- If you make mistakes, the consequences may be too serious and the damage may be irreversible.
- If you make the wrong decisions, you may destroy your life forever.
- If you want to experiment in life, you may end up experimenting with the wrong things, like alcohol or substances.
- Why expose yourself to danger if we can help you avoid it?

16. The text above combines action with comments. For example, "he lowered his webbed feet" forms part of the action while "seagulls, as you know, never falter, never stall" is a general comment on seagull behaviour and this is also signalled by the use of present forms. On the other hand, past forms are also used to describe Jonathan's character or behaviour, as in "was no ordinary bird", "it was not eating that mattered, but flight". Can you single out all action parts and reflect on what the text would be like without the comments?

Answer

The past simple verbs to be singled out are: *lowered, lifted, strained, slowed, narrowed, held, forced, ruffled, stalled*, and *fell*. These verbs allow the story to develop, presenting Jonathan's actions, and are part of the storyline, the backbone of the story. The comments, on the other hand, add variety to the story and explain why Jonathan behaved in the way he did and in what way he is different from other seagulls. The comments provide an insight into the feelings of the characters of the story and the context in which the story is taking place.

17. a. What makes the above book extract literary? Make some suggestions and then read the revised version of the opening sentence below. How is it different from the original sentence? Discuss.

Suggested answer

The revised version of the opening sentence does not have the same impact on the reader. The absence of the phrase "A hundred feet in the sky" does not enable the reader to create a mental image of Jonathan flying in the sky, firing his imagination. The use of the verb "strained", instead of "tried", creates a stronger effect as it allows the reader to imagine how strenuous an effort it was for Jonathan to carry out these moves.

- b. Now go back to the story you had written about the blackbird earlier and add or modify elements to make it more literary, like the book extract above.

Suggested answer

There was a blackbird once, which lived in a dense forest. It lived a solitary existence, perching on tree branches, singing to itself, often in the dead of night. One starless night, as the wind was blowing through the branches, it **turned its eyes to** the sky and realised it felt utterly lonely and miserable, like a bird with broken wings. This **painful realisation** made it start to think that maybe it was time to find a mate, and together they could help their offspring learn to fly. It had never looked for a mate before, and the idea of having offspring had never crossed its mind. **Peering through the dark black night, it saw a flock of birds gliding through the sky.** Maybe its mate was one of these soaring birds. "Perhaps the time has come that I must find a mate. Perhaps it's time to fly away into the light of the dark black night and try my luck", it thought to itself. All its life it was only waiting for this moment to arise, the moment to mature and find a soul mate.

- 18. Listen to the book read out on YouTube ("Jonathan Livingston Seagull, narrated by Richard Harris") and do one or more of the following:**

Suggested answer

Students provide their own answers.

- c. *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* is a book that will speak to your hearts. It is a book about those who never give up on their dreams, those who follow their hearts, those who live with passion. It is a book about those who don't fit in with the rest but are not afraid to be different. It is a book about those who want to explore and experiment with life and strive to fulfil their full potential, because this is the only thing that gives meaning to their lives. I think you're going to love it because it shows the importance of pursuing a meaningful life and this is what all of us want to do.

- 19. Watch the trailer of the filmed version of the book on YouTube ("Jonathan Livingston Seagull – Trailer") and discuss how the effect might have been different from that of reading the book.**

Suggested answer

The video depicts Jonathan flying at top speed and losing control over a flock of seagulls sitting on a landfill, looking at him in awe. Just before crashing into the flock, he manages to regain control and eventually we can see him flying free over the sea. Because a picture is a thousand words, I believe that the video has a stronger impact on the viewer and gives us a more realistic picture of Jonathan's perseverance in his flying efforts.