War Horse

Subjects: Art and English
Age range: KS2

What they’ll learn
- To discuss rich children’s literature, exploring ideas in the text and those from real life
- To write creatively, following the conventions of playscripts
- To perform plays aloud, showing an awareness of their audience
- To use paper and cardboard modelling techniques to make puppets
- To use collage techniques to create a picture

Michael Morpurgo’s classic story War Horse is set during the First World War and told through the eyes of Joey, a horse who witnesses the front line first hand. This teaching sequence gives children the opportunity to discuss the story and some of the issues it raises, before writing playscripts based on key scenes and making puppets to bring these scenes to life.

Discussion and booktalk

1. After reading War Horse together as a class (either in English lessons, whole-class reading sessions or as a class novel), use PowerPoint slide 3 to discuss ideas and themes from the book together, using these questions as prompts:
   - Apart from Albert, which character in the story has the biggest impact on Joey’s life? Why have you chosen that character?
• What is the effect of telling the story from the perspective of Joey, rather than Albert? How would the story be different if he told the story?
• Do you think Joey is a hero in the story? Why / why not?
• What do you think will happen next in Joey’s story? Do you think he will be happy living with Albert and Maisie? Why / why not?
• Do you think Michael Morpurgo is trying to share a message or moral through the story of War Horse? If so, what do you think it is?

2. Next, organise the class into an even number of small groups (with 4-6 children in each group). Using PowerPoint slide 4, share the following statement with the children:

“It is never right to involve animals in human wars”

Ask the children whether they agree with this statement with a show of hands, then tell them they will be debating the statement. Tell half of the groups they will be supporting the statement and tell the other half they will be challenging it. Give the children time to work as a group to compose their arguments. The children can then debate the statement, either as a whole class or with two opposing groups debating against each other.

Once the debate is over, ask for another show of hands. Ask the children if they have changed their minds. If they have, can they explain which arguments persuaded them to think differently?

3. Finally, ask the children if it would be different if people used animals in warfare now, rather than in the past? How might it make a difference? Why might horses be less likely to be used in modern times? Is this a better or worse situation?

Creative writing

1. Tell the children they are going to write a playscript based on a key moment in the story. In pairs or small groups, ask the children to brainstorm the most memorable moments in the story, which they feel would make a good scene for a play. Collect their suggestions and compare these to those on PowerPoint slide 5.
2. Read the extract from *War Horse* (*PowerPoint slides 6-8*) and ask the children how they know:
   - What is happening in the scene
   - What the characters are thinking and feeling
   - Draw out that we can learn lots of information from exposition, where the author tells us what is happening, but also there's much we can pick up from what the characters say.

3. Now share the playscript on *PowerPoint slides 9-11* (or use the handout) and discuss the difference between this and the extract as a class. How do the children know what is happening in the scene now? Draw out that the characters' words still give a lot of information, and stage directions support the reader (or actor) to follow (or perform) what is happening.

4. Ask the children to work with a partner to write the next two or three sections of speech (either in their book or in the handout) to demonstrate they understand the conventions of playscripts.

5. Using *PowerPoint slide 12*, remind the children of the typical structure and layout of a playscript, including:
   - Correct layout with characters' names on new lines (with colons before they speak)
   - Stage directions (written in the present tense)
   - Close match between the characters and the language they use
   - Dialogue used to explain what is happening in the scene and to move the action forward
   - A dramatic scene featuring action or dialogue to grab the attention

6. Either working individually, in pairs, or collaboratively as a small group, ask the children to choose one scene from the story and rewrite it as a playscript. Remind them to follow the conventions of a playscript and to consider the features that might make an effective piece of work.

7. Once they have finished, ask the children to read or act their playscripts aloud. The rest of the class can listen/watch and identify strengths and possible areas for development. Then, give children an opportunity to return to their work and make changes in the light of
feedback and other ideas they’ve seen.

**Creativity and arts**

1. Tell the children that they are going to make puppets of horses to use to perform their playscript. Show children a clip of the National Theatre’s performance of *War Horse* (a quick search online will provide a number of clips, including one from the National Theatre’s own site). Discuss how the puppets are used in the performance and how possible it is for an audience to suspend disbelief and see the puppets as real horses.

2. Next, depending on the resources and time you have available, the children can work in small groups to make a horse puppet by either:

   - Using junk modelling materials to make 3D horse puppets (again, a quick search online will provide plenty of inspiration to share with children, plus ideas for useful materials to collect and share).
   - Or

   Draw the head, neck, body and legs of a horse separately on black card and then cut these out. Attach them using split pins to make a shadow puppet that can be used to project a shadow onto a screen. You can search online for a printable template if you think this might be more effective than hand drawn puppets. The *Warhorse on Stage* site from the National Theatre has free resources to support teachers with this.

**Putting it all together**

Finally, children can put on a performance of their playscript using their puppets. These could be performed live as a class assembly or filmed and shared with parents and carers remotely. The puppets and playscripts could be displayed together as an attractive wall display.