



Student Resource: Year 11 Reading and Responding

Students are required to ‘...analyse the ways in which structures and features are used by the authors of narrative texts to construct meaning...’ (VCAA Study Design p13)

About

In this resource guide, we’ll cover some of the **ways** in which an author can use a language technique to position a reader to construct meaning. You’ll also get some of the background in how a ‘writer’ approaches ‘writing’.

How *Bearings* was written

The stories, written over three years, were initially written to be submitted to literary journals and competitions. They were put together as one collection for Affirm Press, as part of their “Long Story Shorts” initiative. (You can learn more about Affirm Press at www.affirmpress.com.au)

Several of the stories are inspired by events from the author’s life; others were created by fictionalising anecdotes and creating new characters for them, still others came from putting two seemingly disparate ideas together, a line of poetry, a fairy tale or a colour, or using a symbol as a doorway into another world.

In a blog post for the literary journal, *Kill Your Darlings*, author Leah Swann talks about creativity:

LEAH SWANN
BEARINGS

On Writing

Before I could write, I told stories. Little made-up things about my dolls, or why a blue spade had mysteriously appeared in the sandpit. I told my cousins about the fairies that lived in the empty block two doors up and we collected grass from there (with the fairies supposedly clinging to the blades) in an ice-cream container. My cousins loved my fairy stories, but their father didn't. He turned the container upside down and banged out the contents, they told me later.

"See? Nothing. No fairies."

I felt accused of lying, but it didn't stop me. I learned to write my stories, and they became private and delicious. It wasn't until I had children that I told stories again. It was different to reading; it was somehow pulling the raw stuff from the air, and both my children and I felt it.

My usual method was to retell tales I knew, making up whatever I didn't remember. But one winter's evening, the three of us cuddled up in my daughter's bed, I felt tired out, with barely a thought in my head.

"Please, tell us a story."

"No. Mummy can't think of anything."

"Yes you can!"

My toes were sticking out from under the doona, prickling with cold. I didn't want to tell a story. Not a bit.

"Come on, Mum!"

The wheedling went on and I knew they wouldn't let up, so I forced myself to speak. What came out was:

"One night, a snow giant came striding down the hills..."

I stopped. I felt like a tight-rope walker without a net.

"Yes," they said, impatiently. "What did he do?"

I focused on the giant. He was a massive yeti of a thing, hard packed but soft at the edges. He walked silently over the powdery fields till he came to a town, the moon casting his long blue shadow over the houses.

"Keep going, Mum!"

There he paused, feeling a harsh wind whipping his back. And as everyone knows, a harsh wind is fatal to a snow giant. All at once it was too much for him and he collapsed, falling over the town, and when everyone woke up it was dark because they'd been buried by the snow giant...

This is creativity at its purest: when there's only the tiniest bit of tinder – an image, a feeling, a shadowy concept – to fan into the fire that warms the listener and the teller. It's a bit nerve-racking. There's often tremendous resistance at the inner effort required.

When I write, I find planning is helpful. I like a map. It gives the restless brain something to hold onto. But the sensation of not knowing what's coming is the adventure. Something quickens in the imagination, and as writers we step into unknown worlds leaning on words like walking sticks, happily conscious of making something new.

In the best writing, both writer and reader make discoveries. Fiction is not telling lies about fairies; it's about shaping the events, characters and symbols side by side until they reveal something universal.

Questions and Activities

Street Sweeper

Language Technique: 'Point of View'

Definition: Point of **Point of view**: the perspective from which the story is told.

Point of view comes in three types:

1. **First person** is in use when a character tells the story with *I-me-my-mine*. This is often enjoyable as the reader gets to experience the world through someone else's mind. But no-one has complete self-knowledge, so the work for the reader is to *interpret* what's going on beyond the narrator's viewpoint.
2. **Second person**, where the author speaks straight to the reader using *you* or *your*, is rare. Used well, it creates directness and intimacy, almost making the reader part of the action.
3. **Third person** is where an outsider narrates the story, using *he-she*. This is often used, because it allows stories to be told from multiple perspectives. It also means that the reader can know secrets the main character doesn't know.

Activity

1. Read the story *Street Sweeper*.
2. Question: From what 'point of view' is the story being told?
3. Discuss: In pairs, resolve the question as to why this 'point of view' was used to tell the narrative of the story. Create your 3 reasons why and feed them back to the class.
4. Focus now on your own writing. If you were to attempt to change the 'point of view' of the story, what might the effect be? Rewrite the first three paragraphs of *Street Sweeper* in the first person (I) or the third person (he/she).
5. Share: with a partner, read your versions aloud to your partner.
6. Extension questions: Which version do you prefer? Why do you think that the 'point of view' used in *Street Sweeper* is not often used?

What the critics said about Swann's use of 'point of view' in *Street Sweeper*

One reviewer (Gillian Dooley, Writers Radio) found this device "implausible" :

"The first story, 'Street Sweeper', is a second-person account of one remarkable day in the life of a teenage boy, related by someone from his future, perhaps a lover. The raw potency of the narrative masks the implausibility of this device, where the story is being retold to the original teller: 'When you tell me of the evening walks your voice is tender. ... years later, ... now a grown man ...' the narrator writes. It's not something I noticed until I revisited the story to write this review."

Others enjoyed the second person point of view -- *Street Sweeper* won first prize in the **page seventeen** literary competition and will be included in two other anthologies for 2011.

What does "implausible" mean, in this context, and do you think it is? How important is 'plausibility' in storytelling?

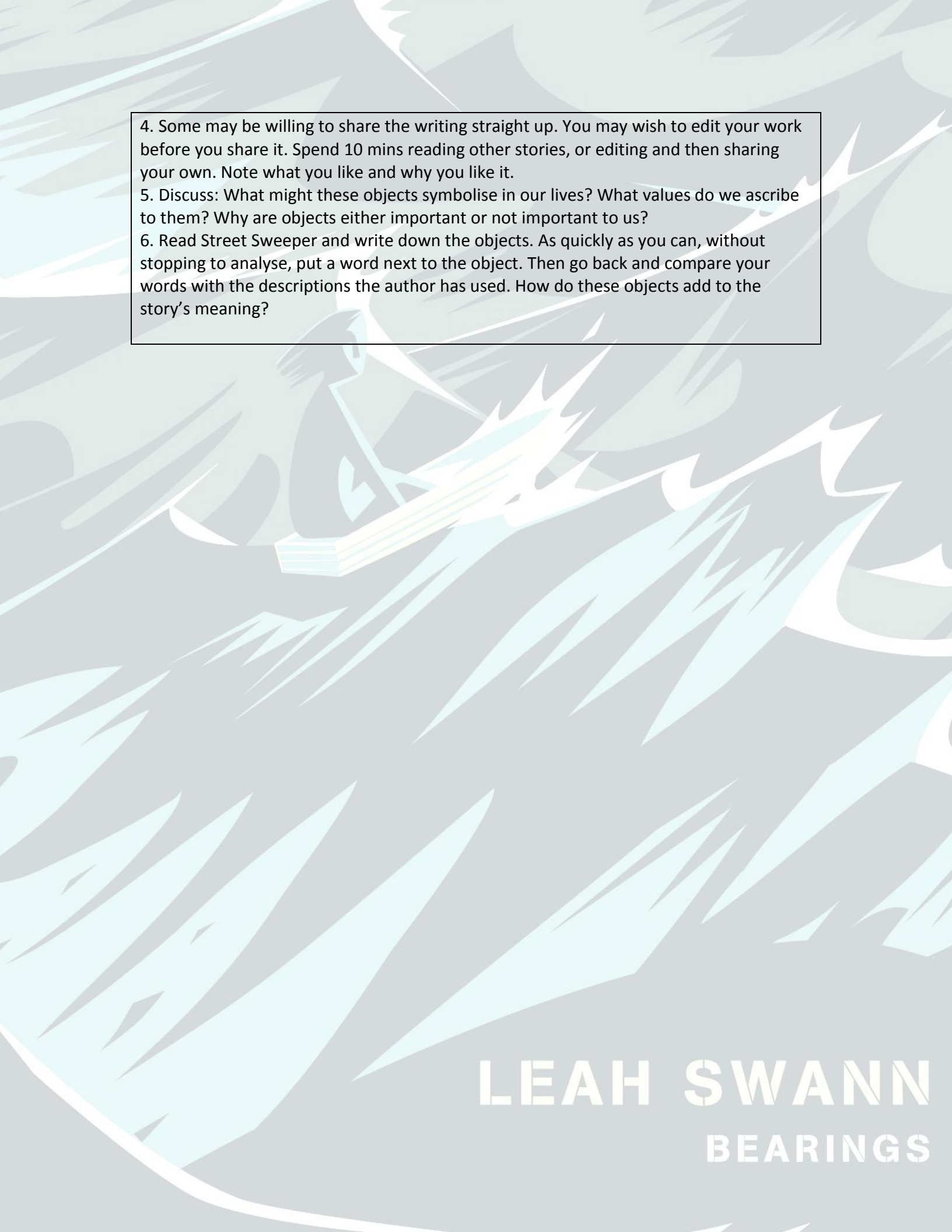
Language Technique: Symbol

Definition: Symbol

A thing that stands for something else, especially a material object representing something abstract or invisible.

Activity

1. Think of a simple object that is important to you. (If you get stuck you use an everyday object for example, a running shoe, a hairbrush, or a pencil).
2. Brainstorm. Write the object in a circle, then use a brainstorm diagram to show:
 - what does it help you do?
 - how does it smell?
 - feel to your hand?
 - look, or taste?
 - do you have any memories or associations with this object?
 - how would you make it stand for something symbolically in a piece of creative writing?
3. Set yourself 5 mins. The rule is that from when the timer starts, you have to write continuously for that time. If that means repeating words, or writing non-sensically, then fine. Try to focus on the object – use lots of adjectives. Find a character in your mind that can help tell the story of the object.



4. Some may be willing to share the writing straight up. You may wish to edit your work before you share it. Spend 10 mins reading other stories, or editing and then sharing your own. Note what you like and why you like it.

5. Discuss: What might these objects symbolise in our lives? What values do we ascribe to them? Why are objects either important or not important to us?

6. Read Street Sweeper and write down the objects. As quickly as you can, without stopping to analyse, put a word next to the object. Then go back and compare your words with the descriptions the author has used. How do these objects add to the story's meaning?

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BEARINGS

Background



Bearings: Are we slaves to destiny or architects of our own fate?

Bearings, a collection of seven short stories and a novella, is about keeping a foothold during unpredictable times.

Author Leah Swann burrows deep into the souls of her characters to reveal universal complexities, frailties and strengths. From searching to love to coping with grief, *Bearings* provides a map of the human condition, deftly drawn by a writer with a sharp eye for instinctive behaviours and emotional truths. *Bearings*:

- offers Australian settings and themes;
- offers varied stories, with both linear and non-linear narrative structures
- uses symbolism and point of view in interesting ways;
- uses different devices to construct meaning;
- outstanding reviews in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Australian*, *The Australian Book Review (ABR)* and others are testimony to the books literary merit

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