

4



# Learning to fly





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.



Blackbirds usually feed off the ground. The majority of English blackbirds seldom move any distance from where they were hatched. They are rather solitary birds with a very melodious voice.



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.



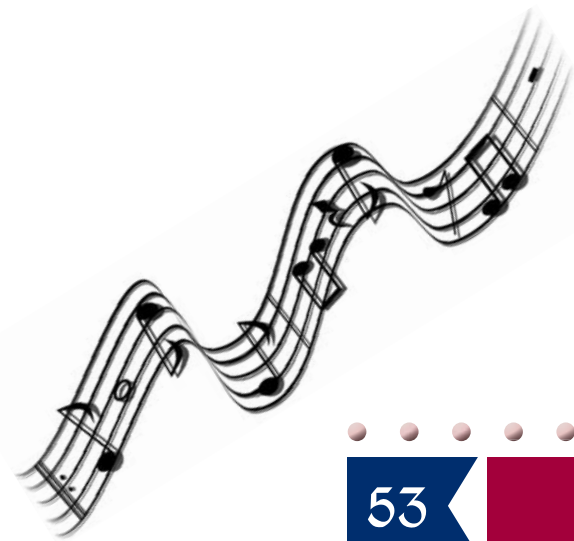
Empty rounded rectangular box for the first step of the narrative.



Empty rounded rectangular box for the second step of the narrative.



Empty rounded rectangular box for the third step of the narrative.



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.

### Background information

*There was a blackbird once, which was very solitary. It perched on the branches of its favourite tree and never flew away.*

### Zooming in on the story

*One day, as it was singing*

### Flashback

*It had never seen anything so beautiful before!*

### Storyline

*it looked up.*

*It plunged into thinking.*

.....

### Description

*A flock of birds was flying in formation.*

### Monologue

*'Perhaps I should try to fly, at least once'.*



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:

When you talk about the steps in the storyline, you use .....

When you pause the storyline and introduce a description, you use .....

- b. Do you think the same generalisations might hold across time? In other words, do we use continuous tenses, for example, to express the same idea in the past, the present and the future? If you use past continuous forms to present a scene in a description, for instance, as in "a flock of birds *was flying* in formation" above, would you use present continuous forms to describe a scene in the present, as in "Look at those birds over there! They *are flying* in formation" and future continuous forms to introduce a description in the future, as in "At 8 o' clock in the evening the birds *will be flying* in formation?" Can you think of examples for the other forms used in 3 above, in conjunction with the general rules you formed in 4a?

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



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?



"I had in mind a black woman, rather than a bird. Those were the days of the civil rights movement, which all of us cared passionately about, so this was really a song from me to a black woman, experiencing these problems in the States: 'Let me encourage you to keep trying, to keep your faith, there is hope.' As is often the case with my things, a veiling took place so, rather than say 'Black woman living in Little Rock\*' and be very specific, she became a bird, became symbolic, so you could apply it to your particular problem".

\* The capital of the US state of Arkansas, 42.1% of the inhabitants of which are Blacks or African-Americans.



<http://www.quora.com/What-is-the-meaning-of-the-phrase-blackbird-singing-in-the-dead-of-night>



7. 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.



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:
- Rewrite the song, replacing the phrases you had made a note of in activity 7 with phrases of your own.
  - Set the lyrics to music you compose yourself. If you have done activity 7a, you could set your version of the lyrics to music.
  - 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

Blackbird singing in the dead of night  
Take these broken wings and learn to fly  
All your life  
You were only waiting for this moment to arise

Black bird singing in the dead of night  
Take these sunken eyes and learn to see  
all your life  
you were only waiting for this moment to be free

Blackbird fly, Blackbird fly  
Into the light of the dark black night.

Blackbird fly, Blackbird fly  
Into the light of the dark black night.

Blackbird singing  
in the dead of night  
Take these broken wings  
and learn to fly  
All your life

You were only waiting for this moment to arise,  
You were only waiting for this moment to arise,  
You were only waiting for this moment to arise



The Beatles, "Blackbird"  
White Album, 1968

9. Now take a look at the paragraph that follows, from Bach's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, and do the following:
- Comment on the dedication right below the title. What do you think it talks about?
  - What do you think Jonathan Livingston Seagull was practising? Why?
  - Where would you place the opening paragraph and the opening line of the second paragraph within the story framework you worked on in activity 3 earlier? The verb form should help you decide.



Richard Bach.  
*Jonathan Livingston Seagull*

To the real  
Jonathan Seagull,  
who lives within us all.

### PART ONE

It was morning, and the new sun sparkled gold across the ripples of a gentle sea. A mile from shore a fishing boat chummed the water and the word for Breakfast Flock flashed through the air, till a crowd of a thousand seagulls came to dodge and fight for bits of food. It was another busy day beginning.

But way off alone, out by himself beyond boat and shore, Jonathan Livingston Seagull was practicing.





- 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.

A large rectangular area with a light yellow background and a thin red border. It contains ten horizontal dotted lines for writing.



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?

A hundred feet in the sky he lowered his webbed feet, lifted his beak, and strained to hold a painful hard twisting curve through his wings. The curve meant that he would fly slowly, and now he slowed until the wind was a whisper in his face, until the ocean stood still beneath him. He narrowed his eyes in fierce concentration, held his breath, forced one... single... more... inch... of... curve... Then his feathers ruffled, he stalled and fell.

Seagulls, as you know, never falter, never stall. To stall in the air is for them disgrace and it is dishonor. But Jonathan Livingston Seagull, unashamed, stretching his wings again in that

trembling hard curve - slowing, slowing, and stalling once more - was no ordinary bird.

Most gulls don't bother to learn more than the simplest facts of flight - how to get from shore to food and back again. For most gulls, it is not flying that matters, but eating. For this gull, though, it was not eating that mattered, but flight. More than anything else. Jonathan Livingston Seagull loved to fly.

This kind of thinking, he found, is not the way to make one's self popular with other birds. Even his parents were dismayed as Jonathan spent whole days alone, making hundreds of low-level glides, experimenting.

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.

daring bold solitary

chicken-hearted decisive cowardly

arrogant risky single-minded

dynamic persistent flexible

headstrong submissive revolutionary

resourceful a non-conformist

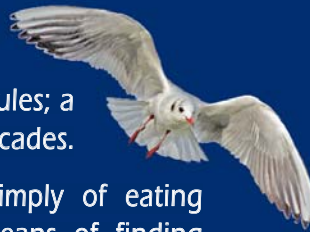
.....



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?
14. Have you felt the need to "fly"? Does the real Jonathan Seagull really live within 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:



This is a story for people who follow their dreams and make their own rules; a story that has inspired people for decades.



For most seagulls, life consists simply of eating and surviving. Flying is just a means of finding food. However, Jonathan Livingston Seagull is no ordinary bird. For him, flying is life itself. Against the conventions of seagull society, he seeks to find a higher purpose and become the best at doing what he loves.

This is a fable about the importance of making the most of our lives, even if our goals run contrary to the norms of our flock, tribe or neighbourhood. Through the metaphor of flight, Jonathan's story shows us that, if we follow our dreams, we too can soar.

'Richard Bach with this book does two things.  
He gives me Flight.  
He makes me Young.  
For both I am deeply grateful.'

RAY BRADBURY

Richard Bach (1970).  
Jonathan Livingston Seagull: a story, HarperCollinsPublishers Ltd.

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?



Form two groups:

- ◆ **Group A** is the child group while
- ◆ **Group B** is the parent group.
- ✓ Role-play the dialogue between a child choosing to fly along his/her own personal route and in his/her personal way and his/her parents, preaching

caution and somehow obstructing their child's "flight" to freedom.

- ✓ Form smaller groups first and decide on at least five arguments supporting your position, then join the other groups with the same role and enrich your arguments further. You should have some ten arguments before you start the role-play. All group members participate.
  - ✓ A pair of students, one from each group, will not take part in the final stage but will need to act as "judges" and decide which of the two groups has advanced more convincing arguments.
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?

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.



When in the sky he lowered his feet, lifted his beak, and tried to hold a curve through his wings.

- 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. Work in groups.



18. Listen to the book read out on YouTube (“Jonathan Livingston Seagull, narrated by Richard Harris”) and do one or more of the following:
- Write down your impressions, as in a diary.
  - Draw a scene from what you listened to.
  - Write a review to be uploaded on a teenager book fan blog.

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. Have you experienced this with other books made into film?



