

# BEHIND THE SCENES: ADAPTING STORIES

## INTERVIEW WITH JENNIFER GASCOIGNE

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HELBLING LANGUAGES · HELBLING READERS BLOG

Have you ever wondered how graded readers are put together? Who writes them? What is it like to adapt stories? Maybe you've thought of adapting or writing your own reader and are wondering how to start. Today we will take a peek behind the scenes and learn about how our graded readers are born.

In the first part of this series you can read an interview with two adaptors and editors, Frances Mariani and Jennifer Gascoigne, who have worked on several Helbling Readers. They shared their adaptation process, talked about their experiences, and gave us some practical tips you can try with your students.

**Nora Nagy (NN): What is the first thing you do when you are given a reader to adapt?**

**Jennifer Gascoigne:** It depends on the story I have to adapt. Usually I get hold of the original text and start reading. But I sometimes watch film versions of the story to get an idea of the plot and the characters – I did that with *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, for example.

**NN: Describe your typical adaptation process.**

**Jennifer:** After I've read the original, I think about how I can divide up the story into the number of chapters I want, usually between 8 and 12. Then I make rough notes on the content of each chapter. If the original is long, like *Wuthering Heights*, then I also have to decide which events I'm going to gloss over or even omit if I don't think they are really essential to the main plot. After that I begin to make my page plan. This involves deciding on the length of the chapters and where to put the pictures. I adjust the plan a lot as I write, so it's always a 'work in progress'! I never worry about having a perfect page plan before I start writing. Then, with the original, next to me, I start writing. I like to get a first draft of the story on paper fairly quickly, then I work on simplifying the vocabulary and structures afterwards. If possible I try to give myself a break of a few days before going back and starting the editing. By creating a distance between you and the text, you can see better where adjustments need to be made. Editing is always the most time-consuming part of the process of writing.

**NN: How important is the choice of reader?**

**Jennifer:** If it's a popular children's classic, and I usually adapt those, it doesn't matter what it is. They are all lovely engaging stories.

**NN: Is there any style/author you prefer?**

**Jennifer:** No, not really. I love the challenge of a new book and a new author. The most difficult book I've adapted so far I think has been *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, both because of the length and the language – Mark Twain uses lots of different local dialects.

**NN: Do you remember any words, phrases or sentences that were really hard to change?**

**Jennifer:** Conditional sentences are challenging when I'm writing at A2 level.

**NN: How can you make sure that the original style stays with us?**

**Jennifer:** That's quite hard, especially if I'm adapting books for A1/A2 readers. I think keeping some of the original words and expressions (glossed) is a way of doing it. It's also necessary to make sure the personality of the main characters remains the same. For example, Alice in 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland' is a self-confident, serious little girl, so this must be clear in the adaptation.

**NN: What would you say to people critical of adaptations?**

**Jennifer:** I'd say that adaptations are really useful additions to any language syllabus. They help to consolidate language already learnt in a pleasurable way. Stories stimulate the imagination much more than the typical short texts you find in text books do. Adaptations introduce students to classic works of literature they might never otherwise read. They are like stepping stones to reading novels in the original language. Because the vocabulary and structures are carefully graded, students get real satisfaction from being able to read 'a book in English' by themselves, especially lower level (A1-A2) students! This builds confidence and boosts motivation to learn. Finally they can be used in cross curricular activities in the classroom, for example, *The Great Gatsby* could be a springboard for studying the American Dream. Or *The Secret Garden* for studying the Edwardian Age in Britain.

**NN: Adaptation is a kind of interpretation. How much creative freedom do you allow yourself?**

**Jennifer:** Very little indeed. I try to stick to the original story as closely as possible. Besides I don't want my 'voice' to dominate – it's the story that's important.

**NN: What's your overall philosophy when you're adapting a story?**

**Jennifer:** Imagine I am the reader.

**NN: Can you give us some tips to keep in mind when adapting original fiction?**

**Jennifer:** Don't summarise the text. An adaptation isn't a summary, it's a story. Being creative with punctuation can inject meaning too – especially at lower levels. For example, put loud words in capitals – CRASH!

**Readers adapted by Jennifer Gascoigne:**

- *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L.Frank Baum
- *Little Women* by Louise May Alcott
- *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll
- *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain
- *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë