What the Dickens?

Lesson 4: Cliffhangers

Key Stages: KS2 – Yr 5 & 6, KS3

Term: Spring

Timing: 60 mins

This Lesson Plan has been designed to be used with either Year 5 or Year 6 at Key Stage 2 or with Years 7, 8 or 9 at Key Stage 3. Content can be adjusted according to the range of abilities within the class, to provide sufficient challenge for the most able students and to accommodate individual school lesson plan requirements. Lesson timings are approximate and can be easily adjusted.

Prior knowledge:

Some knowledge of Charles Dickens’ life and work.

Some experience of reading books containing chapters.

Objective:

By the end of the lesson students will:

* have become aware that much of Charles Dickens’ writing was published in instalments in periodicals rather than as complete novels;
* understand how the device of the ‘cliffhanger’ was a critical element in maintaining interest in and sales of Dickens’ work;
* understand the way in which copyright theft frustrates the efforts of writers like Dickens.

Main curriculum links:

Key Stage 2

* En1 Speaking and listening: 1a,b 2a,b,d
* En2 Reading: 2a,b, d, 3g, 4a,b,e
* En3 Writing: 1a-d, 2a,b,c, 7a

Key Stage 3

* En1 (a) Gaining a sense of the English literary heritage and engaging with important texts in it.
* 1.3 Cultural understanding
* 1.4 Critical understanding
* **3.2 Reading**

Other curriculum links:

Key Stage 2

* PSHCE: 1a, 4b, 4f
* History: 1a, 2a, 2b, 3, 4a

Key Stage 3

* Citizenship: Rights and responsibilities

Equipment and resources:

* Per project: IWB/projector
* Per student/group: computer access as appropriate

Preparation required:

Access to a computer, speakers and IWB/screen.

Settling activity/Starter:

Timing: 10 mins *(Timings adjustable according to teacher preferences)*

Teacher presents typical Charles Dickens ‘cliffhanger’ ending to class e.g. from *Great Expectations* - see passage and explanation in Activity Sheet 4.

* Class speculate on how plot might develop and explain reasons.
* Teacher explains how plot develops in original text.

Main teaching phase:

Timing: 40 mins

The class are tasked to plot a short story which will contain at least one dramatic, cliffhanger ending to a chapter or section within the story. Students may work in pairs, groups or individually according to teacher preference. Some teachers may prefer to use a grid or prompt sheet for setting out the story using headings e.g. characters, setting, problem/issue, element of surprise for cliffhanger.

Next, provide students with a variety of story openings. (*See Lesson 4 appendix for suggested chapter openings; teachers may wish to encourage some students to devise their own.*)

The students should use the chapter openings to create a new story. If working in pairs or groups, students might wish to work separately on cliffhanging chapter ending and follow-up chapter opening e.g. student 1 of pair/group devises cliffhanging ending, student 2 of pair/group creates effective follow-up after hearing the partner’s ending. (*See Activity Sheet 4 for options and follow-up.)*

Teacher selects up to five of the chapter endings the students have written and asks students to read them to class; the others guess what happens next in the follow-up chapter opening. Students then read the actual openings to class.

The connection is made to soap operas on television and films designed to have a sequel, which often have cliffhanger endings. What happens when ‘spoilers’ are leaked? How does this undermine the writer?

Plenary:

Timing: 10 mins

Students consider the merits and criticisms of their own work and share thoughts as to how their stories might be developed/improved.

Students consider including at least one cliffhanger ending within their stories.

Homework/Extension:

Students work on weaving cliffhangers into their stories.

Students note current uses of cliffhanging endings in books they have read, or in television and film and assess their effectiveness.

Lesson 4 appendix

Chapter openings

The following are a variety of chapter openings you may like to use with Lesson 4:

1. It was always the same. I would start looking forward to the long summer holiday as early as June or even May. As the holiday approached, I would become more and more excited thinking about how I would use all that free time and talking with my friends about the wonderful things we could do, daydreaming about the exciting adventures that lay in wait. Then, within as little as one week of the start of the holiday, I would be bored to tears! ‘Why,’ I thought, ‘did nothing exciting ever happen to me?’
2. If only I had listened. Time after time, my mum had told me to be careful about going there. She warned me that nobody would be able to help if I did get into trouble. She even told me about the terrible thing that had occurred there a while back, I’m not sure when. But I thought I knew better. She didn’t understand that I was more than able to look after myself. She still thought of me as a child. I was more than capable of looking after myself nowadays. Or so I thought. Now, of course, I really do know better.
3. The email, when it arrived was short and to the point. It read simply: ‘This Saturday. 10 a.m. The Tip Top Café. Be there. And don’t dare to be late.’ The email address wasn’t one I knew and half of me knew I should ignore it. If I went, it was sure to end in trouble of one kind or another. That was the logical response. The sensible option. But another side of me was intrigued by the message. Especially the part that read ‘And don’t dare to be late’. What could be so vital that it mattered if you were just a minute or two late? Heart versus head. Which would I obey? And what would be the consequence of either action?
4. Why is it that weird things always happen to me? Sometimes, it just seems that even when everything is moving along quite normally and you would think it would be impossible for anything bizarre to happen, suddenly ZOOM! Out of nowhere arrives this totally unbelievably astonishing, astounding and mind-boggling occurrence which has everyone (me included) wondering ‘Where did that come from?’
5. My jeans were torn, my feet were bleeding and I had no money to get home. Worst of all, how I would ever be able to explain how it happened? Perhaps I’d better tell you how it all began.
6. To look at me, most people would think I was a perfectly ordinary person leading a normal life, doing all the usual things that most people do. But maybe everyone’s like that, I don’t know. All I can say is you should be me. Then you’d know what trouble was!
7. ‘Turn a different corner, maybe we would never have met’; I think that’s how the old song lyric goes. That definitely applies to me. If I hadn’t been in just that place at that particular moment, none of this would have happened. Am I glad it happened or do I wish it hadn’t? Listen to this story and judge for yourself.
8. Just three words – ‘You have mail’. Who could ever have guessed what those words would lead to?
9. Now I was really lost. I looked around me. Each of the forest pathways looked exactly the same. There was nothing there to remind me which was the path back to the edge of the forest and safety. The light was fading fast. I began to hear strange noises or maybe it was just my imagination. The longer I dithered the more time I was wasting. I was starting to panic. Would I ever get out of here?
10. I walked past the houses. Most windows were lit and occasionally I could hear snatches of laughter or somebody singing and sometimes music playing. I imagined families gathering round the tree, excitedly looking at enticingly-wrapped presents, waiting for the moment to come when they were allowed to open them. I longed to be part of all that, wished with all my heart to be snug within the comfort of a house, part of a happy family, warm, safe and secure. For me though it wasn’t to be. I was on the outside, looking in.