

# A Very Clever Possum

by Vivienne Joseph  
illustrated by Christine Tate

## Overview

This narrative describes how Mr Lees, a keen gardener, tries to save his favourite rosebush from a hungry possum by setting a trap. Night after night, the wily possum manages to get the food out of the trap and escape. Information about possums is included inside the back cover, along with comments from the author and the illustrator. There is an audio version on the Ready to Read CD *Readalong 2000*.

## Suggested purposes

This text is particularly useful for developing the comprehension strategies of visualising, inferring, analysing, and evaluating.

## Text features

(Focus on only one or two per session.)

- the narrative structure
- the way the possum outwits Mr Lees
- the open ending
- the fact that the possum is never actually seen by the characters
- the possum “thought bubble” on page 12
- the notes on the author and the illustrator and the information about possums inside the back cover
- the indicators of time – “At last”, “After a while”, “In the morning”, “That night”, “The next morning”
- the use of a first-person narrator
- the relatively long sections of direct speech
- the poetic features:
  - the irregular verbs “heard”, “hid”, “lay”, “ran”, “woke”
  - the verbs that involve doubling the final consonant – “slammed”, “stopped”
  - the verbs that involve dropping the final “e” – “dancing”, “shaking”, “using”.
- the use of onomatopoeia (page 2)
- the image of the possum dancing (pages 3 and 6)
- the use of personification (page 8)

## Possible challenges

- the ideas of the possum and the branches “dancing” and the wind “singing”
- the reasoning behind Mr Lee’s solution to the problem (on page 11)
- the reason for the possum “thought bubble” on page 12.

## Introducing the text

Read the title. *What do you know about possums?* Check that the children understand that possums are nocturnal. *Do you think that possums are clever? What problems might a possum cause around people's homes?* Explain that the girl in this story has a neighbour who has a problem with a possum.

## During the reading

Read the names of the author and the illustrator.

Ask the children to read the text silently, pausing at various points for discussion or to clarify any difficulties with the reading.

Page 2 – *Who is telling this story? How do you know?*

Page 3 – *What did Dad mean when he said “dancing on the roof”? Discuss the setting. When is this taking place?*

Page 4 – *Why is the girl lying awake?*

Page 5 – *Who is this man? What is he telling the girl?* You may need to explain the meaning of the word “shoots” in this context.

Page 7– Study the illustration and discuss how the trap might work.

Page 9 – *Why is Mr Lees shaking his head? Do you think the trap will work next time?*

Page 11 – *Why did Mr Lees stop using the trap?*

Page 12 – Draw attention to the last line. *How do you think the writer wants you to read this? Why do you think Mr Lees said the possum was clever? Why is the possum in the illustration?* Clarify that the possum illustration is like a thought bubble belonging to Mr Lees. The “darkness” around the illustration supports the idea that the possum is not physically present. *What do you think about the way the story ends? What do you think about the possum?*

## After the reading

(Choose only one or two per session.)

Read the author and illustrator profiles inside the back cover. Talk about why Vivienne Joseph might have decided to write this book.

Read the information inside the back cover with the children. Talk about why possums are such a threat to the environment.

Listen while the children reread the text with a partner, observing their use of strategies and how they manage the sections of direct speech.

Study the narrative structure of the story. *What was the problem in the beginning? Has the problem been resolved at the end of the story?*

*Are possums clever?* Discuss the title of the book and encourage children to present and listen to different points of view.

Draw attention to the poetic language on pages 2, 3, 6, and 8. *Why does the writer say that the wind is singing? Can possums and branches dance?* Talk about the impact of the onomatopoeia on page 2.

*What words tell you when things are happening on page 8? What about on page 9? Ask the children to find other phrases in the story that are used to indicate time. There are examples on pages 2, 4, 5, 6, 10, and 11. Draw out the idea that phrases like these help the reader.*

Focus on the dialogue on pages 5, 6, 9 and 12. *What did Mr Lees and the girl say? Draw out the idea that “said” will not always come at the beginning or end of a section of dialogue.*

Focus on the sentences that include irregular verbs. Remind the children that some verbs can't have “ed” added to them and that they need to use their knowledge of spoken English to help them when they're reading. *Does “heard” sound right? For ESOL children, who are less likely to be able to draw on their knowledge of English syntax, model the use of these irregular verbs in subsequent conversations.*

Write the verbs “slammed” and “stopped” on the whiteboard. Identify the root words. Draw out the idea that words with a short vowel before the final consonant need to have the final consonant doubled before adding “ed” (or “ing”).

Write the words “dance”, “shake”, and “use” on the whiteboard. *How would you write “dancing”? Explain the need to drop the “e” before adding “ing”. Show me how you would write “shaking” (and “using”).* Think of other verbs that end in “e” and have the children practise adding “ing”.

## Suggestions for further tasks

Listen to the audio version on the CD *Readalong 2000*. *How does the music work to make you feel the different moods in the story?*

Read other articles and stories about possums. Use *Journal Search* to help you.

Use the book for reciprocal reading.

Use the text as a stimulus for modelling persuasive writing about whether possums should be trapped and killed.

Write a letter from the possum stating its point of view.

Make a poster, in pairs or as a group, with information about possums.

Use this text as a model for using alternatives to “and then” in the children's writing.