

# My Sister and I

by Leilani Tamu

School Journal  
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Year 8



## Overview

This TSM contains a wide range of information and suggestions for teachers to pick and choose from, depending on the needs of their students and their purpose for using the text. The materials provide many opportunities for revisiting the text.

The Auckland-based poet Leilani Tamu remembers aspects of her childhood in this autobiographical poem. She looks back on the experiences that were a familiar part of her upbringing when she and her sister spent time with their dad. The poem has a raw honesty, with some reflection, as the writer describes various scenarios that provide some idea of the father's personality and lifestyle – being at the racetrack, eating junk food in a car park outside the casino, and watching brawls at the rugby league ground. The list of experiences is shared with no bitterness, and we can infer that the writer was close to her sister and her father. The poem ends with the poignant comment: these are the things that happened “when Dad was alive”.

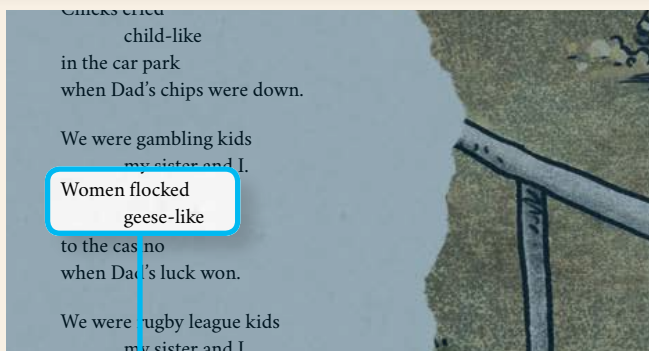
This poem:

- explores the themes of memory and childhood
- allows students to identify with their own lives and experiences
- has a simple, clear structure
- makes use of similes to describe the remembered experiences.

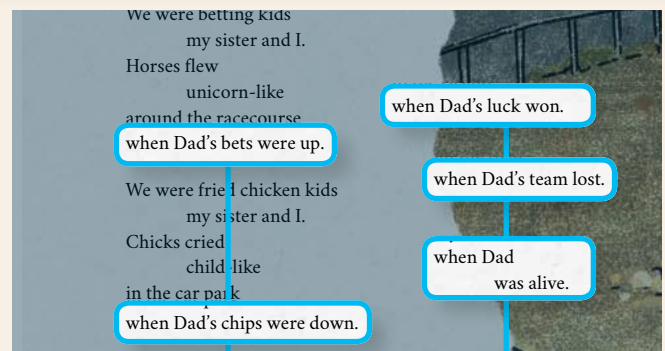
A PDF of the text is available at [www.schooljournal.tki.org.nz](http://www.schooljournal.tki.org.nz)

Texts related by theme “The Squash Club” SJ L4 March 2012

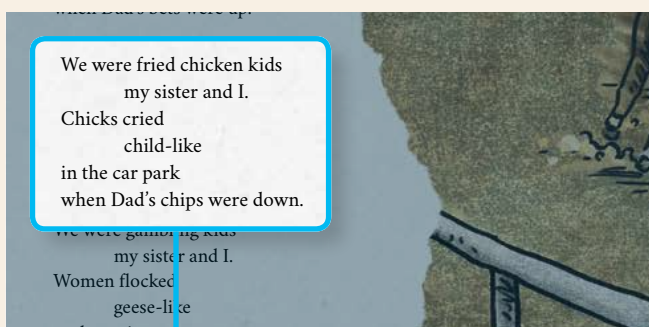
## Text characteristics from the year 8 reading standard



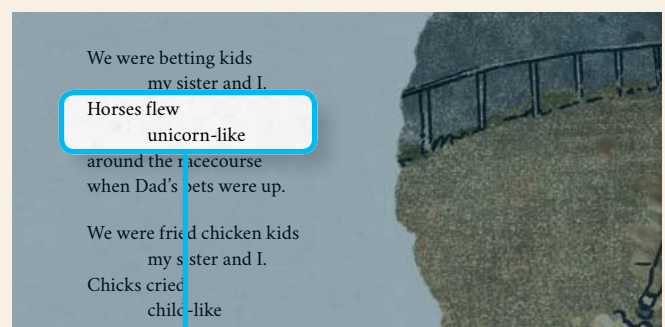
complex layers of meaning, and/or information that is irrelevant to the identified purpose for reading (that is, competing information), requiring students to infer meanings or make judgments



adverbial clauses or connectives that require students to make links across the whole text



words and phrases with multiple meanings that require students to know and use effective word-solving strategies to retain their focus on meaning



simile, analogy, and connotative language that is open to interpretation



Reading standard: by the end of year 8

## VOCABULARY

- Possibly unfamiliar words and phrases, including “betting”, “unicorn-like”, “bets”, “chicks”, “gambling”, “flocked”, “casino”
- Expressions: “chips were down”

## Possible supporting strategies

- There are not very many words in this poem, and none that would cause difficulty. The terms connected with gambling may need some explanation, with links made between the concept of gambling, whether it be at a race track or a casino. The use of “chicks”, referring to the two sisters, may need clarification, especially for English language learners.
- Create word clouds or mind maps of words associated with gambling as these will help to activate prior memory and increase vocabulary.
- The writer uses a known expression, “when your chips are down”, meaning you are down on your luck, or losing. Students may need support to identify the play on words with “chicks” and “chips” in the second stanza.
- *The English Language Learning Progressions: Introduction*, pages 39–46, has useful information about learning vocabulary.
- See also [ESOL Online, Vocabulary](#), for examples of other strategies to support students with vocabulary.

## SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE REQUIRED

- Familiarity with poetry and poetic structures
- Some understanding of the purpose of poetry
- Some understanding of the nature of family relationships and events

## Possible supporting strategies

- Some students may need support to understand the opening statements to each stanza, for example, that it wasn't the kids who were betting. The writer labels them as such because they were with their dad, who was doing the betting.
- Some students will not identify with the scenes depicted, but the concept of parents taking their kids to different places will be familiar.

## TEXT FEATURES AND STRUCTURE

- First person, past tense
- Repetitive structure
- Repeated refrain: “my sister and I”
- Specific nouns coupled with a descriptive verb: “Horses flew”, “Chicks cried”, “Women flocked”, “Men fought”
- Comparisons used to describe: “unicorn-like”, “child-like”, “geese-like”, “warrior-like”
- Adverbial phrases used to detail where the events occurred: “around the racecourse”, “in the car park”, “to the casino”, “on the field”
- Each stanza finishing with a reference to the time: “when ...”
- The simplicity and poignancy of the final line: “when Dad was alive”

## Possible supporting strategies

- Explain that the poem is autobiographical – the writer is telling the reader something of her childhood memories.
- Prompt recall of what the students know about poetry and how you can differentiate between poetry and prose.
- Support students to follow the pattern of the poem – the repetitive structure of each stanza and the line breaks.
- Brainstorm other noun-descriptive verb combinations that could have been used by the author.
- Have them read the poem aloud, in pairs, to discuss the effect of the repetition.
- Use questioning to identify the repeated devices: *What did the horses do? The chicks? The women? The men? How did the horses fly? How did the chicks cry?*
- Discuss the effectiveness of the simple details used to describe where the action was and when this happened.



## Possible curriculum contexts

### ENGLISH (Reading)

Level 4 – Purposes and audiences: Show an increasing understanding of how texts are shaped for different purposes and audiences.

– Structure: Show an increasing understanding of text structures.

### ENGLISH (Writing)

Level 4 – Purposes and audiences: Show an increasing understanding of how to shape texts for different purposes and audiences.

– Structure: Organise texts, using a range of appropriate structures.

### HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION (Relationships with other people)

Level 4 – Relationships: Identify the effects of changing situations, roles, and responsibilities on relationships and describe appropriate responses.

### Possible first reading purpose

- To explore and reflect on a poem that describes childhood memories.

### Possible subsequent reading purposes

- To think critically about the writer's message and how it is conveyed
- To identify and evaluate the writer's use of structure to convey her ideas.

### Possible writing purposes

- To write a poem, using the same structure as "My Sister and I"
- To write a personal narrative which recalls a childhood memory.



# Instructional focus – Reading


**English** Level 4 – Purposes and audiences: Show an increasing understanding of how texts are shaped for different purposes and audiences; Structure: Show an increasing understanding of text structures.

**Health and Physical Education (Relationships with other people)** Level 4 – Relationships: Identify the effects of changing situations, roles, and responsibilities on relationships and describe appropriate responses.

## First reading

- Set the purpose for reading.
- Provide a little background information about the writer, Leilani Tamu, that will help with understanding: born and bred in Auckland, a poet, historian, and politician. She describes her childhood as “happy, although not always easy”. The two sisters spent most of their childhood “living between two worlds – the strict, ‘safe’ world of my Samoan grandparents and mum, and the unpredictable, sometimes dangerous world occupied by our Pākehā dad.”
- Explain that the poem is about the writer’s childhood and tells us about when she was a child.
- Model thinking about good and bad childhood memories and share examples from your own life, including how you felt about each one.
- Have the students read through the poem themselves and discuss their responses with a partner.
- Invite the students to share their thoughts and reflections on the ideas that the poem presents. Discuss whether or not each memory described in the poem was a good one.

## If the students require more scaffolding

- Prompt prior knowledge about poetry. *Why do we write poems? What is the purpose? Are there different forms of poetry? Have a chat with your partner about some poems you have read and enjoyed.*
- Lead discussion about memory – how our brains can recall images from our past experiences. These images are multi-sensory, and include emotions. Talking about emotions and feelings can be difficult for some English language learners. Help them by creating word banks of terms used to describe emotions and feelings.
- After the students have read the poem and discussed it with a partner, ask questions to clarify understanding. *Who is doing the betting at the racecourse? What makes the image of the horses clearer? Are they really flying?*  
 You could project the PDF of the poem onto a whiteboard to refer to as you discuss it.
- Remind students to make connections as they read – connections between the described settings in each stanza and connections to their own world.

**Subsequent readings** How you approach subsequent readings will depend on your reading purpose.

### The teacher

Prompt critical thinking with questioning.

- *What is the writer telling us?*
- *Why would she have written this poem?*
- *How do we get an idea of what she thought of these experiences?*
- *How do we get an idea of how she felt about her dad?*
- *How much do you think the writer wants us to know about her childhood?*
- *Do you think these would have been the only things they did with their dad?*
- *Is this a happy memory? What makes us think that?*

### The teacher

Remind students about text structures – how writers organise and shape their words and phrases to say what they mean.

Direct students to specific lines and structures to support understanding.

- *What is the same in each stanza? What is the effect of that repetition?*
- *Look at the specific nouns – horses, chicks, women, men. What do they do?*
- *Where is the action happening? Does each stanza have an adverbial phrase?*
- *What does “unicorn-like” describe?*
- *How are the chicks described? The women? The men?*
- *How does the final line differ from the last lines of the other stanzas?*

### METACOGNITION

- *Which part of this poem had the most impact on you? Are we able to understand the writer’s purpose from what she’s written? What would you ask the writer if you had the chance?*

### The students:

- reread the whole poem to get a sense of the collection of experiences
- make connections between the text and their own experiences of time spent with a parent
- make inferences about the girls’ relationship with their dad, based on what is said in the poem
- evaluate and synthesise the ideas in each stanza and share their ideas and personal opinions
- ask their own questions of the text
- synthesise the events and descriptions to suggest why the writer might have written the poem.

### The students:

- use their knowledge of language features and text structures to locate and identify the language features and text structures repeated in each stanza
- evaluate the impact of the selected features and structures
- think critically about the writer’s choice to convey her ideas through poetry and discuss the effectiveness of this choice.

### GIVE FEEDBACK

- *After you found the links between the structure and the ideas in each stanza, you came up with your own interpretation of the sisters’ relationship with their dad. Making that connection is a really good way of figuring out what a writer might be saying in a poem.*

Reading standard: by the end of year 8

The Literacy Learning Progressions

Assessment Resource Banks

# Instructional focus – Writing

**English** Level 4 - Purposes and audiences: Show an increasing understanding of how texts are shaped for different purposes and audiences; Structure: Organise texts, using a range of appropriate structures.

## Text excerpts from “My Sister and I”

Page 24  
 We were betting kids ...  
 We were fried chicken kids ...  
 We were gambling kids ...

## Examples of text characteristics

### REPETITION

*Repetition in poetry can emphasise an idea. It also adds rhythm.*


## Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching)

Explain that writers use repetition deliberately for effect.

Model reading Tamu’s poem aloud and ask students to comment on how it sounds. You could do several choral readings of the poem to develop pronunciation, fluency, and intonation. Choral readings are especially helpful for English language learners.

- *Listen to the rhythm. Do you hear a repeated pattern? Is it the words or the way you say them? Which word is emphasised in the first stanza? Is it the same for the other stanzas?*

Have the students write their own poem about a way of life using a similar structure to “My Sister and I”, including repetition.

 The students could use a [Google Doc](#) to write their poem, to allow for continued editing.

Each student could complete a graphic organiser to help plan their ideas. For example, they could complete a table like the one below by listing four childhood memories and adding a description of the location, their feelings, and a noun-descriptive verb simile like those used in the poem. Some students would benefit from observing and participating in teacher modelling of this writing process.

Childhood memory	Location	How I felt	Noun-descriptive verb simile

- *Read your own poem to a partner. Talk to each other about the effect of your repetition.*
- *Do you need to revise your poem? Do you get a better idea of what you want to say when you read aloud?*

Page 24  
 Horses flew  
 unicorn-like

### METAPHORS AND SIMILES

*Metaphors and similes help to create images for the reader.*

Clarify what metaphors and similes are and what they do.

- *What is the difference between something literal and something figurative or metaphorical?*
- *Are the horses literally flying?*
- *What are words “unicorn-like” referring to?*
- *What has more impact – “unicorn-like” or “like unicorns”?*

Encourage students to form opinions in response to the writer’s choices.

Discuss the appropriate use of metaphors and similes.

- *What makes the image of “horses flew” work?*
- *Do we associate “flew” with speed? Does speed match the “unicorn-like” image?*

Have students check their writing and make revision decisions. If students are finding it difficult to write a metaphor or a simile, you can model the process by using a think aloud technique. Brainstorm some words that describe your memory and demonstrate combining two associated ideas into a metaphor or a simile.

- *Are there places where a metaphor or a simile will convey your meaning more eloquently than straight description?*
- *What is the best metaphor or simile that will help to create the visual image you are trying to depict?*

## Text excerpts from “My Sister and I”

## Examples of text characteristics

## Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching)

Page 24  
in the car park  
When Dad’s chips were down

### ADVERBIAL PHRASES

*Adverbial phrases are groups of words that act like an adverb, telling us more about the time and place of the action – the when and the where. They usually begin with a preposition.*

Discuss the choices writers make to ensure they are providing their readers with what they need to make sense of the text. Have the students write a personal narrative about a childhood memory.

Direct students back to Tamu’s poem to recall what the words are providing for the reader.

- *Do we know where she is?*
- *Do we know when this is?*
- *Does this help us to create images in our minds?*

Discuss the impact of phrases that help the reader to see what is going on.

- *Read through your personal narrative, and check that you have included enough details for the reader to know what is going on, where you are, and who is involved.*

Some English language learners have difficulty knowing which prepositions to use. For these students, you may need to explicitly teach the meaning of each preposition and practise using them. You could provide simple anchor charts that use simple diagrams or photos to illustrate the meaning of each preposition that the students can refer to when writing.

### GIVE FEEDBACK

- *You’ve used repetition in your poem about you and your brothers at the rugby club. This gives your poem a good rhythm when you read it.*

### METACOGNITION

- *How did you decide what you wanted your audience to know about your experience? Did you find Leilani Tamu’s structure useful to hang your own ideas on? Why? Why not?*

Writing standard: by the end of year 8

The Literacy Learning Progressions