

Windrush Stories

bl.uk/windrush

Teaching pack: Creative writing activities

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Curriculum subjects: English, History

Suitable for primary school students

Rationale

In June 1948 the *Empire Windrush* arrived at Tilbury Docks, Essex carrying hundreds of people from the Caribbean. Many aboard had been to Britain before. Some had fought in World War Two. Most were filled with excitement and hope about coming to Britain. Citizens had British citizenship and British passports because many islands within the Caribbean were part of the British Empire. The arrival of *Windrush* is very well known, but this was not the first nor the last ship to carry migrants from the Caribbean. Many other people came to Britain to make new lives and help rebuild the country after the war.

These creative writing activities invite you to explore the experiences of people who migrated from the Caribbean and how they have shaped Britain.



Postcard of *Empire Windrush* purchased by Winston Levy whilst on board

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Information for teachers

- Suitable for primary school students. We also have activities for [secondary students](#).
- Key curriculum areas: English, Creative Writing, History; Black History Month activities.
- These activities are designed to stimulate shared classroom talk. When used alongside the *Windrush Stories* website, they aim to build a shared set of understandings and ideas about the topic of Caribbean migration to Britain that can be worked into pieces of creative writing. Children are encouraged to talk through their ideas and discuss collaboratively before writing.
- Before beginning the activities, you could play this [short film](#) featuring members of the Caribbean Social Forum sharing their stories of journeying from the Caribbean to the UK and their experiences of settling in a new place to call home.

Useful links

Videos

- [Members of the Caribbean Social Forum share their stories of journeying from the Caribbean to the UK](#)
- ['Pathe Reporter Meets' – footage of the landing of the *Empire Windrush* in 1948](#)
- ['Windrush Child'](#) by John Agard
- ['Sausages'](#) by Hannah Lowe

Articles

- [Floella Benjamin on coming to England](#)

Collection items

- [Postcard of *Empire Windrush* purchased by Winston Levy whilst on board](#)
- [Photograph of a woman arriving from the Caribbean, May 1956](#)
- [Photograph of John Hazel, Harold Wilmot and John Richards at Tilbury Docks, June 1948](#)
- ['Englan' Voice'](#) by James Berry
- [A volunteer from British Guiana, poster showing Diana Williams working in the auxiliary territorial service](#)
- [BBC pamphlet, *Going to Britain?*](#)
- [Flamingo magazine, September 1961](#)

1. What's in the picture?

Photographs are snapshots of moments in time and can show us vivid glimpses of the past. Each of the photographs below captures an important moment in the collective experience of arriving in Britain from the Caribbean.



Photograph of a woman arriving from the Caribbean, May 1956

© Haywood Magee/Picture Post/Getty Images/Stringer



Photograph of John Hazel, Harold Wilmot and John Richards at Tilbury Docks, June 1948, © Popperfoto/Getty Images/Contributor

Looking closely

Look carefully at each photograph and describe what you see.

What can you say for certain about this picture?

Setting: what can you see in the background?

People: what are the people in the picture doing, what are they wearing?

Objects: what are people holding, looking at, etc?

Opening up possibilities

Now use what you know to speculate, or open up some ideas, about what else the picture might be telling us.

What do you think is happening in this picture? What might be happening just outside of the frame?

Look at body language, facial expressions, mood etc.

What might the people in this picture be thinking at the moment it was taken?

Asking questions

Imagine you are a news reporter who has been sent to meet people to find out more about their experience of moving to Britain from the Caribbean. Choose someone from one of the photographs to interview. *If you could ask this person three questions, what would you ask?*

Watch the [Pathé film footage](#) below for inspiration.



2. Soundsplash – Poetry for performance

Music is a crucial element of Caribbean culture. Caribbean musical styles such as calypso, reggae, ska, mento and RnB have had a huge impact on the British music scene, creating new forms from the traditional ones and bringing added life, colour and richness to music for playing and singing, listening and dancing to.

Performance poetry is also a key ingredient in the recipe of Caribbean language culture, with poets often performing their work live in front of audiences.

The sounds and the rhythm of language are just as important as meaning, and performance actively involves the listener, making it very much a shared experience.

Over to you

Listen to these poetry performances:

- [‘Windrush Child’](#) by John Agard
- [‘Englan’ Voice’](#) by James Berry
- [‘Sausages’](#) by Hannah Lowe

Choose a poem you like and develop your own performance of it.

How will you use your voice to bring your personality into the performance?

Jamaican poet [Una Marson](#) describes each of her poems as a ‘heart-throb’.

How will you bring a sense of rhythm to your performance to make it exciting for the listener?

Poems to read and perform

- [‘Windrush Child’](#) by John Agard
- [‘Isn’t my name magical?’](#) by James Berry
- [Poems](#) by Grace Nichols

3. Persuading people

Posters like this one, produced by the Ministry of Information, were used to persuade people to come to Britain from the Caribbean to support the war effort during World War Two. [This poster](#) features Diana Williams, from British Guyana, who volunteered with the Auxiliary Territorial Service.



A volunteer from British Guiana, poster showing Diana Williams working in the auxiliary territorial service

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To persuade people, it suggests that Diana's contribution to the war effort will be valued and that Diana will have an equal chance of promotion: that her work in Britain will be an important step towards achieving racial equality.

Over to you

Design a poster to persuade people to come to Britain from the Caribbean during the 1940s or 1950s, using a combination of words and images to convince people.

- What jobs might you invite people to come and do? For example, you might invite people to come and work as a nurse or a doctor with the NHS, formed in 1948. Or you might persuade them to come and work as a journalist or a playwright, a poet or an artist, a musician or a dancer, an actor or a lawyer.
- What will you tell people to persuade them to come?

Going to Britain

For people who had already settled in Britain, one way of supporting each other and building a sense of community was to offer advice to fellow Caribbeans who had yet to make the journey. [Going to Britain?](#) was a pamphlet offering advice to new arrivants about how to settle into life in Britain, from what to bring with you and how to prepare for the cold, to how to find work and the importance of tea breaks!

Read the extract below:

It is wise for you to remember that England is a cold country, that it is way up north, and that it has customs and traditions different from those of the West Indies.

I said that England is a cold place – so it is, colder than anything you have ever felt. In winter all the water outside freezes, that is, it turns into ice, everybody shivering though protected with warm sweaters, leather gloves, woollen coats, and thick-soled shoes. Are you prepare for this type of cold climate with its icy winds, its sleet and snow?
(*Going to Britain?*, p. 10)

Over to you

If you were giving advice to someone coming to join you to live in Britain, what would you tell them about? Think of at least three key pieces of advice or information, then create your own leaflet.

4. Telling the story

[Flamingo magazine](#) was created especially for black and Caribbean readers. It ran in the 1960s and described itself as 'the voice for the 350,000 West Indians and many thousands of Africans and Asians' in Britain.

Magazines often carried 'photo-stories', telling the story of a real-life event or situation using a series of photographs arranged in chronological order, like a storyboard.

This photo-story explores the experience of a young woman who is settling into a new home in England. The captions deepen our understanding of the pictures.

London is the Place for me

My name is Joan and I come from the West Indies. I am 21. So many people seemed to be leaving home to come and try their luck in Britain, so I decided to come over here too. I had some pre-conceived ideas on what I would find here—mostly ideas I had gained from school books on English history—and I found that my picture didn't at all fit in with what I actually discovered here. But still, I like it . . . I'm glad I came.

1. When I first arrived in London I felt so lost I just wanted to turn round and go back home again.

2. But the porter was nice to me. He told me which bus to catch to get to my friend's address. When I offered him a tip, he refused and said, "Keep it, you might need it later, ducks".

© Edward Scobie: © Flamingo magazine, September 1961, edited by Edward Scobie.

Over to you

Read the photo-story, using both the pictures and the captions. Flick through the pages to see the full story.

What might Joan be thinking and feeling in each picture?

Write a thought bubble for each picture to show her thoughts.

5. *Coming to England: a child's perspective*

Coming to England is an autobiographical novel by children's television presenter and author [Floella Benjamin](#). In it, she reveals a richly detailed picture of her early childhood in Trinidad and tells the story of her family's sudden and unexpected move to England.



Photograph of Floella Benjamin as a child with her mum, dad, sister Sandra and brother Lester.
Courtesy of Floella Benjamin.

Activity 1

Celebrations

This extract describes Floella's special Sunday lunches at home with her family in Trinidad.

Read the description aloud and look out for the details that reveal that, for her, it is a special experience. Make notes of your thoughts.

For lunch it was either a rich tasty soup which was like a stew made of meat, pulses, vegetables and dumplings, or rice served with beef, chicken or, on Fridays, fish. For dessert we had whatever fresh fruit was in season: mangoes, pineapples, pawpaw or pomsitea, and for supper we had bread and cakes, all baked by Marmie, washed down with cocoa.

Saturday was Marmie's baking day, and she would bake enough for the whole week. Bread or bakes – a sort of bread with no yeast; sweet bread – bread with coconut and sugar; sponge cakes and coconut drops. The smell of freshly baked bread and cakes was wonderful – it always made me hungry. Sandra and I had to do our bit by helping to grease the baking tins and stir the cake mixture. The best part was when we fought over licking the cake bowl.

Sunday was a special day in Trinidad. It was the one time of the week when we all got together which gave me a happy feeling of belonging and a sense of occasion. The realisation that the family unit was special began to take place during that time. We ate lavishly in the sitting room: the crisp starched white tablecloth would be spread out over the mahogany table, and the best glasses – frosted coloured ones – and plates were used. Then the table would be laden with dishes of food – it was like a feast. On the menu was brown down chicken, rice, plantains, callaloo, sweet potatoes, cassavas, unguo peas, and macaroni cheese pie.

(Floella Benjamin, *Coming to England*, pp. 15–18)

Over to you

Think of a special family meal or celebration that you have experienced and write about it.

What details will you choose to paint a vivid picture for the reader?

- *How will you show that it is a very special experience?*
- *Use sensory language to bring your writing to life: what can be seen, heard, felt, smelt, tasted?*

Activity 2

Expectations

In this extract, Floella and her siblings have finally boarded a ship bound for England. Their mother, Marmie, has already been there for some time and has now sent for them to join her.

Read the extract carefully out loud and think about how Floella is feeling whilst on board the ship.

Finally the day for our journey across the ocean came. My mother had asked her sister Olive to buy the tickets for all four of us. Auntie Olive lived in the Port of Spain which was where had to board the ship for England. We spent our final night with her before being packed into her car for the drive through the busy evening traffic to the port. I had been there before to wave goodbye to Dardie when he left the country. But now it was my turn to leave these tropical shores for the first time in my life. I was just about to begin a journey of a lifetime which would take fifteen days across 4,000 [miles?] of ocean.

The excitement at the port gave me a tingle inside. I felt butterflies in my tummy. I could see the big ship far out in the water. It couldn't come right up to the side of the wharf because the water wasn't deep enough so everyone had to be transported to the ship in small motor boats. There was so much noise it was deafening, everyone was pushing and shoving, people were shouting, making sure their trunks and suitcases were safe as the boats ferried backwards and forwards. I felt bewildered, lost amongst the other passengers and those who had come to bid them farewell. Many were hugging and crying as they said goodbye. Prayers were being said for a safe passage. Suddenly I started to cry too. I felt scared, but of what I wasn't sure. Perhaps it was because I now realised what was about to happen. I was leaving my homeland, the land where I had experienced great happiness with my family. Maybe it was because I was frightened of going into the small boat as it bobbed on the dark, oily water – water which crazily reflected the harsh harbour lights like a liquid mirror and separated us from the waiting ship that seemed to be calling me to her. Maybe I was just scared of facing the unknown. I still don't know.

Over to you

- Write a postcard or a letter from Floella to her mother in England.
- What feelings will she share?
- What questions might she have about the life that lies ahead?

Activity 3

Revelations / New experiences

In this final piece, Floella describes the experience of seeing snow for the first time:

There was, however, one kind of weather that made me feel happy, even though it was cold. I so clearly remember the first time I experienced the thrill of it. On a cold morning, as I huddled under my thick blanket, the smell of the paraffin lamp still lingering in the air, I was awakened by a stillness, an eerie quietness. A strong, clear light shone through the curtains, not the usual murky greyness but a magical light. I sensed something was different about this day as I slowly went to the window. I lifted up the curtains and wiped the condensation off the pane. Then I saw it, a pure white blanket that dazzled me. It was a whiteness I had never seen before, and everything was covered in it. I gasped with wonderment, the landscape looked so beautiful, it took my breath away. Surprisingly, I didn't feel cold; the beauty had warmed me. I had fallen in love with snow.

- How do Floella's word choices reveal how she feels about the snow?
- Choose some words and phrases that show how she paints a picture in the reader's mind of what she is seeing.
- How does she create a sense of wonder, of surprise?

Make some notes of your ideas.

Over to you

Now, choose an experience that you have had in your own life.

For example:

- Being out in a thunderstorm
- Eating an ice cream
- Reading aloud in front of the class

Imagine you are having that experience for the first time ever in your life. How will you describe it?

What is exciting about it?

What is surprising?

How does the experience make you feel?

Extracts from *Coming to England* reproduced with kind permission of Floella Benjamin.