

Launching into Literacy Skills with Science Fiction

Grades
K-2, 3-5

by | Jennifer Ward

• Keep 'em Reading •

It is often said that yesterday's science fiction is today's reality. And it's true, considering the many far-fetched elements of science fiction from days past that are commonplace in current society. The submarine is a perfect example. Initially featured in 1869 as an invented and imaginary vehicle of transport in Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (Children's Press, 2006), the device was seemingly otherworldly at that time, but is now considered ordinary. Ear buds, worn today by children and adults alike, were featured in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* in the 1950s (Simon and Schuster, 2012) long before their invention. And prior to cell phones and today's computer technology, past generations could hardly fathom using cordless telephones on a daily basis to communicate over extreme distances (as seen in *Star Trek*), or communicate face-to-face via screen or monitor devices, as George Jetson often did with his boss in the cartoon, *The Jetsons*. Robots, space travel, artificial intelligence, cloning, space travel, flying cars, jet packs—these and other realms of invention we cannot yet fathom set our imaginations spinning.

The genre of science fiction serves as a window on the potential of technology and invention. It gives us a peek into what the future might hold. It is both real and exaggerated science, and it affords an infinite area for curriculum applications and units of study. Read on for a collection of science fiction picture books that will launch your students into literacy-related skills; encourage them to imagine, create and invent; and give them a glimpse at what the future may hold.



Decode It! (Grades 1-5)

We often look for engaging ways to help our students use context clues to make text-to-text and text-to-illustration connections. A perfect picture book to implement this particular curriculum element is *Baloney (Henry P.)* by Jon Scieszka, illustrated by Lane Smith (Viking, 2001). Henry is an alien, and evidently he has school problems just like your students experience, too! In this story, Henry is late for school one time too many. The plot develops as he spins a yarn to convince his teacher that he shouldn't be given life-long detention.

The fun in this book is the connection between text and illustration. Scieszka uses supposedly made-up "space" language throughout the narrative, which students can decipher by using context clues with companion text and illustration. The language implemented throughout the story is actually Finnish, Latin, Ugbaric, Maltese, and Swahili, among a variety of other languages. After reading the story with students, embark on some language play and invite them to

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decode the foreign languages used in the book while deciphering which technique they used to determine each word's meaning (visual clue, context clue, similarity to a word they're familiar with). Use the reproducible on page 4 to assist with this activity.

Invent It!

Science fiction is all about creative inventions. The more outlandish and unimaginable, the better! This genre is packed with titles for all ages and reading ranges to prove this point, but two picture books to get young inventors spinning with ideas are *Cookiebot! A Harry and Horsie Adventure* by Katie Van Camp, illustrated by Lincoln Agnew (Balzer & Bray 2011); and *If I Built a Car* by Chris Van Dusen (Puffin 2007).

Both books center on children who come up with creative inventions to solve a problem, such as a robot that can get to the out-of-reach cookie jar, or an embellished car that can fly, float, and do all sorts of other things.

After sharing one or both stories with students, invite them to invent their own creations. Students may want to invent cooperatively, with a partner or small group, or work individually. Inventions will be preliminary ideas, drawn on paper using pencils, crayons or markers. You may want to supply rulers or other elements that can aid in their drawing, e.g., items and shapes that can be traced. Encourage students to share why they made this invention. Does it make life easier, better, or more enjoyable? Provide a word-web like the example on page 5 for students to brainstorm ideas and organize their thoughts before they embark on designing their invention. It can also be used as a reference while they create.

Once a word web is established for reference, the following areas may help students to get started with ideas for their drawing:

- *Invent a sport.* Using knowledge from sports they are familiar with, encourage students to think of a new sport. It can be an individual or team sport, and may involve whatever type of equipment or special uniform they can imagine.



- *Invent a robot.* Using knowledge from familiar inventions that are used daily, and remembering the idea that many inventions make life easier, encourage students to draw the designs for a robot. Their robot can be pet- or animal-like, human-like, or whatever they imagine—the more exaggerated, the better. What is their robot's primary function? Invite them to write about it and share their thoughts orally with the class.
- *Invent a type of vehicle.* Draw a vehicle that functions in any way you'd like; the more exaggerated, the better. Maybe it flies, maybe it floats. Maybe it soars, maybe it can turn invisible. Maybe it cooks, maybe it moves like a roller coaster. Maybe it hovers, maybe it does homework! Brainstorm with students and get their imaginations rolling. Use a word-web initially to jot down ideas, and reference it during the design stage.
- *Invent a type of food:* What does it look like? What does it taste like? What benefits does it offer?
- *Invent a classroom:* What type of technology does it offer?

As a wrap-up, ask students to make a list, organized by room, of as many inventions as they can find in their homes when they go home at the end of the day. Ask them to bring their list back to school to share with the class. A reproducible chart is available on page 6.

As an extension, older students will enjoy reading and researching more mature science fiction works, both in books and on film. Invite them to complete the table on page 7 that explores the technological inventions and devices implemented in older works that are utilized in society today—or perhaps, are on the way to becoming a technological reality.

New Frontiers of Writing

Science fiction picture books can be used as a springboard for creative writing with students, where the fun lies in your students mixing fiction and their own imaginations in a realm where anything goes.

Use titles from the bibliography at the end of this article for a variety of science fiction themes for your classroom. From aliens to space travel, from robots to just pure silly, students will see an underlying, common thread that ties all of these books together. Regardless of the author's writing style, the mood of the illustration, or the book's theme, each story has a character, a setting, and rich details.

Provide the graphic organizer from page 8 to guide your students with their own science fiction writing.

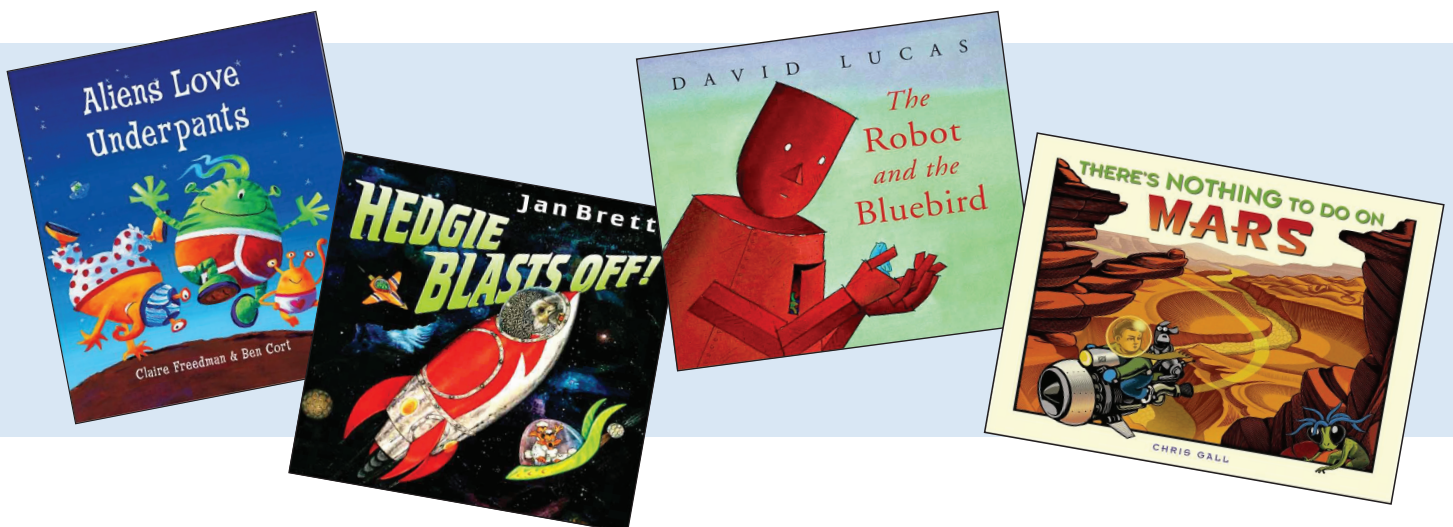
Bibliography

- *Aliens Love Underpants* by Claire Freedman and Ben Cort Barrons. Educational Series, 2007.
- *Baloney (Henry P)* by Jon Scieszka. Illustrated by Lane Smith. Viking, 2001.
- *Captain Raptor and the Space Pirates* by Patrick O'Brien and Kevin O'Malley. Walker Books, 2007.
- *Cookiebot! A Harry and Horsie Adventure* by Katie Van Camp. Illustrated by Lincoln Agnew. Balzer & Bray, 2011.

- *Harry and Horsie* by Katie Van Camp. Illustrated by Lincoln Agnew. Balzer & Bray, 2009.
- *Hedgie Blasts Off!* by Jan Brett. Putnam, 2006.
- *Hello Robots* by Bob Staake. Viking, 2004.
- *Here Come the Aliens!* by Colin McNaughton. Candlewick Press, 1997.
- *If I Built a Car* by Chris Van Dusen. Puffin, 2007.
- *Jack and the Night Visitors* by Pat Schories. Front Street Press, 2006.
- *The Robot and the Bluebird* by David Lucas. Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2008.
- *Robot Dreams* by Sara Varon. First Second, 2007.
- *Robot Zot* by Jon Scieszka. Illustrated by David Shannon. Simon & Schuster, 2009.
- *Sheep Blast Off!* by Nancy Shaw. Illustrated by Margot Apple. Houghton Mifflin, 2008.
- *There's Nothing to do on Mars* by Chris Gall. Little, Brown and Company, 2008.
- *We're Off to Look for Aliens* by Colin McNaughton. Candlewick Press, 2008.

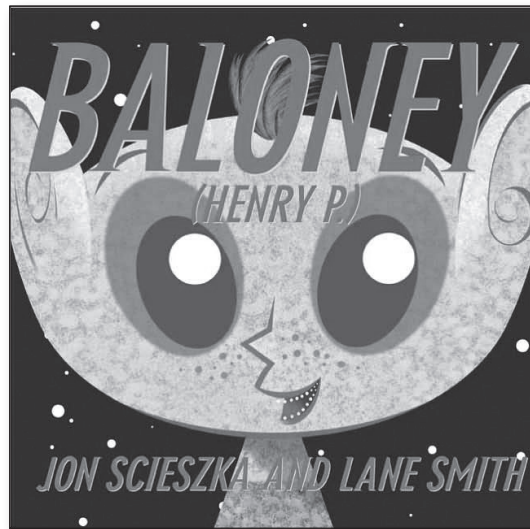


Jennifer Ward is the author of numerous acclaimed children's books and parenting books including the whimsical, fictional picture books, *There Was a Coyote Who Swallowed a Flea* (Cooper Square Publishing, 2007); *There Was an Old Monkey Who Swallowed a Frog* (Marshall Cavendish, 2010), a 2011 IRA/CBC Children's Choice Book; *There Was an Odd Princess Who Swallowed a Pea* (Marshall Cavendish, 2011); and the forthcoming, *There Was an Old Pirate Who Swallowed a Fish* (Marshall Cavendish, fall 2012). A former elementary educator, she now writes full time from her home in Illinois. Visit her on the Web at www.jenniferwardbooks.com.



How Did You Figure Out the Words in Henry (Baloney P.)?

Place a check mark in the box or boxes that helped you determine each word's meaning.



WORD	Visual clue from illustration	Similarity to familiar word	Context clue with surrounding text
deski			
piksa			
razzi			
torakku			
zimulis			



An Invention
Just for Fun:

What Invention
Would Make My
Life Easier Or
More Enjoyable?

An Invention
for School:

An Invention to
Use at Home:



Inventions In My Home

Kitchen						
Bathroom						
Bedroom						
Garage and Yard						
Living/ Family Room						



From Science Fiction to Science Fact: Technology Inspired by Science Fiction

Title of Movie or Book, including date of release/publication	Technology	Is the technology used today?	If not, might the technology be developed and used in the future?
<i>Fahrenheit 451</i> , by Ray Bradbury, 1953	Earbuds (seashells) provide sound, worn on ears	Yes	

Main Idea

(what do you want your story to be about?)

Details

(character)

Details

(setting)

Details

(action/events)
