Welcome to Global Words

The twelve units of work in Global Words have been produced by World Vision Australia and the Primary English Teaching Association Australia (PETAA) to integrate the teaching and learning of English and global citizenship education.

At the centre of both global citizenship education and the study of English is the aim of supporting students to become ethical, thoughtful and informed citizens, predisposed to take action for change.

In this interactive notebook we will discuss modality and look at how Mem Fox has used it to effectively communicate a message.

Understanding modality

Modality in Mem Fox's *Whoever You Are*
To the teacher

On the activity

This SMART Notebook offers a close textual analysis of Mem Fox's and Leslie Staub’s Whoever You Are. The discussion of modality could be applied to other texts, both imaginative and informative.

On the text

It is a paradox that the simplest texts are often the most complex.

*Whoever You Are* is not a story in the traditional narrative mode. It does not present a traditional orientation, nor a complication, nor a resolution.

It is text more about relationships between things, than a story in which things happen.

To help children navigate a story with no story, illustrator Leslie Staub has given readers a consistent point of identification as they read the book. The blue-suited man operates as a kind of guide, anchoring the story visually as geographic contexts shift with every page turn.

Notice the incantatory, almost-hypnotic quality of the writing. Although not the language focus here, you may choose to bring students’ attention to small size of the word bank and how often the words are recycled/repeated.
What is modality?

The big picture

Authors use modality to achieve specific purposes in their writing. Let's investigate modality a little further and then apply what we learn to Whoever You Are.

Modality lies on a continuum, or a scale, and we usually describe modality in terms of whether it is high or low.


In any particular situation, we choose different degrees of modality depending on how we want to relate to the listener/reader and how we want to portray our own level of commitment to an idea or action.

For example, we could use low modality if we wanted to encourage interaction by being gentle and tentative.

For example, we absolutely must use high modality when we want to express a high degree of certainty.
Student activity

Sort the words in white

Prompt sentence: We ________ take care of our classroom.
Mem Fox and modality

Examining text

Display a copy of the text of Whoever You Are and highlight each instance of the word 'may'.

May is a modal auxiliary which means it needs to team up with a verb to be complete.

"Modals give us information about the degree of obligation or certainty involved in the action."

Student activity

What degree of modality does MAY possess? Sort the following modals according to their level of modality.

WILL CAN SHOULD HAS TO COULD

MAY NEED TO MIGHT MUST

OU T TO WOULD HAVE TO

LOW OBLIGATION HIGH OBLIGATION

TENTATIVE CERTAIN

LOW MODALITY MEDIUM MODALITY HIGH MODALITY

ANSWERS
Relating verbs

Examining text
Authors develop relations between sets of information to achieve specific purposes in their writing.

We have already established that Mem Fox is using the low modality auxiliary — may — in this text.

What verb does 'may' modify?
Go back to the text and have a look.

Student activity

Below is a table that begins to look at the way relating verbs and modal auxiliaries are used in Whoever You Are. Mem Fox is relating/comparing other people’s skin, homes, hearts, smiles with the reader’s.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thing being identified</th>
<th>Modal auxiliary</th>
<th>Relating verb</th>
<th>Identifier</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Their skin</td>
<td>may</td>
<td>be</td>
<td>different from yours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>their homes</td>
<td>may</td>
<td>be</td>
<td>different from yours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>their hearts</td>
<td></td>
<td>are</td>
<td>just like yours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>their smiles</td>
<td></td>
<td>are</td>
<td>like yours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the next page, look at the text and classify which qualities of being human Mem Fox is softening the connection with through the use of modality, and which qualities she is relating more directly.
Student activity

Classify the nouns from the text

THINGS THAT MAY BE DIFFERENT

words

laugh

smiles

hearts

lives

joys

land

pain

hurts

blood

love

smiles

homes

schools

skin

THINGS THAT ARE THE SAME
Grammar for a purpose

The summary

Mem Fox wants the reader to pay more attention to the human qualities that unite us, rather than the differences in our circumstances that might separate us.

So in between the two participants in the text - YOU and THEM - she places a series of noun groups.

Mem uses modality to soften the relations between YOU and THEM with those nouns that refer to circumstance.

The nouns that refer to human qualities, however, are linked directly to the reader, without qualification. The nouns that refer to human qualities relate YOU and THEM at the level of fact.

The choice of low modality — may — prevents the reader, who is addressed directly in the second person, from disagreeing with her statements and perhaps switching off.

Choosing low modality here, builds the relationship with the reader and opens up the space for further conversation.

Mem Fox is an awesome wordsmith!
Your turn!

Four children, four stories

In the beginning of this unit, we looked at four stories from around the world and analysed them for their differences and common elements. This is RICH material for writing a text that uses modality and relating verbs in the style of *Whoever You Are*.

Example:

Who these children live with is different, but they all live in families.
The foods they eat are different, but they all have favourite foods.
The jobs they do are different, but they all help at home.

Little one, whoever you are.
Wherever you are.
There are little ones just like you all over the world.

Who children live with may be different from yours and their foods may be different from yours. The jobs they do at home may be different from yours.
To the teacher

On the activity

The degree of scaffolding required and specific task design is up to you as the teacher.

A possible option would be for students to take the first three lines as is, but use the content from the four children’s stories to write five lines of low modality differences — a selection of the specific differences as generated in the table in the unit — followed by six lines of strongly related similarities — the headings of the table — then take the next three lines as is and innovate again on the final stanza. See the picture example on the previous page.

Other options could include: writing in direct address to just one child — narrowing the you — or seeing what happens to the meaning of Mem Fox’s original text when the your / theirs are reversed and we highlight differences rather than similarities, or inviting students to vary the strength of the modality to see the effect on meaning.
Australian curriculum: English

Content descriptors covered

LANGUAGE
Language for interaction
Examine how evaluative language can be varied to be more or less forceful (ACELA1477)

Expressing and developing ideas
Understand that verbs represent different processes (doing, thinking, saying, and relating) and that these processes are anchored in time through tense (ACELA1482)

Text structure and organisation
Learn extended and technical vocabulary and ways of expressing opinion including modal verbs and adverbs (ACELA1484)

LITERATURE
Literature and context
Discuss texts in which characters, events and settings are portrayed in different ways, and speculate on the authors' reasons (ACELT1594)

Creating literature
Create texts that adapt language features and patterns encountered in literary texts, for example characterisation, rhyme, rhythm, mood, music, sound effects and dialogue (ACELT1791)

LITERACY
Interpreting, analysing, evaluating
Identify the audience and purpose of imaginative, informative and persuasive texts (ACELY1678)

Creating texts
Plan, draft and publish imaginative, informative and persuasive texts demonstrating increasing control over text structures and language features and selecting print, and multimodal elements appropriate to the audience and purpose (ACELY1682)