

Every year, just a moment before Christmas, millions of Americans named Uncle George race into a book store on their only trip of the year.

"I want a book," they tell the salesman, "that my nephew Orlo can read. He's in first grade. Wants to be a rhinoceros hunter."

"Sorry," says the salesman. "We have nothing about rhinoceros that Orlo could possibly read."

And, on Christmas morning, under millions of Christmas trees, millions of Orlos unwrap millions of books . . . all of them titled, approximately, "Bunny, Bunny, Bunny."

This causes the rhinoceros hunters to snort, "Books stink!" And this, in turn, causes philosophers to get all het up and to write essays entitled "Why Orlo Can't Read," in which they urge that we all rush out and burn down the nearest school house.

Of course this would be just as silly as it would be to rush out and burn down the nearest Uncle George.

The reason Orlo says "Nuts to Books" is because practically every book that he is able to read is far beneath his intellectual capacity. Orlo, in the first grade, is a mighty hep guy. When he twists the knob of his television set, he meets everyone from Wyatt Earp to Governor Faubus. He attends the launchings of Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles. He observes the building of the Pyramids, flies across the South Pole and he knows what tools you have to use if you want to defang a cobra. Orlo, at 6, has seen more of life than his great-grandfather had seen when he died at the age of 90.

Yet, if you go out to get Orlo a good book he can read, even if you search the great New York Public Library, you can bring all the available books back home in

a paper bag and still have room in the paper bag for three oranges and a can of tuna.

So . . . one day I got so distressed about Orlo's plight, that I put on my Don Quixote suit and went out on a crusade. I announced loudly to all those within earshot, "Within two short weeks, with one hand tied behind me, I will knock out a story that will thrill the pants right off all Orlos!"

My ensuing experience can best be described as not dissimilar to that of being lost with a witch in a tunnel of love. The only job I ever tackled that I found more difficult was when I wrote the Baedeker that Eskimos use when they travel in Siam.

In writing for kids of the middle first grade, the writer gets his first ghastly shock when he learns about a diabolical little thing known as "The List." Schoolbook publishing houses all have little lists. Lists of words that kids can be expected to read, at various stages in their progress through the elementary grades. How they compile these lists is still a mystery to me. But somehow or other . . . with divining rods or something . . . they've figured out the number of words that a teacher can ram into the average child's noodle. (Also the approximate dates on which these rammings should take place.)

Poor Orlo! At the age of 6½, his noodle has scarcely been rammed at all!

He can, of course, recognize some 1500 *spoken* words when they enter his head through the holes in his ears. But *printed* words . . . *ugh!* He can recognize only about 300 when they try to get into his head through his eyes. All the other printed words in the world all look, to Orlo, like Appomatox.

And there I was, in my shining armor, with my feet

handed down to a pathetic little vocabulary that I swear my Irish setter could master.

After the first couple of hours of staring at my Word List, I did discover a few words that might come in handy in writing a story. Words like *am* and *are* and *is*. But when you want to thrill the pants off a rhinoceros hunter, that takes a bit of doing with words like *daddy* and *kitten* and *pot*.

After the first few weeks, I was still looking for a subject to write about. Then, suddenly one night, I dreamed the answer. Two simple little romantic words! Every last kid in the United States knew them! They were even printed on kindergarten building blocks!

I leapt from my beddie house. I rushed for my typewriter. Even before I got there, my happy fingers were already typing in the air. "The Queen Zebra" was the title of my story!

I had dashed off thirty-two red hot pages when, suddenly, I felt sort of all-over-queasy. Out of the corners of my eyes, I snuck a look at the Word List. *Queen* and *Zebra* weren't there after all!

Then, to make things even more befuddling, I noticed something new that had escaped my attention up to now. Maybe the letters "Q" and "Z" were perfectly kosher in kindergarten, but there were no "Q" and "Z" words on my first-grade list whatever. "Q" and "Z" had been purged and sent to Siberia!

Befuddled? At the end of the first four months, my Befuddlement Index had zoomed so high that my befuddlement thermometer blew up in my mouth. I was now trying to sweat out a story about a bird . . . at the same time refraining from using the word *bird*. (The list, you see, declares a permanent closed season.)

But *wing* was on the list. And *thing* was on the list. So I COULD write about a bird IF I called the bird a

WING THING! And then I discovered I could use the word *fly*! Now, at last, I could really be moving! This enabled me to write a sentence.

That first sentence was also the last sentence of that story. After six weeks of trying to get my *wing thing* off the ground and into the sky, I had to give up due to numerous unbelievable reasons. *Ground* and *sky* were both taboo. Furthermore, my *wing thing* couldn't have *legs* or a *beak* or a *tail*. Not even a *foot*! Neither a *left* foot nor a *right* foot. And she couldn't lay *eggs*. Because *eggs*, according to the word list, are to be eaten, not read.

At this point, in order to get control of my emotions, I spent half a year working in my Uncle George's coal mine.

When I came up, I solved my problem by writing "The Cat in the Hat." How I did this is no trade secret. The method I used is the same method you use when you sit down to make apple stroodle without stroodles.

You forget all about time. You go to work with what you have! You take your limited, uninteresting ingredients (in my case 223 words) and day and night, month after month, you mix them up into thousands of different combinations. You bake a batch. You taste it. Then you hurl it out of the window. Until finally one night, when it is darkest just before dawn, a plausible stroodle-less stroodle begins to take shape before your eyes!

Since "The Cat" I've been trying to invent some easier method. But I am afraid the above procedure will always be par for the course. At least it will be just as long as the course is laid out on a word list.

[This essay was first published in the *New York Times Book Review*, 17 Nov. 1957, on pages 2 and 60.]



A while back there was a tremendous ruckus going on about the reading problems of American school kids. And I, who knew nothing about primary education, got flung into the mixer quite by accident. Somebody . . . John Hersey . . . casually suggested in an article in *Life* that I was the type of writer who should write a first grade reader.

So, with innocent conceit, I said, "Why not?" All I needed to do, I figured, was find a whale of an exciting subject. This would make the average 6-year-old want to read like crazy. None of the old dull stuff. Dick has a ball. Dick likes the ball. The ball is red, red, red, red, red.

Within an hour I found a dozen hot subjects. I merely watched my nephew Norval, who was visiting us, watch television. I discovered that Norval was fascinated by everything we adults are . . . murders, nautch dancers, beer commercials, the home life of the ant, jungle tigers . . . submarines. But the thing that thrilled the eyes practically out of his head was a chiller-diller expedition scaling Mt. Everest.

So, bright and early the very next morning, I informed a distinguished schoolbook publisher that his worries about kids reading were over forever. I would give first graders the adventures they craved, take them scaling the peaks of Everest at 60 degrees below zero.

"Truly exciting," said the publisher rather sadly. "But you can't use the word *scaling*. You can't use the word *peaks*. You can't use *Everest*. You can't use *60*. You can't use *degrees*. You can't . . ."

"Now look here!" I bristled. "You're talking old fashioned. Why, on television, that story thrilled the pants off Norval."

"Of course," sighed the publisher. "On television he understood it all. But he was looking at pictures and listening to *spoken* words. He wasn't reading *printed*

words. All he knows of printed words are the pitiful few that his teacher has struggled to make him recognize. At his age he couldn't tell the printed word Everest from a pineapple-upside-down-cake."

I mulled this over. "Would you buy a book about a jungle tiger?" I asked limply.

"Certainly," said the publisher. "With two minor changes. Change the tiger into a cat. Change the jungle into a house."

Then, as gently as he could, he dropped a ton of bricks all over me. He handed me a tiny little list of words. "These are all the words that a first grade Norval *can* recognize."

I stared. I could have engraved the whole list, personally, on the head of a pin. They were thrillers . . . like *am*, *is*, *but*, *if*, *in*, *into*, *no*, *yes*. Words full of great adventure . . . like *milk* and *mitten* and *mop*. And a number of super-humdingers . . . like *lump* and *bun* and *string*. I saw the word *sick* and that's how I felt very.

"Now you take this list," I heard the publisher saying. "Take it home. Cut loose! Create a rollicking carefree story. Pack it with action. Make it tingle with suspense! Embellish it with gay brilliant rhymes and bubbling rhythms. And one more thing. Repeat the words. Repeat! Repeat! Taking care, of course, not to be boring."

The next thing I knew, it was six months later. I was home, staring red-eyed at the list, trying to find some usable words besides *cat* and *hat* that rhymed. The list had a *daddy*. But it didn't have a *caddy*. I found myself snarling, "faddy, maddy, saddy, waddy."

It had words like *thank*. But no *blank*, *crank*, *frank*, or *stank*. There was the word *something*. But *something* only rhymes with *numb-thing*. And even if *numb-thing* were on the list, which it wasn't, how in the blazes can you use something like *numb-thing* in a story?

And what *was* my story anyhow: at one point — three excruciatingly painful weeks grinding out a yarn about a King Cat and a Queen Cat. Then I called in Norval as an expert consultant to read it. When he came to the word *King*, he read it just fine. When he came to the word *Queen*, he just stood there blowing bubbles.

In a real cold sweat, I rechecked my list thoroughly. The poor queen, not being registered, died a horribly swift death. And the king died of loneliness shortly thereafter.

Norval, feeling sorry for me because I wasn't bright enough to write for him, was now dropping in occasionally after school to offer help. "Why don't you have your cat run a Quiz show?" was one of his suggestions. Nervously I fine-tooth combed the list for *quiz*. I got a shock that threw me into terrible confusion. "Q" had evidently been dropped right out of the alphabet completely!

This appalling discovery so unnerved me that for two weeks the only subjects I could think of at all were "Q" ones. Like "Quarrying for Quartz." And "The Quitter in the Quicksand." "Quilting Bees and Quails." And "A First Grade Biography of John Quincy Adams."

Then after I'd mastered *that* psychosis, I happened to notice that "Z" had been banished as a letter also! And for weeks all I could think of were Zulu zebras zipping from New Zealand to the Zuider Zee.

By this time, my first grade nephew, Norval, mysteriously stopped dropping in and I had to bungle along entirely on my own. How I ever managed to manipulate that maddening jigsaw puzzle of itsy-bitsy-witsy wordies into any kind of story at all, I don't know.

All I know is that when we finished, I was dealt the most painful blow of all. I took it around to Norval to see how he liked it.

Norval looked down his nose at the manuscript. "Don't bother me with that kid stuff," he snorted. "I've

learning calculus."

[This essay was first published in the *Chicago Tribune*, 17 Nov. 1957.]