M E M B E R S H I P

THE METAMORPHOSIS
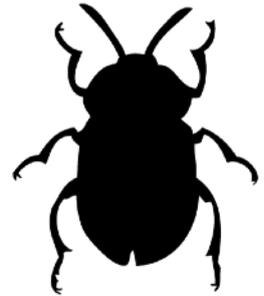
About this activity

Students use AI to give visual life to the first page of Kafka's classic novel

▶ **Language level**: C1
▶ **Main task**: Reading & visualising; inferring information
▶ **Topics**: Literature; Franz Kafka; artificial intelligence
▶ **Language focus**: Adjectives

For this activity, students will need the following:

- **The worksheet** on page 5 (one for each student)
- **Access to an AI image generator** such as DALL-E3 (see below)

Note: For all materials and discussion, go to the corresponding page in the Resources section:

https://membership.lessonstream.com/resources/the-metamorphosis/

About the text

This activity makes use of the first page of Franz Kafka's 1915 novel *The Metamorphosis*. In the story, the main character, Gregor Samsa, wakes up to find that he has transformed into a gigantic insect. The first three paragraphs of the book are highly visual, vividly describing Gregor's insect body and his bedroom. For this lesson plan, the original German version has been translated into English.

In the activity, students use an AI image generator to give visual life to the text. At the time of writing, DALL-E3 is probably the best one for this purpose as it is free to use if you have a Microsoft or Outlook account. For this activity, you may have to introduce it to your students: https://www.bing.com/images/create/

Part one – reading

1. Ask students if they enjoy reading classic novels. Find out if anyone has a personal favourite.

2. Tell students that you are going to give them the first page of a classic novel. Students have to look at the text and decide whether or not they can identify **the title** of the novel, **the author** and **the missing word** in the first line.

3. Give out the worksheet on page 5 and ask students to read the text quickly to find out if they know the novel, the author or the missing word/

> ⚠️ **IMPORTANT**: If students think that they know the answers, they should write them down and show them to you in silence. No shouting out the answers!

4. Draw students' attention to instructions at the bottom of the worksheet which ask them to do the following:

- Underline all the parts of the text that provide information about what Gregor Samsa transformed into (i.e. the missing word).
- Underline all the parts of the text that indicate that the novel is not set in the present day.

> **Note**: The text contains a number of words that students may be unfamiliar with. In particular, there are many adjectives including two compound adjectives: *armour-like* and *dome-like*.
>
> In some cases, students will be able to work out meanings from context. But in other cases, this will not be possible. Here are some possible ways to deal with this:
>
> - Get students to work in pairs or small groups so that they can pool their knowledge and support each other's learning.
> - Allow students to use monolingual dictionaries. (Note, however, that if they use online dictionaries, they will be able to cheat by putting parts of the text into a search engine to find out where it came from.)
> - Permit students to ask you for the meanings of an agreed number of words – no more than eight, for example. (See glossary on the next page.)

5. When students have finished the task, listen to their ideas and give feedback accordingly (see answers on the next page).

6. Tell students that the novel is *The Metamorphosis* (original German title: *Die Verwandlung*) by Franz Kafka. It was published in 1915. The missing word is 'insect'.

Find out if anyone has read the book and if they enjoyed it?

Glossary

- **Gigantic** (*adjective*): Extremely large or huge
- **Armour** (*noun*): A shell or covering that you wear or use to protect yourself
- **Dome** (*noun*): A round, roof-like structure
- **Rigid** (*adjective*): Stiff and not flexible
- **Arched** (*adjective*): Curved
- **Segments** (*plural noun*): Divisions or parts
- **Numerous** (*adjective*): Many in number
- **Pitiful** (*adjective*): Sad and causing pity
- **Helpless** (*adjective*): Powerless; unable to protect yourself
- **Lay** (*verb – past of to lie*): To be situated or positioned
- **Cloth** (*uncountable noun*): Material for making clothes, curtains, etc.
- **Gilded** (*adjective*): Covered with a thin layer of gold or something that looks like gold
- **A boa** (*noun*): A long piece of clothing that is worn around the neck for fashion rather than to keep you warm. It is usually made of fur or feathers
- **A muff** (*noun*): A tube that you put both hands or arms into on a cold day to keep them warm
- **Forearm** (*noun*): The part of the arm between the elbow and the wrist
- **Overcast** (*adjective*): Completely cloudy
- **Pane** (*noun*): A single sheet of glass in a window or door
- **Melancholic** (*adjective*): Sad
- **A dull pain** (*collocation*): An ache which is not sharp but is continuous

Answers

i. The missing word in the first line could be *insect, bug cockroach* or *beetle*. Students may have underlined the following parts of the text:

… his hard, armour-like back …
… his brown, dome-like belly divided into rigid, arched segments.
His numerous legs, pitifully thin compared to the rest of him, waved helplessly …
No matter how hard he tried to throw himself onto his right side, he always rolled onto his back again.

ii. The following would suggest that the novel is not set in the present day:

- Gregor is a traveling salesmen – not a common occupation these days. Traveling salesmen would go from door-to-door to find customers.
- Gregor sells cloth – another indication that the story is not set in the present day.
- The woman in the picture is wearing a fur hat, boa and muff – articles of clothing that are associated with earlier fashion styles.
- These days all magazines contain visual content. But that was not always the case. Advancements in printing technology made it possible to reproduce images alongside text and the concept of illustrated magazines dates back to the 19th century.

Given the above information, ChatGPT made an informed guess that the novel was written in the early to mid-20th century.

Part two – image creation

1. By this stage, you should have established that Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning to discover that he has transformed into a gigantic insect. Ask students to speculate about what kind of insect is described. You can turn to ChatGPT for an answer.

2. Give students this task which can be done as homework:

> **You**
> What kind of insect has a hard, armour-like back, a brown, dome-like belly divided into rigid, arched segments and numerous legs which are thin compared to the rest of its body?
>
> **ChatGPT**
> The description you provided sounds like it could match various types of beetles, specifically those with a hard, armor-like exoskeleton.
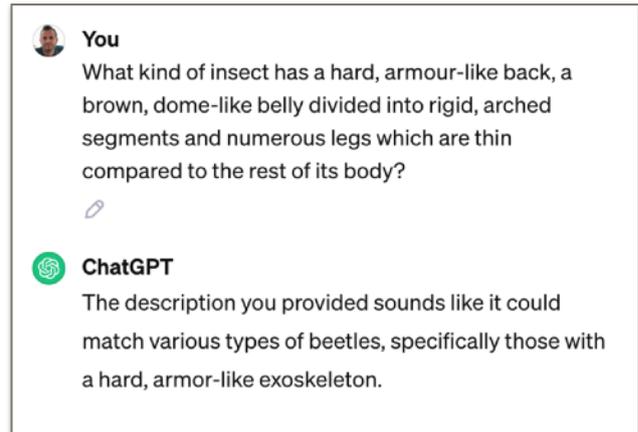
The first page of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* is very visual. Use an AI image generator to create a picture of Gregor Samsa waking up in his bedroom as a beetle. Try to include as many of the details from the text as possible. Let's see who can create the best image.

3. Get students to compare their images. Find out who has the best image by awarding one point for each of the following ten criteria:

- It looks like an early 20th century European bedroom (**one point**)
- There is a giant beetle in bed (**one point**)
- The beetle is on its back (**one point**)
- The beetle is partially covered by a blanket (**one point**)
- There is a table in the room (**one point**)
- There are some cloth samples laid out on the table (**one point**)
- There is a window (**one point**)
- We can see that the weather is bad (**one point**)
- There is a picture of a woman on the wall above the table (**one point**)
- The woman is dressed in furs (**one point**)

About this task

I can tell you from experience that it is virtually impossible to get DALL-E3 to generate an image which includes all of the above details. After about ten attempts, the image on the right is the best I can do. (According to the above criteria, I would give it a score of 7/10.)

Despite this, it can be fun to experiment with the instructions that we give the AI image generator. This will allow you and your students to learn about its limitations and what we can and cannot expect from it.

I

ONE MORNING, when Gregor Samsa woke up from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed into a gigantic _____. He was lying in bed on his hard, armour-like back and as he lifted his head a little, he could see his brown, dome-like belly divided into rigid, arched segments. The blanket was hardly able to cover his new body completely and seemed ready to slide off at any moment. His numerous legs, pitifully thin compared to the rest of him, waved helplessly before his eyes.

"What has happened to me?" he thought. It was no dream. His room, a proper human bedroom, although a little too small, lay quietly between the four familiar walls. Above the table, on which a collection of cloth samples was unpacked and spread out – Samsa was a traveling salesman – hung the picture which he had recently cut out of an illustrated magazine and put into a pretty gilded frame. It was a picture of a woman with a fur hat and a fur boa. She sat upright, holding out to the viewer a solid fur muff into which her entire forearm disappeared.

Gregor's eyes then turned to the window and the overcast sky. The sound of raindrops hitting the pane made him quite melancholic. "What about sleeping a little longer and forgetting all this nonsense?" he thought. But that was impossible because he was used to sleeping on his right side, and in his current state, he could not get into that position. No matter how hard he tried to throw himself onto his right side, he always rolled onto his back again. He must have tried it a hundred times, with his eyes closed to avoid seeing his struggling legs, and only stopped when he began to feel a dull pain in his side that he had never felt before.

This is the very first page of a classic novel. Perhaps you know it.

i. The missing world
- Read the text carefully
- Try to work out what the missing word is
- Underline all of the parts of the text that provide clues for your answer

ii. Time setting
- Look for indications in the text that suggest that the story is not set in the present day
- Underline all of the parts of the text that support this idea