



*A Hollow is Home* by Abbie Mitchell

## **TIPS FOR WRITING PERSUASIVE TEXT – LESSONS LEARNED FROM A HOLLOW IS A HOME CAPTURING CURIOUS CREATURES & WILD MINDS!**

The success of *A Hollow is a Home* was absolutely hinged on my ability to be able to translate science for kids. Firstly, I needed to make children want to read the book, and secondly, I needed to make sure that they understood the themes without effort.

I am a first time children's author, and far from an expert, but I do have ten years of experience teaching primary aged children about biodiversity as an environmental educator. When you stand in front of children, as any teacher or parent would know, you very quickly work out when they are bored, or do not comprehend something. That is exactly what I did not want from this book.

Below I offer a breakdown of how I approached this book to do my very best to reach my ultimate ambition – fill young minds with wonder, and their hearts with joy, so that they will intrinsically become the environmental champions of the future!

### **PURPOSE**

#### **Who is this book for and why is it needed?**

*Everyone can understand nature.* The purpose for writing this book was to engage kids with nature while explaining the science behind biodiversity conservation via fully embedding the core principles and practices of conservation science as demonstrated through the animals showcased.

I wanted this book to capture the sheer joy of discovering nature that I experienced as a child and present it with the scientific context I had learned at uni, to help others make sense of the nature around them: to provide reason and understanding.

You don't need a scientific degree to understand nature, just the curiosity to watch, listen and question what you are seeing. Good ecological science is based on observation and asking questions after all!

Most kids love animals, most kids are curious, most kids love knowing facts and most people want to do the right thing – look after nature. My plan was to explain the real need for looking after nature in a way that will be understood for life – unpicking what animals are doing and why, informs our comprehension of the impacts we each have – both good and bad - on the lives of other animals.

### **RESEARCH THE 'HOW'**

#### **Understand how a book will be different from others and how it will meet its' purpose**

Well ahead of pitching this book I checked out what was already out there, then before writing the words I knuckled down and listed all known hollow-using animals (then 303) and sorted them by how they could best be interwoven to provide example for the list of key concepts I wanted to cover.



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Some species were better to highlight a point than others, or animals were needed to be included together (as communities) to represent a theme within an ecosystem (e.g. rainforest ecosystem discussing competition between species and general vs. niche habitat).

I also needed to discover my voice. I played with different approaches, read widely on science related children's topics – especially the trickier themes such as climate change or complex biological processes such as hollow formation – and looked at how others tackled it. And my 'voice' I discovered was exactly how I talk to kid's when I am teaching.

### **PLAN**

#### **Plot the journey**

Though this book is on the surface about hollows, hollow use is actually the glue, the central common link between species, to allow me to talk about a huge and very varied range of animals and concepts.

I listed the key themes I wanted to explore (such as habitat requirements, animal territory, diet, breeding, interspecies competition, predator/prey relationships, animal behaviour, threats to animals, different ecosystems, animal dispersal, human influence on animals) and also the key words I wanted to include (most in the glossary) then allocated animals to each to demonstrate the points. These animals were drawn from a list provided by Lindenmayer and Gibbons in the book *Tree Hollows and Wildlife Conservation in Australia* (CSIRO 2002), written for land managers and conservationists. This became quite a complex spreadsheet to say the least!

### **ASK LOTS OF QUESTIONS!**

#### **Research and understand the answers**

Often as I was researching an animal it would initially create more questions that I needed to answer in order to fully make sense of the information. As I was researching I would constantly ask the basics: Who?, how?, what?, where?, why?, when?: I needed to make sure that what I was writing was answering my own questions, or at the very least I researched the answers so that I knew if I needed to include further information to make sense of what I did know and or to preempt the questions the readers may be thinking.

Many of the questions I posed in my research were included as a title in the book in their own right:

*How long do hollows take to form?* This is an obvious question but the answer is really complex so to answer this I needed to understand:

- How hollows form
- What sorts of trees hollows develop in
- How old a tree is when it develops hollows
- How scientists are even able to work this out

I read everything I could about the how hollows develop in size with the age of a tree. I had a



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spread sheet from studies all over Australia recording the different species of trees, where they were located, the age when they first develop hollows, and how much larger they got over time, and which species used them across this development.

What this did show me was a massive range in the rate in which hollows form and the age range of the trees they are in – the shortest time being for some small hollows to develop in a 40 year old tree, and the longest time for large hollows to develop being over 350 years.

In the end I realised that it did not need to be quite so academic – so I wrote “ *For many years, scientists have researched how long it takes for hollows to form. Guess what? For Australian tree species, the answer is always the same: a long time*” (Pg. 17), because I figured that even 40 years is too long for any animal to wait for a home! (Image page 18)

But all this data did show some common ideas:

- The bigger the tree the more likely it has hollows
- The bigger the tree the bigger the hollows
- Trees with dead branches contain more hollows than healthy trees
- Large stags (dead trees) almost always contain hollows

So with that as a basis I built up the questions:

*What species need hollows?*

*What sort of hollows do animals need?*

*Do animals need just one hollow or lots? Why?*

To answer these questions I needed to understand some really important things about animal behaviour – what animals eat, how they move, when they are active, how they breed – and fundamentally what this book then becomes is about a huge variety of animals and really important ecological themes united with a common theme - a need for a hollow home.

*Where is my home?*

*Who else wants these hollows?*

This is where it got really interesting – because to answer these questions I needed to explore an animals territory – how big is the area that different species need (and why), and if they may need to compete with each other for this resource – therefore introducing the concept of communities (and ecosystems).

To provide an example of this I chose a focus area - the rainforest of Cape York – right up the top of Australia. I did some research and got a list of all the different animals that have been recorded in Kulla National Park (330 animals) then worked out which of these needed hollows – and from there looked at the reason why they needed hollows and if they might compete with each other for those hollows. But for that I needed evidence – again more research of each species to unravel a picture of how these animals would interact within their community.

One of my favourite animal stories came from the research for this part of the book (pg. 36) about



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the competition between two of the smartest birds on the planet - the palm cockatoo and the sulphur-crested cockatoo trying to intimidate each other for their hollow prize.

## **BUILD A BOOK**

### **Layer information to develop understanding**

I carefully mapped out the book in consideration of the order of information to make sure that each new concept had basis in the former content. For example I explained the home range of animals and how that was dependent on having a sustainable habitat and competition for that space, then looked at connectivity and how roads (and all types of fragmentation) may impact an animals home range, ability to travel to each other and therefore its sustainability.

## **RESPECT YOUR AUDIENCE**

### **All words, ideas and knowledge are new at some time**

Correct terms and scientific concepts were used throughout the book. I am a big believer in using correct terms, as all words need to be learned at some point! Don't water ideas down to much, but you can also use a mix of colloquial terms with correct terms so long as that is understood (E.g. poo, scats, faeces).

## **PROVIDE EXAMPLE**

### **Make it memorable**

Use an example for every fact – either photographic or selecting an animal to represent a concept through its behaviour – much more fun and makes the point more memorable.

## **PAINT A PICTURE WITH WORDS**

### **Plant a strong image**

Use narrative to create a picture of how and why an animal behaves as it does. See it in your mind first, then describe what you are seeing, what it sounds like, smells like, or makes you feel.

## **CREATE CONNECTION**

### **Make your audience feel something**

Connection, empathy, understanding or even wonder are needed to drive an emotional response – to spur the reader on and particularly to change behaviour – care for hollows and the species that need them. Most of the content has humour or curiosity woven within the text, however the one chapter where there is NO humour, is about threats to hollows. It was also the hardest chapter to write. Confronting examples of habitat loss are shown, and some very engaging animals are presented to drive the point of what we face to loss if we remain business as usual. The connection aims to come from the understanding readers now have and the emotional response to act.



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### **QUESTION YOURSELF AS A WRITER**

#### **Look at it from the reader's point of view**

I constantly questioned what I was writing: is it interesting?, does it make sense?, why would you want to read it?, how can it be better?, do the reader feel anything?, is this fuelling your imagination?

These questions were my go-to in writing the book. If the answer was “no” I would stop. If I was bored with my own words, I would stop. If the author is bored, then the reader is definitely bored!

There is a really good example of this – not in my book. What you read is the ‘interesting, imaginative’ version of what could have easily been the most boring pages in the book, Pages 14-16 (about how hollows develop).

I started to write about how hollows form in quite a matter of fact way. When I woke up, having bored myself to sleep, I knew I was going about it the wrong way. How else could I write this? Was there a different point of view? Of course! What would it be like to be a tree? I wrote the line “imagine if a tree could talk”, and suddenly it had interest – because it invites the reader to step outside themselves and picture a different life.

### **INSPIRE**

#### **Prompt audience participation**

Both immediately and in the future (either as a career path or as a sustainable way of living) my aim was to inspire a pro-active response to reading the book. Provide positive direction; methods for determining the animals in your immediate location, suggestions for improving habitat, understanding for why humans need nature, and ideally compassion for why we would want the beauty and wonder of nature to endure now and in the future.

### **CREDIBILITY**

#### **Good research to get your facts right!**

I wanted to show how the book is based on research by scientists – how they did it, what is exciting about field work, inspire young scientists and show that it is a credible and important profession. This not only provides credibility to my words but also a fabulous opportunity to celebrate science and inspire young scientists. But most importantly with any factual piece you must have good credible references, ALWAYS cross reference, and keep a list of references so that you can review things later. I also kept folders of all the species and themes that I researched, including the ones I was not yet sure if I wanted to include, so that I had something to come back too.

The research I did over the course of writing grew the list of hollow using species recorded from being 303 species to 345 species! For example of the four species of Australian quoll species only two were listed in the 2002 reference list, but I questioned why the other two species would not use hollows as they have very similar behaviour. So I researched and found that more recent



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studies had documented that the two quoll species not listed actually did use hollows. I also uncovered many more species that could be added due to taxonomic revision and even a couple of species that had been discovered since 2002! The list will continue to grow of course – in fact already has - since my book was published the sugar glider has now been reclassified and what was considered one species is now recognised as three distinct species!! The growth of the list in such a short time really demonstrates how much we are continuing to learn about our wildlife and how thorough research can pay off – I could have just adopted the former list, but gosh it was satisfying adding to it!

### KEEP ON TRACK

#### What's the point?

Often a book is as much about what you put in it as what you choose to leave out – don't be scared to cull! My editors asked me to cull 6000 words (about 25-30 pages)! This made me focus on what was important, and capture the meaning derived from a group of words with a single word to be more precise in how I wrote an idea (and be less verbose!). However, sometime over writing also helps to identify the good stuff, so long as you are prepared to be brutal in the editing later.

### KEY WORDS

#### Assist visualization and meaning

I used key words to assist visualizations.

To do this effectively I would question then research what an animal was doing and then imagine it in detail so that I could select words to steer the reader to see the same vision:

“ It **crashes** through the canopy causing leaves and limbs to fall...” (A feeding striped possum - Page 42)

“...they will **ascend** into a dog fight, **spiralling and twirling** until one retreats” (Battling yellow-tailed sheath-tailed bats – Page 26)

“The young joey **peeks** from the pouch as the forest **whooshes** past...” (Travelling with its glider mother - Page 32)

“ Imagine seeing a little feathertail glider **whizzing** past with a **downy** feather **flittering** in her mouth.” (Page 40).

For example how is the vision different for the sentence above had I written: “The feathertail glider goes past with a feather in her mouth”

Sometimes just a couple of words were enough to coax an emotional response from the reader; “Bombs away” (A bird dropping faeces - Page 43), or “Sounds dreamy” (describing an antechinus nest in a box of camomile tea bags- page 56).



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## **ENGAGING WORDS, IDEAS PHOTOS & IMAGES**

### **Go for the 'wow' or 'ah-ha' moment**

Photos were selected to:

- Cause an emotional response (of wonder, compassion, understanding):
- Further explain an idea
- Extend thinking

Key examples: Conflict between a cockatoo and goanna (pg. 45), the ringtail possum family using the rope bridge over the highway (pg. 35), the owl with the glider sitting in a distant tree showing the predator/prey relationship (pg. 30), the dunnart hiding demonstrating camouflage (pg. 31), the wood ducks looking for a nest site (pg. 24), and Micky the rescued glider approaching a landing (pg. 77)

Often a drawing or photo can explain an idea much more quickly than words alone or make a point exciting for example:

- Animal super stars (powerful owl as an umbrella species pg. 39)
- Home range of animals (pg. 31)
- Alternatives to hollows (pg. 57)
- The ripple effect of habitat loss (pg. 46)
- A representation of the scale of a tree hollow entrance compared to an animal (pg. 25)
- The diversity of species that need hollows organised by groups (pg. 23)

## **TELL A STORY**

### **Provide a personal story to make it relatable**

Examples in the book include the story of the pygmy possum found in a washing basket (pg. 12) and the rescue of Mickey the yellow-bellied glider (pg.77).

## **SPRINKLE THE JOY**

### **Break up the heavy content**

There are a lot of academic concepts and scientific language in this book so to keep kids engaged, depending on the topic, I had a few tricks: light words (e.g. poo rather than just scats or feaces even though both other terms were used), happy words, visual cues (prompting imagination) and humour were used throughout.

## **SMALL CHUNCKS**

### **Don't overwhelm**

I kept text blocks/ topics to a bite size amount (with help from my wonderful editors) with a clear catchy heading to develop interest and summarise the content or address a question such as "How safe is my tree?"



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## **LISTEN TO FEEDBACK**

### **Seek opinion and consider it**

Having an editorial team helping to shape a book is a pretty awesome position to be in. I needed to toughen up quickly and consider constructive criticism without ego. In the end, a book is for others. It needs to make sense, be engaging, be succinct and keep on theme. Feedback should ultimately result in a better result, but having said that it is also an opinion, so even if you don't like it, or don't agree, you still need to consider the comments, and question whether to adopt them, or be able to justify *why* not too! Sometimes it also helps to rationalise your own opinion too.

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**GOOD LUCK AND HAPPY WRITING!!**