Cambridge University Press presents…

The Future Writes
The Future Writes
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Acknowledgements
Cambridge University Press asked teenagers from local schools in Cambridge to write us a short story inspired by the *Cambridge Experience Readers*: a series of stories designed for teen English Language Learners.

We had over 60 entries from students aged 10-16, from eight different schools, with first languages from English to Swahili and Kabyle. The topics were diverse! Some were whimsical, featuring teddy bear picnics, meerkats and unicorns. Others dealt with darker themes; war, haunted buildings and unrequited love. Some were laugh-out-loud funny, with unusual superpowers and failed bank heists, and some were incredibly sad; about refugees, displaced families and the loss of a parent.

Stories were judged by a panel of staff members from Cambridge University Press, including representatives from Community Engagement, Marketing, Editorial and Language Research.

“We had a really difficult job choosing our ten winners. I think we were all overwhelmed by the quality and depth of the stories, and we laughed and cried in equal measure while reading them.”

Laura Sigsworth, Product Marketing Manager
The stories will also help our Language Research Team build the Cambridge English Corpus; a multi-billion word database of written and spoken English that helps linguists study the English Language.

“Getting hold of written language from teenagers is always tricky, so this will really contribute to the study of English and how it is changing, and being changed by the next generation.”

Olivia Goodman, Language Research Project Manager

We would like to congratulate our ten shortlisted authors and all those who entered.

This book truly was written by the future!
We lived in a fitting sized house in the middle of Syria. It had a vibrant yellow front door with three concrete steps leading up to it. There were four windows at the front also, one located in each corner. Each window had a clean white cross on it. Our house was only a three bedroom one; one room for me, and the others for my brother and parents. I didn't think the house was great, it was just ... fair.

Now our world is a warzone. The place I called home for the whole of my life, demolished. It’s now a pile of rubble, just like the rest of Syria. No more cars or motorbikes or people begging passers-by to purchase something from them. Only screams, gunshots and ... death. People tried to fight back but it only made things worse. It was hopeless. They grow stronger by the day. It’s hopeless. Many people join them because it’s their only choice. We may have to join them. They call themselves ISIS.
At the moment we’re on a journey, a journey to find a better place. We are attempting to get to the western outskirts of Syria so we can get away by boat. It’s our only choice. Europe is where we hope to be in a few years; safe in a nice house with food and water. The simple things that people take for granted is what we don’t have. On the move, trying to get away from this warzone: Syria. But we have only just started our journey, we might not even make one day without dying, or coming into contact with ISIS. The only thing we can do now is keep hoping, and not give up.

At the moment we are desperate; at the moment we are struggling to survive. We have to fight and struggle to do very simple things. Eat; there is a very limited amount of resources at the moment, as we are having to constantly move. Sleep; we never have a reliable shelter as the many refugee camps are busy, loud and cheap. Walk; the lack of sleep, food and water makes everything we are trying to do ten times harder. God has put ten tonnes on our backs and forced us to carry it throughout our journey, ’til the end.

Bang! The sound of a gunshot pounding in my ear. The others in our group heard it as well. People dropping down to their knees to pray that they’ll make it out of this alive, I hope I do. Instead of walking we are having to run. Bang! Another shot had just been fired, this time pounding even more in my ear and landing even closer to one of us. We just have to carry on running and hope. Looking to my right I saw a dusty jeep storming towards us with four men on it with firearms. Looking to my left I see the same. Surely it’s over; we’re surrounded. This is not the life I wanted to live. This is...

Amira Elazar

2000 – 2015
Five minutes until the end of the school day. Graham started packing his books. The English teacher had, amazingly, forgotten to set prep. He thought that if he managed to put all his books away before the bell, he would escape. The minutes were ticking away.

“Graham! Stop daydreaming and get your prep diary out.”

Horror: a 500-word short story! He could never think of anything original, and knew he would have to spend hours trying to put enough on paper to satisfy the teacher. The bell rang and everybody rushed out of the classroom. Graham was the last to leave, now thoroughly despondent at the prospect of an impossible task ahead.

The grandfather clock downstairs struck midnight. Graham had not been to sleep; he was struggling to think of what his short story could be about. His
A teacher would definitely not be pleased if he didn't hand his prep in on time. But he just could not think of anything remotely original to write about.

All of a sudden a deep, raspy voice boomed into Graham’s ear. “Meet me in the graveyard at the church.”

Where did the voice come from? It was eerily compelling. Almost in a trance, Graham put on his dressing gown, opened the bedroom door, crept downstairs and out into the moonlit garden.

Graham felt he was being led by an invisible force down the lane towards the church. As he reached the churchyard gate, he stumbled over a soft pile of earth, and nearly fell into a freshly dug, open grave, empty except for a piece of broken mirror at the bottom. To his horror he caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure reflected in the mirror. Graham was frozen to the spot, and a chill passed down his spine. He turned round, only to find there was no one there. Graham climbed into the grave and retrieved the mirror. He could still see the shadowy figure, but no reflection of himself or any of the surroundings and realised that the figure only existed in the mirror. It was a weird experience holding it and realising that the figure was just a reflection with no solid form. It beckoned Graham to follow.

Arriving at the church, the figure seemed to melt through the solid oak door, which then silently opened to let Graham in. He saw the moon shining through one of the stained glass windows. It produced a rainbow that ended on the altar, brightly illuminating two sheets of paper. Graham walked over, looked at the first page, and saw that it was in his own writing. In amazement he realised that he had written a short story in beautiful prose!

When he woke up in the morning Graham could not work out how he had got back from the churchyard. It must have been a dream! He turned to his bedside table to find two sheets of paper - a story in his own handwriting!
I rest awake looking at your sleeping body, curved and wrapped in a warm blanket, rising and falling in time with your breath. A heave of pain resides in my throat.

I lie on my side looking at your face, your skin, your eyes, closed in sleep so beautiful and soft, an image of peace. I watch all the imperfections you hate which I grew to love, the way they somehow make you all the more striking.

I’m so close to you; your smell wafts over me, a tear forms in the corner of my eye, a small pearl of sadness, it streams down my face, a gentle caress to my cheek.

I am face down in a pillow, tears streaming down my face, crying silently.

I reach out to touch you, to be acknowledged by you, to love you, to find the lost warmth.
No response.

I bury my head in the pillow and silently cry myself to sleep as the nostalgia hits.

The stolen hugs in secrecy at sleepovers, the thrill and warmth of having each other.

The trees and bushes in the freezing cold, keeping each other warm with our love, a passionate frenzy of affection.

One afternoon when it was pouring with rain, we could have gone home and been dry. We stayed together in the cold and wet holding each other in a tight hug, kissing in the rain under a tree so green.

Times weren't always easy; we fought, got angry, had problems but it was real and it always finished with a sincere apology.

I cried and you were lovely, holding me in your arms and making it all okay, loving me with your beautiful, kind, warm heart.

We had a meeting place, the green triangle we called it, you were always late but I grew to love that too.

We broke up once before, on a park bench near school. Both devastated but still with strong feelings, I remember standing by the tree, feeling its rough bark against my hand, the old rusty abandoned bike behind you.

It didn't last long though, our breakup, and before I knew it we were in love once more.

But there was one thing that stood out. I stroked your hair as you fell asleep soothing you. In that moment it is all too much, I reach across to stroke your hair one last time.

It all ends when you wake up.

The end.
In a world where magic is real and every child born to the world receives a superpower, those with the greatest power live to be heroes. Girls and boys of all ages grew up being able to fly, run at incredible speeds and even control the elements. In a world where anything was possible, I got the worst deal of all. My special power was controlling paper.

I jest ye not. While my classmates were conjuring up gales and firestorms with their bare hands, my sheets of paper were either blown away or burnt to a crisp when I tried to fit in. Because no matter what anyone said to me, I knew the truth.

My superpower was lame.

But one day, a day like any other, I was sitting in the classroom surrounded by all of my insanely powerful friends. I had taped some paper around a pen and was using it to write down every word my teacher was droning on about.
Yawning quietly, I wished that school would be over soon. Class after class of learning to control our powers left me sitting quietly in the corner moving sheets of paper about with my mind while my classmates pushed the borders of their powers to their limits and I knew that my lame power would never mean anything in comparison to theirs.

Suddenly, the door crashed open, and people in masks rushed in, grabbing some of the kids sitting near me. One of the men was carrying what seemed like a massive radio, but looking closely at it I suddenly realised that it was a power-o-meter; it measured the strength of someone’s superpower.

“This one’s strong. So is this one. Wow, this one can make anything they touch explode! They’ll be perfect for the superhuman army we’re building to take over the world!” They cackled. The man suddenly turned towards me and pointed the power-o-meter in my face. He frowned. “This one controls paper,” he grumbled. “That’s no use to us.”

They were about to take all of the children and the teacher away to forcefully train them into an army, but they left me behind. And so I stood up, eyeing the stack of papers that were scattered on everyone’s desks. “You’ll have to go through me first!” I called out and unleashed my full power.

Wave after wave of paper flew into their faces, blinding them, beating them and giving them excruciatingly painful papercuts, but I did not stop. There was a whirlwind of paper flying around me like a snowstorm and I kept on pelting the men with paper until they were forced back, holding their hands in front of their faces to defend themselves. Because of that, they didn't see the police come up behind them and were arrested.

People tell stories of the day I saved my school. I had thought at first that my superpower and I were lame, but I realised that day that anyone can be a hero.
The granules enveloped her fingers; the warmth of her skin managed to soften the sugar so that it was nothing more than sticky goo when it reached her lips. She popped each finger into her mouth with surprising efficiency, only occasionally missing her mouth. One, two, three, four, six, she counted. She was ever so good with numbers; Mr. Jenkins said that she could be a mathematician one day – if she tried hard enough.

But, you see, five was her unlucky number. She simply did not like it: in fact the fear she had of it was quite intense. She had been known to scream and shout at its mention, spectators have said it is like watching a descent into madness. No one is certain when it first started, but now they count down the days until its end.

Her sticky claw grabbed at the bag for another sweet, messily fumbling to the bottom of it. Her eyes, alert, scanned her surroundings. No one was around. The sky was filled with a cotton candy twilight that blanketed the tarmac with soft,
blue light. She could just about decipher the distinction between the leering traffic lights and the occasional car that rumbled past, but, apart from that, the horizon was expansive. There was no other noise, save for the low buzz of the insects raring up for a night of blood sucking, and the gentle hum of traffic in the distance.

Growing tired of the child’s dawdling, her mother ripped through the scene. It was getting late after all. She stormed down the pavement, willing the child to follow her. Her frustration continued to rise as she felt the difficult child’s pace grind to a slow halt. The thick air began to waver too - it grew tired and hung heavily over them both, clinging to them, forming a duvet of slow suffocation. She could not think clearly: her thoughts seemed to swim away in the dense humidity, ducking and diving out of reach until all that was left was an indecipherable tangle of words.

She stopped dead in her tracks.

“Hurry the hell up!”

Silence.

“Now!” She snapped.

A frown; a bearing of teeth – the child was close to a growl.

The mother let out a sharp burst of breath and brought her hand to her forehead with a pinch; she squeezed her eyes tightly shut.

“Look – Baby – come on! Mummy wants to get home!”

The child turned her back.

“We’re nearly there, I promise, take my hand. See? We won’t be five …”

Thud.

The child let out a slow, gasping wail, like a deer ripped down from behind by a pack of animals as its herd raced on. A car sped away into the night. She tried to make sense of the incongruous mess that lay on the ground in front of her. She grappled for her mother’s hand but was met with limp pulp. The child’s sticky fingers enclosed around it as she sighed.

Five was unlucky.
In a life-threatening situation you go into fight or flight mode. Your muscles tighten to help prevent injury, your breaths quicken and your heart rate per minute increases dramatically. That’s what starts to happen to me as I hear the back door open.

In any other situation I would think it was my parents. But they’re not here, I’m by myself. And whoever opened the back door only a second ago is definitely not my family. I was about to walk downstairs but the soft sound of someone - no, there was more than one person entering my house - stopped me.

For a second I stood there at the top of the stairs, listening for whoever had just come into my house. My heart seemed to pound in my throat and I felt my blood rushing through me. Did they know I was in the house?

I try to slow down my breathing and calm down. THINK! What should I do? OK. Slowly, so as not to make a sound, I shift towards my bedroom door.
Every footfall kills me and my heart pulses at a million miles an hour. If I am not caught from a creaking floorboard, then the sound of my heart beating will surely give me away.

Think about getting to your room, carefully, don’t make any noi … CREAK! I stop. Holding in my breath, I freeze in position.

‘Who was that?’ Someone says.

He is replied by a whisper; although I can’t hear it I think I know what he has said. Upstairs.

I move with haste towards my door and push it open, immediately sliding underneath my bed and crawling into a hard-to-see position. As soon as I am under, the door opens and I see someone’s feet obscure my vision. He stands there for a few seconds, looking around at my room.

‘There’s no one here. Check the other rooms.’

The door closes. I stay there for a few seconds and plan my next move: I have to get out of the house and call the police. But it will be risky and I have no margin for error.

I have to do this now.

I roll from my hiding place and get up, listening quietly. Thump. Thump. Thump. Before I realise what’s happening the door opens and a man comes in. The next part is a blur. I slam my elbow into the man’s face and pull him behind me. A mix of surprise and pain paints his face, which is immediately turned to anger as I run past him and leap down the stairs. A cry of agony follows me as I hear someone behind chase after me.

But I’m already at the door, opening it and shutting it behind me when something crashes forward into the oak. There is a crunching sound and a yell but I’m already running, out of the drive, past the road, onto the pavement, bringing out my phone I call 999. Relief.

Several minutes later the sight of flashing lights enters my vision and the sound of sirens fills the air.
The English language has so many words with corresponding or similar meanings, but only one way to say “I love you”. What does this mean for society? For those who don’t overthink these issues, which seem insignificant to the structure of their everyday coffee-dependent lives, it means nothing and shouldn’t even be considered. However, for the small minority of people who devote their lives to understanding the details of life that overpower their senses like synaesthesia allows them to breathe the stench of music, this one word infects their very existence and is echoed in everything that they do or say. Throughout history, people have struggled with the ever-growing debate about whether one should say “I love you” (or the three most dangerous words, depending who you speak to) if you do not mean it. Well, some situations simply demand certain words, if you are a synaesthetic or not.
I would try to describe the weather that morning, but who remembers those dull facts when one is experiencing the worst moment of one’s life. Also, it was England so you can assume it was grey and wet. Anyway, we were inside in the heat of a party. It was a usual teenage house party. We had met in this very house, Jack and I. Perhaps at another time and to other people this would have been a romantic visit to memories of the past. However, men always seem to ruin the greatest of situations, and Jack was no exception. So there he was, with the possibility of being dumped lurking in the corner of our conversation. What does he do? You guessed it, he went and said those three words, not once but many times (just in case I hadn’t taken notice the first few times). Perhaps I would have been the first to say those words if he had not done what he did, and if he had not then ruined those words with his bad timing. So I won’t say “I love you”, I don’t need to. Who was I fooling? His light sky blue eyes stared into mine like a puppy searching desperately for its owner. He was lost, and I had found him. So, out the venom poured… we broke up less than a week later.

Now I’m not saying that love should never be uttered from the lips of anyone’s mouth, as that would be a rather depressingly pessimistic view of life. However, words are powerful and, when mixed together in a wrong situation, they can take control of your morals and force even the most loyal to betray, and the most truthful to lie. Love can enrich your senses and thoughts with a vivid dream. Nevertheless, a dream is not reality and one soon wakes into the inevitable state of being alone. Ever so alone.
I saw him standing there. I had a strange feeling about him. His crooked smile, fiendish eyes; he was odd. The question was, “Should I ask?” I didn't know what to say because of the fear that he would be the bad kind of strange. But what if he was the good kind? What if he turned out to be normal? That’s what I wanted, for him to be normal. I wanted to be his friend, or at least know his story. His crooked smile, fiendish eyes. They were almost supernatural. How was I going to approach this most perplexing situation? This boy - this teenage boy - who was enticing in the most fantastic way, was confusing me. Some more information? Alright. He had beautiful grizzled hair that cascaded lightly over his forehead, stopping before the previously mentioned “fiendish eyes”. He was spindly and tall, with pale skin. He wore a loose white T-shirt over light denim jeans with a thin chain dangling around his neck, glinting in the sun. Now, his shoes. The pair of shoes that a person wears can tell you everything about them,
for instance if someone wears five-inch heels, you may assume that they are very high profile, however in this scenario, the boy wore distressed light brown dress shoes, which at this point, I hadn't looked in to the meaning of.

The way he stared into the distance was one of the most peculiar things. He was emotionless, as if all the life had been sucked out of him with a vacuum, but maybe, it left a tiny morsel behind. There could have been a little spark, I suppose he just didn't know it existed. I realise that I have been referring to this mysterious person as “he” or “him” which, now that I think about it, is quite irritating. For the purpose of this story, we can call him August. I like that. August. August.

Well, while August was staring off in to the distance for some reason, I was actually just walking down my street. Yes, just walking. Nothing interesting. So, I was walking and I noticed him, but this was especially abnormal, because having lived in this tiny city for my whole life, I had never once seen August. It was either that he had just arrived, or I had been completely oblivious, and just never noticed him before. I went with “he must be new around here”, to save myself the guilt of never introducing myself. Here’s the bad part: I never got to know who he was. For a reason I can’t remember, we never got the chance to get acquainted. I left, he left. 5 years later, I am 19 and I still find myself wondering who this curious character was and where he is now. It is something that I’ll never find out, and that will bother me for as long as the answer remains a secret.
It had been a long day. It still seems like yesterday. Izzy’s phone beeped. I saw fear and curiosity in her face, but we thought it wasn’t important. I went to get food, and when I returned, she lay lifeless on the floor of her room, her black silky hair covering her pale face. I knew she read the text message, but who would believe a thirteen year old?

Dark-eyed and freckled Izzy was the most popular girl in year nine. Everyone loved her, as she was always kind.

Her death was attributed to heart failure by the authorities. But Izzy was an excellent athlete. Every morning we biked to school together.

Heart failure! No one believed it. – “What else, then?” – they asked themselves. Only I knew a text message had killed Izzy.

We were best friends, but totally different. And yet we were inseparable.
On Monday, a girl named Rory was found dead in the changing rooms, phone in hand. Then, Dean, a boy from the same “popular” group of students, died in similar circumstances. Their deaths attributed to “heart failure”. But Rory and Dean were champion swimmers. Was it murder, suicide, or substance abuse? It still didn’t make sense. Three more died phone in hand, but no one suspected the text messages. By Christmas break there were 150 out of 300 students left. Everyone was a suspect. No one dared to read a text message. You could see their eyes, flinching at every sound. In the silent halls, you could hear a pin drop. I noticed a pattern: only the most popular kids were dying.

The deaths stopped for a week in half term. – “I can’t think straight, I’m so nervous”– a blonde girl said to her friend Esther, who answered: – “I wonder who’s next?” Esther would die during Maths. Children were dropping like flies.

There was paranoia, and fear everywhere. Paris, the shy one, now more than ever kept to herself. Rejected by the “popular” students, she was friendless.

Jacob, the joker, always good for a laugh, could barely talk after losing his friend John. Petite, blonde and lively Lilly, looked as if she hadn’t slept in weeks, her eyes staring into nothingness. They stood out in a group that seemed stripped of their personalities. Afraid of social media, we only talked face to face.

Can something as common as words kill you suddenly? We wanted to know, but without reading the deadly messages.

No one talked to each other outside of school. Until I received a call from an unknown number. – “Hello?” – I whispered. – “Hey, it’s, Paris!” – a cheery voice answered. We talked for hours before going to sleep.

By June no one texted, people called each other, and they could tell if the words were meant to hurt or not.

People stopped dying, and things returned to normal. Fifty of us survived, and we were all friends.

Whoever sent those killer texts was never caught. There are various theories but I guess we’ll never know.
A keyboard clacking at an even pace. A pause. An exasperated sigh, and an index finger slamming down on the backspace button. The process repeated itself for a solemn three minutes.

The first paragraph was finally finished. Letting out a sigh of relief, I gazed at the computer screen. What in the world was going to happen in my next paragraph? I sat there, thinking more than writing. Words shouldn’t have been forcefully ripped out of me, like trying to squeeze blood or water out of a stone. I couldn’t remember what the actual simile was. Regardless, I was anguished.

“Anguished”. The word bore deep into my soul as I continued to write. The more I stared at it, the more it bothered me. It didn’t seem like a real word to me, but then again neither did “yacht”.

10

Writer’s Block

Tessa-Marie D’Andrea

Parkside Federation Academies

Age 16
I was getting side-tracked. What was I going to write before the word “anguished” annoyed me? Oh, right. Words shouldn't have to be ripped out of me, like squeezing water out of a stone. The words I wanted to write should flow smoothly out of me, from thought to fingertips, from fingertips to keyboard, from keyboard to computer screen. Writing should've been a simple process for me. After all, I wrote every day, regardless of it being notes during class or texting a friend. Why was it so difficult for me to find vocabulary that perfectly flowed? Was my level of writing expertise slowly dropping? Was this my fate? Would I die, knowing that I struggled to find ideas for a simple writing competition?

Sighing, I decided to give up. Making up stories off the top of my head is something that seemed impossible. To this day, I still get flashbacks of my only moment of creative struggle. It haunts me. It wakes me up in the middle of the night in fear. Fear of writer’s block attacking me again. Fear of never being like the greats; F. Scott Fitzgerald, J. D. Salinger, Harper Lee. I would never become as great as them if I struggled to get ideas onto paper. Which is why I have never written a creative piece of writing since that day.
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Cambridge University Press presents…

The Future Writes

Ten short stories, with subjects ranging from unrequited love, to writer’s block, to unusual superpowers and life as a refugee. From the best of Cambridge’s young authors, these tales will take you on a rollercoaster of fear, laughter and tears.

Written by teenage students in Cambridge, aged twelve to sixteen, and inspired by the Cambridge Experience Readers.