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Introduction

It's a Friday afternoon and in schools across the country audible groans of disappointment filter from each classroom as homework assignments are given out.

On Sunday evenings tensions rise in family homes as parents and their children begin negotiations, threats, sulks and bribery over uncompleted homework.

Back at school on the following Monday mornings, teachers begin to chase up the late and missing homework tasks. Once again the nation's dogs have developed a taste for paper, homework booklets have mysteriously vanished into thin air and thousands of homework sheets have been left on the back seats of cars and busses.

Does this sound all too familiar? Teachers, pupils and parents seem to accept these rituals as an unavoidable part of school life.

In writing these *Creative Homework Tasks* I decided to try to change this pattern of behaviour. As a busy teacher and parent, I felt homework was an extra source of stress I could do without and set out to find a solution that would suit everyone.

My first undertaking was to look at a variety of homework schemes and assess the quality and variety of homework assignments. The vast majority of homework tasks were numeracy and literacy based, the sheets themselves tended to look similar, generally being formal in layout and lacking pictures, diagrams and illustrations.

It was obvious that these tasks were completely inappropriate for the largest group of non-participants, most of whom were boys. I invited groups of children to carry out a 'preferred learning style' questionnaire. The results indicated that the majority of children who were reluctant to carry out homework tasks were kinaesthetic learners and visual learners.

When asked to list things that they were interested in outside of school and their favourite school lessons, football, art, science fiction, dinosaurs, sport, computer games and crafts all figured highly on their lists!

Knowing what the children were interested in and how they preferred to learn gave me something tangible to go on – my job was to now go out and plan a series of new homework tasks that would appeal directly to them.

The first creative homework task I came up with was one where they had to invent their own 'James Bond' style watch (*Escape* pages 34–35 in book one for 7–9 year olds). The watch design had to incorporate three gadgets which their 'hero' uses to defeat or escape from an enemy.

Children love secrets and an element of mystery, so in order to attract their interest I staged this first task. On Monday morning I sat with my back to the class working at my desk before calling the register, apparently engrossed in what I was doing. Within moments I was surrounded by a group of inquisitive children eager to see what I was up to. Quickly I covered my work, giving just enough time for them to see I had been busy drawing something. Despite constant pestering I refused to tell them what my sketch was of. I continued this charade during the day, making sure that news and occasional glimpses of my 'Design a Gadget Watch' homework sheet slowly filtered around the class. The design of the sheet was highly visual, keeping text down to a minimum.

On Friday I introduced the task to the children, proudly showing my watch design and explaining its functions. To my amazement two of the boys called out, 'we've done ours already, we sneaked in at playtime and saw it on your desk!' These two individuals, who hadn't managed a single piece of homework between them all year, now produced finished watch designs and stories from their bags! That week every child in the class completed their homework on time and I realized I was onto a winner.

Over the next year the number of children participating in homework rose as they worked their way through the new creative tasks. In addition, feedback from parents was extremely positive, many noticing a positive change in their children's attitude towards homework. In many cases it seemed the format and content of these new homework tasks was putting an end to the confrontation, arguments and bribery they previously resorted to in order to ensure homework was done.

Indeed, one boy's homework had improved beyond recognition. His handwriting, spelling, grammar, design skills and drawing were a revelation. Alas it was too good to be true, the new tasks had proved to be a temptation for his father who had completed them himself! The boy ended up taking two copies home so that they could work together, even then his father insisted on handing his homework in too!

Once a new ethos was established in class I started to introduce tasks that appealed to a wider audience. My first tasks were developed with underachieving, kinaesthetic boys in mind. I gambled that if I kept the tasks visually stimulating and creative in nature these children would still retain their new-found enthusiasm. It was also important to start introducing a wider range of curriculum areas, particularly numeracy and literacy while doing away with lists of sums, lengthy explanations and mountains of text. Devising tasks that get children to think creatively, or giving traditional tasks a creative twist, is the key.

The tasks you will find in this book have been trialled in a number of schools and are the culmination of many months of research, feedback and editing. They have been designed so that they can be given out with little or no input from the teacher if need be. In my experience a little enthusiasm from the teacher goes a long way. There are extensive teacher notes for each task – giving examples of extension activities, relevant websites, fun ways of accessing the tasks and solutions to the problems!

There are some great ideas in the book that all children will love – many seem too good to waste on homework! Why not start them off at school or dip into the teacher's notes to find an extension exercise to do at home?

Above all, enjoy the tasks – homework no longer needs to be a grind!

The children's task is to design secret 'spy kit' gadgets to help them in their mission!

Introduce 'The Mission' and collaborate in naming TV spy films/cartoons (James Bond, Mission Impossible, Spy Kids, Agent Cody Banks, and Danger Mouse and Penfold – the cartoon). The children's task is to invent and design their own 'Spy Kit'. Talk about items that might be include in a spy kit:

- A bottle of perfume** Spray into the face of an enemy and it knocks them out instantly!
- A tube of hair gel** This acts as a super-strength glue, useful for slowing enemies down!
- Lipstick** One application of this lipstick will make the wearer tell the truth. Great for extracting secrets from tight-lipped agents!
- Dental floss** This is actually super-strong thread which can be used for tying up enemy agents or to help you make quick exits from tall buildings!
- Mascara** Simply apply this mascara to your eyes and you will have x-ray vision!

Would they include anything different? What would their inventions be?

It's worth looking at the Alex Rider books by Anthony Horowitz. This teenage spy will appeal to the children – he uses loads of gadgets!

There is a book devoted to his gadgets - Alex Rider: The Gadgets and a web site at www.alexrider.com/Alexs-World/Gadgets/Viewer. (**Please note:** in order to view more than two gadgets on this site, users will need to give their names and email addresses.)



Spy Kit

Imagine you are a top spy for MI5 – just like James Bond!

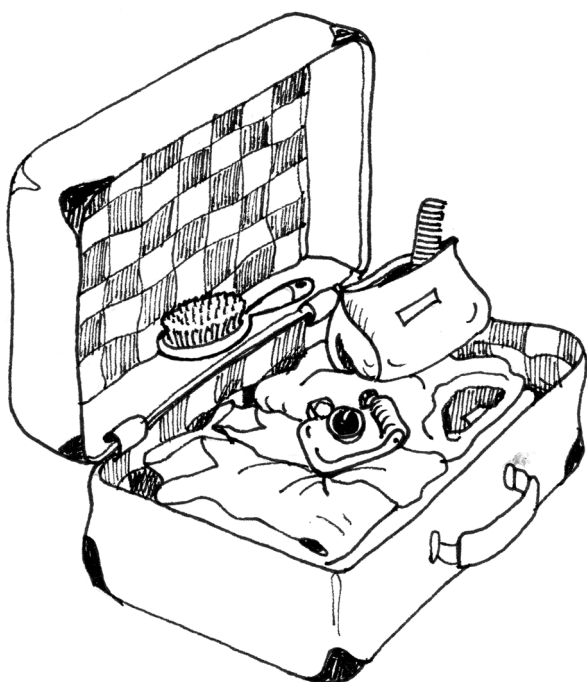
You have been asked to carry out a dangerous mission in another country. You will need to pack a suitcase with all the gadgets you will need.

What gadgets will you need to pack?

What gadgets do you think a spy might need?

- a camera?
- a gun?
- a disguise?
- explosives?
- a voice recorder?
- 'bugging' equipment?
- a tracking device?

However, your gadgets will need to be disguised as harmless everyday objects. If your suitcase is opened and checked at the airport it is vital that nothing inside it arouses suspicion.



Design your own spy kit – draw and label your inventions and say how they are disguised and how they will work!



Personal Rain Catcher

Teacher's
Notes

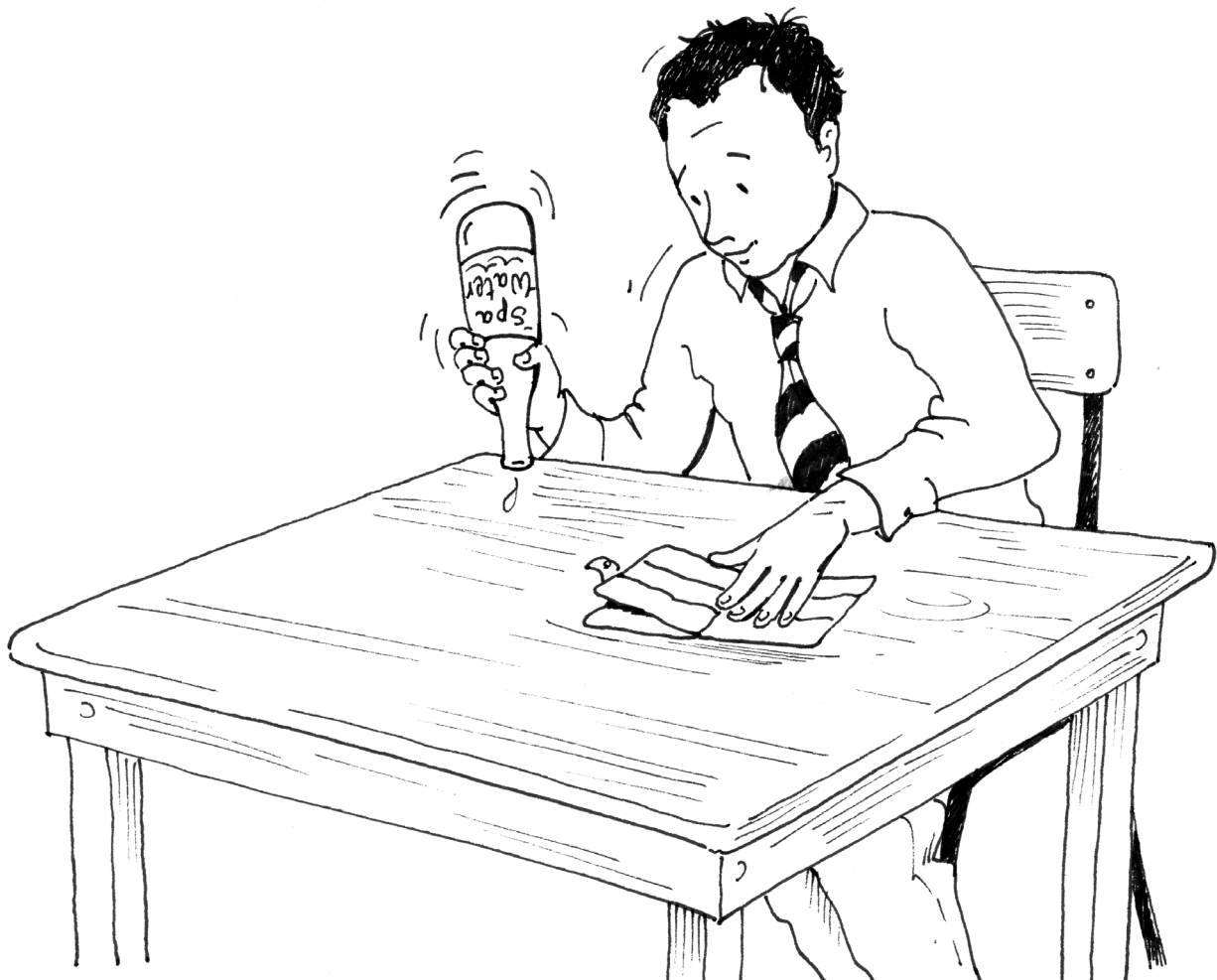
The children's task is to write and illustrate an advert that will persuade people to buy a 'Personal Rain Catcher'. They will need to exaggerate any positive features they can think of for this invention.

Start off by reviewing different adverts from magazines or from the TV. Talk about what makes them successful. Then introduce the task.

Encourage the children to use the persuasive strategies listed on the sheet. Using them will make their advert more effective.

For example:

- Are you sick of paying ridiculous prices for bottles of mineral water? (Question)
- Save a fortune in water bills with a fabulous Personal Rain Catcher! (Exaggeration)
- Allowing yourself to get dehydrated is dangerous! Don't get caught out next time it rains! (Warning)
- Order your Personal Rain Catcher today – start collecting free water tomorrow! (Instruction)
- You'll never go thirsty again with a Personal Rain Catcher! (Promise & Exaggeration)
- Try using a Personal Rain Catcher next time it rains – what will you use your water for? (Invitation & Question)
- 'Rain water is scientifically proven to be better for you than tap water.' Dr H. Two – Oxford University Professor (Expert Opinion).



Personal Rain Catcher

Your task is to write and illustrate an advert that will persuade people to buy a Personal Rain Catcher.

Try using these strategies to make your advert more persuasive:

Question: Are you sick of paying ridiculous prices for bottled water?

Invitation: Try using a Personal Rain Catcher next time it rains.

Promise: You'll never go thirsty again!

Warning: Don't be left parched and thirsty each time it rains!

Exaggeration: The Personal Rain Catcher is the invention you've been waiting for all your life!

Instruction: Order a Personal Rain Catcher today!

Expert opinion: 'I never leave the Palace without my Personal Rain Catcher' – The Queen.

Do you think this is a good invention?
Explain your thoughts.

